

Minutes of Audit and Risk Assurance Committee

**5 June 2023 at 6.01pm
In the Council Chamber at Sandwell Council House**

Present: Councillor Preece (Chair);
Councillors Anandou, Bhullar, L Giles, Smith and Tipper.
Mr Hussain (Independent Member).

Officers: Kate Ashley (Strategic Lead – Service Improvement);
Rebecca Jenkins (Senior Lead - Service Improvement);
Surjit Tour (Director Law and Governance and Monitoring
Officer); Stephnie Hancock (Deputy Democratic Services
Manager) and Anthony Lloyd (Democratic Services Officer).

20/23 **Apologies for Absence**

An apology was received from Mr Ager (Independent Member).

21/23 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

22/23 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the-meeting held on 16 March
2023 are confirmed as a correct record.

23/23 **Urgent Additional Items of Business**

There were no urgent additional items of business.



Improvement Plan Progress and Phase 3 Refresh

An update was provided to the Committee on progress made against the Improvement Plan up to the end of April 2023. The update formed the content of the Council's June 2023 letter to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Several significant achievements were noted including progress made in relation to the Lion Farm Expert Determination process, and the approval of the Council's Commercial Strategy. A follow up review from the Local Government Association had taken place, as well as a follow-up review in relation to the CIPFA financial review and recommendations had been embedded into the Improvement Plan.

An annual report had been prepared that reflected the significant progress over the year with examples of how the changes had impacted on the organisation. The annual report set out the next steps of the improvement journey.

The Committee noted exception reports on each of the six themes within the Improvement Plan:-

Organisational Culture

There had been a low response rate to the member-officer relationship survey launched in April 2023. Consideration was being given to timescales for a repeat survey and lessons learnt in relation to the poor response rate would be taken on board. There had been some slippage in the approval of the next phase of the member development programme as a result of the number of new councillors following the May election. The induction programme had been finalised and a Member Toolkit was in development to support members further.

Corporate Oversight

Local Partnerships was supporting a review of Corporate Transformation and the Programme Management Office



(PMO) arrangements in the Council. This review was due to report in June. There had been some slippage to the timelines for the establishment of the Corporate Transformation PMO, associated governance, and the implementation of a programme and project management system due to timescales for Local Partnerships' review not reflecting the dates within the Improvement Plan. Timescales had been reprofiled and the Corporate Transformation PMO would be established in September 2023 (subject to the recommendations of the Local Partnerships Review), with the Programme and Project Management System to be implemented in July 2023, and the Corporate Transformation Board to be operational in June 2023.

Continuous improvement and lessons learnt activity was underway throughout the Council. Examples included continuous improvement around the scrutiny function, lessons learnt around SEND transport, and a case study around supporting residents experiencing damp and mould.

A directorate level restructure was in progress; however, actions were on hold, pending implementation of the workforce strategy and a review of spans and layers of control across the organisation.

Strategic Direction

The deadline for the engagement of a strategic delivery partner in relation to the regeneration pipeline had not been achieved. Engagement with a provider was currently taking place with an update expected to be reported to the Cabinet in July. A procurement exercise for a stock condition survey had only resulted in one tender being received and so the specification was being reviewed before a re-tendering exercise. The stock condition survey would inform the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan in future years.

Procurement and Commercial

The development of an options appraisal for a performance management system had slipped due to resource



challenges. Resources and a project plan were now in place and the options appraisal was due to be completed by August 2023.

Partnership and Relationships

A Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy was in development, however, timescales had been extended to enable a more fundamental look at the relationship with the VCS.

The Committee also noted that two of the risks on the Improvement Plan Risk Register had been closed. Of the remaining risks, five were now green and five amber.

In response to members' comments and questions, the following points were clarified/noted:-

- The establishment of a Programme Management Office was a high priority. Following a re-alignment of resources, the key officers across the Council undertaking programme management would be brought together as a team. Benchmarking against other authorities had taken place to ensure best practice.
- The Council's new culture and values framework would apply to everyone in the organisation and would be linked to appraisals and other relevant policies.
- A series of workshops would be taking place during the summer months to engage with residents. Intelligence from complaints was also being considered.
- The span of control workstream had initially been put on hold whilst the Council recruited a Chief Executive. The Chief Executive was now in a position to review the structure of the Council.
- A wide range of channels had been used to communicate the member-officer relationship survey to members, however, the low response was likely due to the timing of the survey, which was during the pre-election period.
- A network of in-house culture champions, along with the results of bi-annual staff surveys would be used to measure



capacity to adapt to change across the organisation and the effectiveness of the new culture and values framework.

25/23 **Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Resolution - Update**

The Committee noted a written response from the Leader of the Council in relation to the Committee's resolution of 17 March 2022 (Minute No. 23/22 refers).

The Leader's response reiterated that the reason that particular employees' names had been raised as part of an historical investigation, was not connected to race. It also reiterated the Council's commitment to the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) agenda.

The Council had already established a new Equalities Team; had recently approved a new Equality Policy and was reviewing its Equality Objective; and had adopted the LGA's Equality Framework to develop and implement a new EDI Strategy that would set out the Council's roadmap to delivering excellence in EDI over the next 5 years.

The Chair pledged to move forward and focus on meeting the needs of the people of the borough.

26/23 **Cabinet Forward Plan**

The Committee noted the Cabinet Forward Plan.

Meeting ended at 6.56 p.m.

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