

Audit, Governance and Standards Committee

Thursday, 25 September 2014

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Roger Bennett (Chair), Councillor David Thain (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Michael Braley, Andrew Brazier (substituting for Councillor Jane Potter), Natalie Brookes, John Fisher (during Minute No's 23 to 29), Andrew Fry (substituting for Councillor Pat Witherspoon), Rachael Smith and John Witherspoon

Dave Jones – Independent Member for Audit & Governance (non-voting co-opted member of the Committee)

Kevin White – Feckenham Parish Council Representative for Standards (non-voting co-opted member of the Committee)

Also Present:

Phil Jones and Zoe Thomas (Grant Thornton – External Auditors)

Officers:

Andy Bromage, Clare Flanagan, Shona Knight and Sam Morgan

Committee Services Officer:

Debbie Parker-Jones

16. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Jane Potter and Pat Witherspoon.

It was also noted that Megan Harrison, Independent Person under the Standards regime, would not be observing the meeting that evening.

17. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

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18. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee held on 3rd July 2014 were submitted.

As detailed in the agenda listing it was noted that, following referral of the draft minutes to the meeting of Full Council on 15th September 2014, the final sentence of Minute No.15 (Portfolio Holder Update – 2013/14 Outturn) was subject to an amendment and should have read: “Officers responded that a large number of Bromsgrove District Council staff had relocated to the Town Hall, with the rental income for this for the last financial year being £100k.”

RESOLVED that

subject to the amendment of Minute No.15 as detailed in the preamble above, the minutes of the meeting of the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee held on 3rd July 2014 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

19. MONITORING OFFICER'S REPORT - STANDARDS REGIME

Members received a report from the Monitoring Officer outlining the current position in relation to standards regime matters of relevance to the Committee.

Officers advised that the Charing Skills training scheduled to take place on 17th September had unfortunately had to be postponed as the trainer had been taken ill and hospitalised on the day of the training.

In response to a Member query on how complaint numbers currently compared with previous figures, Officers advised that complaint levels were very good with low numbers of complaints now being received.

RESOLVED that

the report of the Monitoring Officer and the additional updates provided by the Deputy Monitoring Officer at the meeting be noted.

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**20. FECKENHAM PARISH COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE'S REPORT
- STANDARDS REGIME**

Feckenham Parish Councillor Kevin White, the new Parish Representative on the Committee, was present at the meeting and advised that he had nothing to update Members on.

RESOLVED that

the position be noted.

**21. AUDIT, GOVERNANCE AND STANDARDS COMMITTEE -
ACTION LIST AND WORK PROGRAMME**

Action List

- i) Ref 1 – Feasibility of introducing monthly rents on commercial buildings in advance via direct debit

Further to Minute No. 7. i) of the 3rd July 2014 meeting of the Committee, Officers confirmed that they had reported as far as they could on this item, and that it suited some tenants to pay their rent on a quarterly basis. Members agreed therefore that this item could now be removed from the Action List.

Action: item to be removed from Action List.

- ii) Ref 2 – Future monitoring of use of balances to support expenditure

It was noted that this remained an ongoing item on the Action List and that a separate Portfolio Holder Quarterly Budget Monitoring update item appeared later in the agenda.

Action: item to remain on Action List for future monitoring and reporting.

Work Programme

Following the addition of standards regime business to the work of the newly introduced Audit, Governance and Standards Committee, Members noted the Committee's heavy workload together with the fact that the Committee met only 4 times a year.

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It was suggested and agreed that Officers explore with all members of the Committee, and the political Group Leaders, the possibility of meetings commencing earlier in the evening to ensure there was sufficient time to conduct all required business in a timely manner.

RESOLVED that

- 1) subject to the comments detailed in the preamble above, the Committee's Action List and Work Programme be noted and the amendments and updates highlighted be agreed; and**
- 2) Officers explore with the members of the Committee and the political Group Leaders the possibility of meetings of the Committee commencing earlier in the evening.**

22. REVIEW OF THE INDEPENDENT MEMBER ROLE ON THE COMMITTEE

Following the appointment of Mr Dave Jones to the role of Independent Member on the Committee for a 12-month trial basis in December 2013, Members considered whether they wished for the role of Independent Member to continue and, if so, whether this should be on a permanent basis or for a set term of office, and how the position should be appointed to. Mr Jones was asked to leave the meeting during the consideration of this item.

Members supported the role of the Independent Member and the External Auditors commented that it was good for audit committees to have Independent Members, with the Committee having discretion as to the terms of any such appointments. It was further noted that Mr Jones's original appointment had been subject to a formal recruitment and selection process.

