

Audit, Governance & Standards Committee

Tuesday, 15th September,
2020

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor John Fisher (Chair), Councillor Mark Shurmer (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Salman Akbar, Tom Baker-Price, Juliet Brunner, Peter Fleming, Yvonne Smith and David Thain

Also Present:

Jackson Murray – Engagement Lead for Grant Thornton
Neil Preece – Engagement Manager for Grant Thornton

Officers:

Jayne Pickering, Andy Bromage

Democratic Services Officers:

Jo Gresham and Pauline Ross

19. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

An apology for absence was received on behalf of Councillor Joanne Beecham.

20. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

21. MINUTES FROM THE LAST AUDIT, GOVERNANCE AND STANDARDS MEETING HELD ON 27TH JULY 2020

RESOLVED that

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Chair

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the minutes of the meeting of the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee held on Monday 27th July 2020 be approved as a true and correct record.

22. PUBLIC SPEAKING

The Chair confirmed that there were no registered public speakers on this occasion.

23. GRANT THORNTON - PROGRESS REPORT AND SECTOR UPDATE

The Engagement Lead from Grant Thornton updated Members in respect of the Progress Report and Sector Update and in doing so highlighted the following:

- There were delays in carrying out the audit and it was now anticipated to begin towards the end of September 2020. It was hoped that the opinion on the Statement of Accounts would be available, however due to the delay there was risk that this timeframe may not be feasible.
- The National Audit Office had completed its consultation on a new Code of Audit Practice, and it was confirmed that it would result in significant changes for future audits. The Engagement Lead for Grant Thornton undertook to circulate the findings of the review for Members information.
- The deadline for the reporting of the Housing Benefit Subsidy Claim had been moved by the Department of Work and Pensions to January 2021.
- The Redmond Review had recently been published and detailed the effectiveness of local audit and the transparency of local authority financial reporting. This review would be considered by the Committee at a future meeting. The Engagement Lead for Grant Thornton undertook to circulate the findings of the review for Members information for discussion at a future meeting. Some of the areas that were discussed during the debate was the lack of experience within the audit industry and the retention of auditors.

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- Carrying out remote audits had proved more difficult and a more protracted process than anticipated.
- Some Members questions the impact of Covid-19 on the Section 24 and it was clarified that any announcement in regard to the Section 24 represents a point in time and it was impossible to say at this point what the outcome would be. It was confirmed to Members that the Audit Findings were a public document and would be published in the public domain.

RESOLVED that

the contents of the External Audit Progress Report and Sector Update be noted.

24. INTERNAL AUDIT - PROGRESS REPORT

The Head of the Worcestershire Internal Audit Shared Service explained to Members that this was a progress report that provided the progress of the Audit Plan for 2020-2021. As part of the presentation, Members attention was drawn to the following:

- There had been one finalised report and 6 reports were ongoing since the previous meeting.
- Core Financials would be looked at in Quarter 3.
- Any outstanding reports would be brought to a future meeting for Members' consideration.
- After a delayed start due to Covid-19 and associated lockdown the plan recommenced as of 1st June 2020.

After further discussion, the Head of the Worcestershire Internal Audit Shared Service gave Members the assurance that the Audit Plan for 2020-2021 was moving in the right direction.

The Chair asked the Head of the Worcestershire Internal Audit Shared Service about which SharePoint software was being used by the Council and he undertook to find out and circulate the information to Members.

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Members questioned the 2nd Follow-Up report regarding the On and Off-Street Parking audit. There were some queries regarding the seeming lack of urgency around the completion of the recommendations contained within the report. The Head of Worcestershire Internal Audit Shared Service explained that the follow-ups were done in 3 monthly periods and agreed to follow up with the relevant Head of Service to see what had been delivered and provide clarification on what was causing delays.

The Chair thanked the officers for their report and looked forward to hearing the update at the next meeting.

RESOLVED that

the contents of the Internal Audit - Progress Report be noted.

25. INTERNAL AUDIT - BENEFITS SERVICE PRESENTATION

The Executive Director Finance and Resources provided the presentation in respect of the improvements made within the Housing Benefits Service. She explained that changes had been made following the limited assurance audit the service had received in 2019.

Members were reassured that there had been significant improvements made to the service and an interim structure had been implemented. In addition to the interim structure staff had received training, greater numbers of team leaders were established, and 1-2-1 meetings were now more frequent and offered staff increased support and advice.

There was further clarification on the measures that had been implemented including more automated processing which decreased the levels of errors and increased the accuracy and the time taken to process claims.

Some Members were interested whether the quality checking process had been successful whilst staff were working from home during Covid-19 and associated lockdown. It was explained that most staff were getting used to the new IT equipment and working from home and that staff who needed to come in to the office to perform some of their duties were able to do so, in a safe and Covid secure manner.

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Members thanked the Executive Director Finance and Resources for the hard work that had been done to improve the service.

RESOLVED that

the Benefits Service Presentation report be noted.

26. S151 OFFICER REPORT

The Executive Director Finance and Resources presented the report in respect of the S151 Update. The following was highlighted Members:

- Actions that had been carried out since the previous update which included the areas of Procurement and delegations.
- Contracts were negotiated within a framework and procurement guidelines.
- The Housing restructure that had been carried out was implemented and successful.

Members referred to the Contract Register item within Appendix 1 and whether all contracts were up to date and questioned the contradictory information within the table. It was agreed that this would be clarified by officers and the information circulated to Members. In addition to this some Members were concerned with the cleaning of buildings with cladding in the Borough and whether they were being regularly cleaned. The Executive Director Finance and Resources undertook to discuss this with the relevant officers.

The upgrades of systems were queried by Members and there was some concern that due to the fast moving and constant changing technologies whether the new systems would only have a short shelf life. Members were assured that the systems that had been procured and implemented had the facility to be upgraded on an annual basis.

RESOLVED that

the S151 Officer Report be noted.

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27. RISK CHAMPION - VERBAL UPDATE

The Chair introduced this item with regards to the appointment of the Risk Champion role for the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee. He explained that Councillor David Thain had volunteered to undertake the role for the Committee. Other Members of the Committee were asked if they would like to volunteer for the role during this item and, as there were no other volunteers, it was confirmed that Councillor Thain be appointed as Risk Champion for the Committee going forward and thanked Members for their support and appointment in the role.

RESOLVED that

Councillor D. Thain be appointed as Risk Champion for the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee.

28. INDEPENDENT MEMBER RECRUITMENT - VERBAL UPDATE

The Executive Director Finance and Resources updated Members regarding the process of the Independent Member recruitment and explained that the post had been advertised and was due to close on Thursday 17th September with shortlisting arranged for the following week and interviews to be scheduled for the week commencing 28th September 2020.

Some Members were keen to be a part of the interview panel and volunteers were identified and would be notified once the advert for the post had closed.

RESOLVED that

the verbal update regarding the Independent Member Recruitment be noted.

29. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Democratic Services Officer confirmed that any additions that had been identified by Members during the course of the meeting, would be added to the Work Programme.

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RESOLVED that

the contents of the Committee's Work Programme be noted.

The Meeting commenced at 7.05 pm
and closed at 8.53 pm