

Minutes of the Audit and Standards Committee Meeting held on 12 October 2020

Present: Martyn Tittley (Chairman)

Attendance

Derek Davis, OBE	Ann Edgeller
Carolyn Trowbridge (Vice-Chairman)	Richard Ford
Ross Ward	Helen Fisher
Paul Northcott	Philip Atkins, OBE
Susan Woodward	Keith Flunder
Alastair Little	

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Apologies: Bernard Williams and David Brookes

PART ONE

19. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Little declared a non-pecuniary interest in item number 25 relating to a Parental Leave Policy for Members.

Councillor Flunder formally recorded his involvement in discussions as the community representative, on County Council land transactions within his Division which was included in the Council's Strategic Property and Asset Management arrangements – see item 29.

20. Minutes of the Meeting held on 30 July 2020

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 30 July 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

21. Annual Report on Information Governance

The Director of Corporate Services submitted his Annual Report on the work of his Information Governance Unit for the period to 31 March 2020.

The report detailed activity under the Data Protection, Freedom of Information, Environmental Information, Transparency, and Regulation of Investigatory Powers (RIPA) legislation. The management of information and compliance with requirements was subject to inspection by various national Commissioners, the most recent inspection having been conducted by the RIPA Commissioner.

During the initial stages of the COVID emergency, the Unit had been instrumental in the management of data relating to Staffordshire residents who were classed as Extremely Vulnerable and had worked closely with IT colleagues to develop effective ways of managing the high volumes of data.

Members queried the systems in place to address the risk of Cyber attack and considered details of the ongoing development of the Cyber Security Incident Plan, the proposal to invest in a Security and Information Events Solution (SIEM) and the ongoing testing of the Council's systems to maintain its Public Services Network accreditation without which access to government shared services would not be permitted.

Concluding the Director reported that work continued on the Information Asset Register to meet GDPR requirements and on the provision of relevant training to officers, following a temporary pause in training activity due to the reprioritisation of the Unit's workload to accommodate COVID related demands.

RESOLVED – That the Annual Report be noted and a report be submitted to a future meeting of this Committee on the measures in place to address the risk of Cyber - attack.

22. Cabinet Office - National Fraud Initiative

The County Treasurer submitted proposals to participate in the 2020 National Fraud Initiative, a Cabinet led data matching exercise amongst public sector organisations which provided a useful tool for detecting and preventing fraud and errors in payments made by the Council.

The report detailed the categories of datasets made by the Council which would be shared as part of the exercise and on the process to be adopted for notifying persons affected by the data sharing exercise. It was noted that data on Direct payments and payments relating to Residential Care Homes had previously been a key area for the Council to review. Currently, due to the designation of that data as Patient Data by the Department for Health it was not currently accessible, however, discussions were underway on the redesignation of that information.

A new area for attention was COVID 19 related transactions with the Cabinet Office looking to extend the scope of the exercise to include datasets on Business Rates Relief and Business Support Grants.

Members queried the availability of information on 'Lessons Learnt' during the COVID emergency.

RESOLVED – That:

- (i) the Councils involvement in the National Fraud Initiative 2020 be noted, and
- (i) the COVID Incident Management Teams 'Lessons Learnt' report be submitted to this Committee for consideration.

23. Final Accounts 2019/20 Progress Report

On behalf of Ernst Young, the Councils external auditors, Steve Clark, Partner at EY reported on progress of the audit of the Councils accounts for 2019/20. He reported on action being taken to address a delay in work due to staff illness, giving an assurance that the finalised accounts would be submitted to this Committee on 9 December 2020.

Steve Clark also reported that as part of the audit of the Pension Fund, work was now progressing on the issuing of Assurances to scheme employers.

The County Treasurer acknowledged that nationally external auditors were experiencing problems securing staffing resources and confirmed that the December 2020 date was acceptable with the delay having no significantly adverse effect on the preparation of the Councils budget for 2021/22.

RESOLVED – That the current position in respect of the audit of the Councils accounts 2019/20 be noted.

24. Code of Conduct for Members - Report on the Management of Complaints

The Director of Corporate Services reported on 12 complaints/alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct for members for the period January 2019- September 2020, explaining that the extended reporting period aimed to correspond as closely as possible with the next Annual Governance Statement, the period for which had been extended to 30 November 2020.

The Director summarised the nature of each complaint/allegation received and detailed the action taken. He highlighted the proactive attitude demonstrated by County Councillors towards maintaining high standards of behaviour, both by this Committee in acting to strengthen the Code using locally agreed changes, and by individual members responding swiftly to remedy allegations against them.

Members called for measures to support them when subjected to disproportionate attacks by the public both via Social Media or more directly, and referred to the potential effect on their mental well-being of persistent/vexacious personal attacks.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted and the Director of Corporate Services examine ways of supporting members when subjected to a disproportionate degree of personal attack.

25. Parental Leave Policy for Members

The Director of Corporate Services submitted a draft Parental Leave Policy for Members explaining that it had been drawn up by a joint member/officer working group. The Policy, which included guiding principles to enable members to fulfil their role whilst benefiting from Parental Leave, was intended to provide a positive environment for members with family responsibilities in order to secure cross community representation on the Council.

The Policy included a detailed procedure to be followed by applicants with the decision ultimately made jointly by the relevant political Group Leader and a member of the Council's Senior Leadership Team. It was envisaged that this joint responsibility would address any potential concerns that a decision could be based on personal relationships rather than on the applicant's circumstances.

The Director reported on the need for the Policy to be approved by full Council for inclusion in the County Council's Constitution due to its direct relevance to elected members.

RESOLVED- That full Council be recommended to approve the proposed Parental Leave Policy for Members.

26. Forward Plan

The Committee considered the Forward Plan/Work Programme for its future meetings noting that the Plan would be updated to reflect decisions made at this meeting.

27. Exclusion of the Public

RESOLVED – that the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business which involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in the paragraphs of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 indicated below.

The Committee proceeded to consider the following items:

28. Exempt Minutes of the Meeting held on 30 July 2020

29. Strategic Property and Asset Management Audit Review - Progress Report (exemption paragraph 3)

30. Joint Funding and Billing - CCGs Continuing Healthcare - Final Audit Report 2019/20 (exemption paragraph 3)

31. Special Guardianship Payments - Final Audit Report 2020/21 (exemption paragraph 3)

32. Update on Approved Mental Health Professionals - Implementation of Previous Recommendations (exemption paragraph 3)

Chairman