Members felt that Mr Jones had played an active part on the Committee, with his also having been appointed as one of the Committee's Lead Risk Members at the previous meeting. Members agreed that Mr Jones was an asset to the Committee and that his appointment should therefore be extended without the need for re-advertisement.

Members agreed that the Independent Member role be subject to a four-year term of office and that Independent Members be permitted

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to serve a maximum of two consecutive four-year terms of office. Mr Jones's term of office would take immediate effect and would cover the period July 2014 to July 2018. His appointment would be reviewed in 2018, prior to the expiry of his term of office, in order for the Committee to ascertain whether the position should be subject to re-advertisement at that stage.

Members wished to ensure that safeguards were built into the process in the event of poor attendance at meetings by Independent Members. Officers were therefore asked to take back to the Committee suitable proposals in this regard, which might include a requirement for Independent Members to attend a minimum number of meetings per year and for there to be either an annual or bi-annual review of Independent Member performance.

RESOLVED that

- 1) the role of Independent Member on the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee be made permanent, with the role being subject to a four-year term of office and Independent Members being permitted to serve a maximum of two consecutive four-year terms of office;**
- 2) Mr Jones be appointed to the role of Independent Member on the Committee for a four-year term of office with immediate effect, and that his appointment be subject to review during his fourth year of office; and**
- 3) Officers take back to the Committee proposals relating to required attendance at meetings by Independent Members and arrangements for reviewing Independent Member performance.**

23. GRANT THORNTON - AUDIT FINDINGS REPORT

Members were asked to consider Grant Thornton's Audit Findings report for the Council for the year ended 31st March 2014. A revised Letter of Representation was tabled by Officers which included an additional 'Specific Representation' section on the final page.

It was noted that the External Auditors had issued a qualified opinion on the Value for Money conclusion in the report. This was

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due to concerns being raised around financial resilience. The main issues leading to this conclusion being:

- weaknesses in medium-to long-term financial planning, specifically the absence of an up-to-date, sustainable 3-5 year medium-term financial plan;
- lack of robust plans to deliver savings required to balance the budget; and
- planned use of reserves to fund recurrent expenditure that was not, for example, part of planned invest to save initiatives.

Officers were currently working through a number of the report recommendations and would be bringing back an action plan for these at a later date. Heads of Service and budget holders were working through the detail of their budgets across the Council's strategic purposes, with a number of costs having already been identified for further detailed work. Managers were also developing savings which were as a result of reducing waste in their systems (unnecessary procedures and processes which currently cost the Council money), and were reducing the cost of the enabling services (services that did not add value to the Council's customers). Heads of Service were also looking at how they could deliver their services differently by bringing in alternative service providers or providing more service for a reduced cost.

Significant concerns were raised by some Members on the Value for Money conclusion and lack of a current medium-to long-term financial plan, together with unfilled vacancies and the grouping together of ICT costs. In relation to unfilled vacancies, the Portfolio Holder stated that there was a push to remove these and that this issue would also be addressed by the service reviews which were taking place. Officers agreed to check if they could provide Members with information on the number of unfilled vacancies and how long these had been vacant for. Officers added that all savings would need to be considered, with the majority of the Council's costs being staff-related and with voluntary redundancy being offered through a formal process.

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Management highlighted the positive elements of the External Auditors report and explained the approach which was being taken with the Council's financial planning. He had requested that Officers bring an update on the external auditor's recommendations and progress on actions

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against these to each meeting of the Committee. Service reviews were ongoing and it was felt prudent to develop a 3-year financial plan based on the outcomes of the work currently being undertaken as this would allow for an informed and sustainable budget based on new and improved ways of working. Up-front savings could easily be identified by simply cutting jobs or closing community centres, however such hasty cuts could impact on services which residents relied on and create more issues in the future.

The Independent Member, who was also one of the Lead Risk Members on the Committee, queried whether the Council had a robust process for managing change and whether there was a strategic change team in place who managed performance measures. Officers advised that the Vanguard model for re-design was being used by the Council as part of the transformation process, and that the Corporate Management and Senior Management Teams were responsible for driving change and managing measures at strategic level. In order to gain more of an insight into the process it was agreed that the Independent Member would meet with the Portfolio Holder and relevant Officers to further discuss this.

Officers advised that they would be reporting to the Executive Committee in October with outline plans on how future savings would be achieved. The External Auditors commended the work which was currently being undertaken by Officers on the medium-term financial plan, and added that any savings as a consequence of systems thinking and transformation needed to be clearly deliverable and transparent.

RESOLVED that

the Audit Findings Report 2013/14 from Grant Thornton be approved.

