

**Minutes of the Audit and Standards Committee
Thursday 23rd March, 2023 at 6.00pm
at Saltwells Education and Development Centre,
Bowling Green Road, Netherton**

Present:

Councillor D Borley (Vice-Chair in the Chair)

Councillors S Ali, J Cowell, M Evans, E Lawrence, J Martin and A Taylor.

Officers:

B Heran (Deputy Chief Executive), I Newman (Director of Finance and Legal), K Jones (Director of Housing and Communities), G Harrison (Head of Audit and Risk Management), R Cooper (Head of Financial Services), M Lyons (Interim Lead - Compliance and Building Safety), N Biddle (Head of Digital and Customer Services), G Aulakh (Head of Technology Systems and Services), T Robbins (Head of Procurement) and S Griffiths (Democratic Services Manager).

Officers in Attendance via Microsoft Teams:

H Martin (Director of Regeneration and Enterprise), A Vaughan (Interim Director of Environment), A Taylor (Senior Principal Auditor), M Landy (Principal Auditor) and E Newman (Principal Auditor).

49 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors P Atkins and A Lees.

50 Appointment of Substitute Member

There were no substitute Members appointed for this meeting of the Committee.

51 **Declarations of Interest**

No Member made a declaration of interest in accordance with the Member's Code of Conduct.

52 **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meetings held on 23rd January and 13th February, 2023 be confirmed as correct records and signed.

53 **Accounting Policies, Critical Accounting Judgements and Key Sources of Estimation Uncertainty**

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Finance and Legal explaining the accounting policies, critical accounting judgements and key sources of estimation uncertainty to be used in preparing the 2022/23 Statement of Accounts.

The Committee was provided with an overview of the processes for making significant accounting estimates for the Council's Statement of Accounts.

Resolved

- (1) That the Accounting Policies that will be used to complete the 2022/23 Statement of Accounts be approved.
 - (2) That the Critical Accounting Judgements made and Key Sources of Estimation Uncertainty, which will be disclosed in the Statement of Accounts, be noted.
 - (3) That the processes for making significant accounting estimates for the Statement of Accounts be noted.
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54 **Exemptions from the Requirement for a Competitive Procurement Process**

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Digital, Customer and Commercial on exemptions that had been made to the Council's requirements for a competitive procurement process to be undertaken.

Members questioned the level of detail provided in the report and referred to the former format of the report, which provided more information, explanation and examples of the exemptions that had been granted. It was noted that the greater level of detail might be commercially sensitive, disclosing exempt information, and would therefore have to be considered by the Committee in private session.

The Head of Procurement gave examples of exemptions that had been granted and highlighted the issue of waivers. The Committee supported the provision of more detailed information in future reports. It was suggested that an agenda item, in private session, be programmed for the September meeting of this Committee to receive the additional detail required and any additional exemptions granted up to September, 2023. For future years, a report would be scheduled for the April meeting of this Committee. The Head of Audit Services would amend the work programme accordingly.

Councillor S Ali also suggested that all Directorates should be reminded of the requirements relating to waivers and that greater discipline should be applied for exemptions or waivers to be granted in legitimate circumstances only.

Resolved

- (1) That the report be noted.
- (2) That the Head of Audit Services amend the Committee's work programme to provide for the submission of reports, in the format requested, to the September, 2023 meeting and to the meetings scheduled for April in future years.

55 Digital Platform Consultation Update

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Digital, Customer and Commercial on the ongoing and planned consultation and support for residents to use online services, with specific reference to elderly and vulnerable people.

The Head of Digital and Customer Services gave an overview of the report. Following initial consultation, the digital platform would be tested and links would be made to existing systems used by the Council such as Councillor Contact. Officers acknowledged the need for further work and consultation with Directorates on specific issues raised by Members.

In developing the digital platform to improve access to online services, Members emphasised the need to avoid digital exclusion. The Council needed to reach out to a diverse range of communities across the Borough to fully understand and meet the needs of all residents. The Head of Digital and Customer Services responded to questions concerning those residents who had no access to ICT or were unable to leave their homes. It was acknowledged that some residents received support from friends, relatives or carers and facilities would be available in libraries. Face to face contact or telephony would remain available in relevant circumstances and it was important to fully understand how individual residents wished to access services.

The Deputy Chief Executive indicated that increasing the digital offer should release capacity within teams to provide support to vulnerable residents. The Committee supported the need to retain appropriate communication channels to ensure that residents retained a level of choice as to how they accessed services or support from the Council.

Resolved

That, subject to the comments outlined above, the report be noted.

56 Questions Under Council Procedure Rule 11.8

There were no questions to the Chair pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 11.8.

57 Exclusion of the Public and Press

Resolved

That the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business, on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information relating to any individual(s) and to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information) as defined under Part I of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, as amended.

58 **Annual Audit Report for the Deputy Chief Executive**

A report of the Director of Finance and Legal was submitted summarising the audit work undertaken in relation to those Directors reporting directly to the Deputy Chief Executive for the financial year 2021/22. The Head of Audit and Risk Management gave an overview of the report.

In connection with paragraph 9 of the report, a proposed additional paragraph to be added to the Annual Governance Statement 2021/22 in relation to Housing Compliance was circulated.

Councillor J Cowell referred to the Employee Warning System (EWS) and Officers reported on the ongoing work to develop processes and raise awareness of this corporate system to assist in ensuring the safety of employees and Members.

The Interim Director of Environment responded to a query from Councillor A Taylor concerning the implementation of actions from the Recycling audit. The Director of Regeneration and Enterprise also responded to a question from Councillor A Taylor concerning funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

Following questions from Councillor E Lawrence, the Head of Technology Systems and Services reported on work being undertaken to close the actions in relation to administrator access to Liquid Logic and ICT Patch management.

The Deputy Chief Executive undertook to liaise with the Head of Audit and Risk Management concerning the request made by Councillor M Evans for the inclusion of timescales and completion dates in future reports.

In response to a question from Councillor D Borley, the Deputy Chief Executive indicated that the role of a quality checking post in relation to Property Compliance had now been superseded following a review and restructure of the service.

Resolved

- (1) That the findings in respect of the 2021/22 audit work be accepted.
- (2) That the Annual Governance statement 2021/22 be amended as referred to in paragraph 9 of the report and by the inclusion of the additional paragraph set out below:

6.5 Housing Compliance

- 6.5.1 Following a review of housing compliance data the Council has identified issues with data quality. It is likely that the issues identified date back over a number of years and, in view of the findings, the Council has launched a recovery programme and made a self-referral to the Regulator of Social Housing in relation to housing compliance.
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The meeting ended at 7.10pm

CHAIR