24. RISK MONITORING AND REPORTING

The Independent Member queried whether some aims/goals could be established in relation to the Lead Risk Members' monitoring roles. He added that this would link into the discussion under the previous agenda item regarding his attending a meeting with the Portfolio Holder and relevant Officers to explain the workings of the Vanguard model for re-designing the Council's services.

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Officers advised that the Risk Management Monitoring Group had been re-established and that a date for its members, which would include the Lead Risk Members on the Committee, to meet was due to be arranged. The Group could then give consideration to the aims/goals of the Lead Risk Members. Members took this opportunity to formally thank Mr Jones for his work in this regard.

RESOLVED that

the position be noted.

25. FRAUD MONITORING AND REPORTING

One of the Lead Fraud Members on the Committee advised that he was due to meet with Officers from the Fraud Team the following week to discuss his role and learn more about the work of the team. He added that Members had also recently received a very good presentation from the Trading Standards Illegal Money Lending Team on loan sharks.

Officers stated that, as referred to under the previous agenda item, a Fraud Management Monitoring Group was also due to be established, the membership of which would include the Lead Risk Members on the Committee.

RESOLVED that

the position be noted.

26. BENEFITS INVESTIGATIONS - 1ST APRIL 2014 TO 30TH JUNE 2014

The Committee received a report which advised on the performance of the Benefits Services Fraud Investigation Service from 1st April to 30th June 2014.

Officers highlighted the key elements of the report and responded to Members' questions. A percentage error was noted at paragraph 3.11 of the report, which should have stated 15% and not 27%.

Regarding paragraph 3.27 of the report and the benchmarking information previously requested by the Committee comparing the Council's performance against other authorities in the county, a Member queried whether comparison data with like-for-like councils

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such as Harlow in Essex could be provided. Officers explained that whilst this might be possible in the short term, the rolling programme of change for all authorities to the Single Fraud Investigation Service meant that ultimately councils would not be running a fraud service. Some monitoring of sorts might however be possible further down the line once the new system had been introduced and had settled down.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

27. STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2013/14

The Committee received the Council's Statement of Accounts 2013/14 for approval and signature by the Chair at the meeting.

Officers circulated a table of changes to the printed version of the Statement. Members queried whether the External Auditors were happy with the table of changes, which they confirmed they were.

RESOLVED that

subject to the amendments detailed in the table of changes circulated at the meeting, the 2013/14 Statement of Accounts be approved.

28. INTERNAL AUDIT - MONITORING REPORT

The Committee considered a progress report on internal audit work for the residual of 2013/14 and the 2014/15 year to date.

Officers advised that no monitoring report had been referred to the previous meeting of the Committee as Members had received the Annual Report at that meeting, which could have led to confusion if receiving both.

Officers highlighted the three limited assurances set out in the summary of assurance levels table at page 48 of the report. These related to Risk Management, Sports Development and ICT audits.

Whilst a large amount of work had been carried out by Officers on risk registers and the 4Risk system over the past year, the processes involved with this now needed to be fully embedded.

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The recently re-introduced Risk Management Monitoring Group would take forward this and the other issues highlighted by the audit.

Insufficient controls around cash collection and reconciliation processes as part of the Sports Development audit were noted. Members felt that cash control was a common theme running through the report and that the Council should, where possible, aim to avoid cash transactions as they were clearly a weak point. Finance Officers/Cashiers had been to visit relevant staff to train them on the best methods of dealing with cash however Redditch was quite a cash-based economy. A Member suggested the possibility of using a mobile phone app for payments. Officers responded that there was the option for some mobile working with the new cash receipting system. The package for this had not been purchased at this stage but the feasibility of this would be considered moving forward.

Officers confirmed that they had taken on board the comment made by a Member under the Audit Findings Report item earlier in the evening regarding the different strands associated with ICT. Members were advised that there was a clear action plan in place to address the weaknesses identified as part of the recent audit and that ICT was included on the Audit Plan every year. Officers further agreed to include the auditing of product licences in the audit programme.

Officers highlighted the remaining elements of the report and confirmed that any issues of concern raised during audits would be followed-up as part of the audit tracker section of the report.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

29. PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S UPDATE - QUARTERLY BUDGET MONITORING

The Committee received an oral update on budget monitoring from the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Management.

The Portfolio Holder stated that, as mentioned earlier in the meeting under the Audit Findings Report, the Council had, in February, set the budget for 2014/15. The budget had included unidentified

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savings which the Portfolio Holder stated the Council was currently on track to make.

The Portfolio Holder stated that he was in regular discussions with Officers on the monitoring of savings.

RESOLVED that

the position be noted.

The Meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and closed at 8.45 pm

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Chair