

Audit and Standards Committee

Meeting held 22 April 2021

**PRESENT:** Councillors Sioned-Mair Richards (Chair), Simon Clement-Jones, Angela Argenzio, Mohammed Mahroof, Dianne Hurst and Alison Howard (Independent Co-Opted Member)

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**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Adam Hurst.

**2. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

2.1 No items were identified where resolutions may be moved to exclude the press and public.

**3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

3.1 There were no declarations of interest made.

**4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

4.1 The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2021 were approved as a correct record.

**5. EDUCATION HEALTHCARE PLAN**

5.1 The Director of Education and Skills submitted a report to the committee to provide an overview of the work undertaken to improve the quality and timeliness of the Education Health care Plans (EHCP) in 2020-21 and to improve the experience of children and their families when part of the process.

5.2 Andrews Jones, Director of Educations and Skills and Tim Armstrong Head of Special Educational Needs were in attendance to present the report and answer questions.

5.3 Following the publication of the Annual Ombudsman Report 2019-20 and after discussion with the Audit and Standards Committee in February 2021, it was requested that an update be brought back for consideration by the committee.

5.4 In January 2020, 15.7% of children and young people in Sheffield schools were identified as having a special educational need; this included both children with EHC plans and those receiving SEN support. This was 0.3% above the statistical

neighbour average and 0.5% above England as a whole. The proportion of children and young people in schools with an EHC plan in Sheffield continued to be below the national average 2.7% compared to 3.3% nationally.

5.5 SEN support in Sheffield had been higher than in England as a whole, 13% compared with 11.9% nationally as reported in the 2020 school census. In the last 5 years, the proportion of SEN support pupils had declined by 1% locally, whilst increasing nationally by 0.4%.

5.6 It was advised that since 2014, there had been a significant increase in young people over statutory school age having EHC plans. In January 2014, the number was 157, by January 2017 it had risen to 581 and by January 2020 the total was at 926. There had been increase particularly FE-related provision at 584 in January 2020 and 196 of those who applied to schools.

5.7 The Director of Education and Skills advised that-

- There had been an increase in the number of EHC plans in Sheffield over the past 5 years.
- Sheffield had a higher rate of children with SEN support than nationally.
- Sheffield had a lower rate of children with an EHC plan than nationally.
- Overall, Sheffield had a higher-than-average percentage of children with SEND in schools than nationally.

5.8 Like many areas within Education, since the 2019-20 ombudsman report, there had been significant impact because of covid. In April 2020, The Coronavirus Act 2020, temporarily lifted the statutory duty on local authorities to maintain the precise provision for EHC plans, with local authorities needing to instead to apply 'reasonable endeavours' to support children and their families.

5.9 Throughout the pandemic Sheffield City Council continued to prioritise the EHC assessment process and although timeliness had fallen due to the ways of working in the pandemic, this had been held consistent at the 50% mark.

5.10 The Committee were advised that the service recognised the number of complaints were due to the timeliness in dealing with the EHC plans and the service was currently working on reducing these.

5.11 Significant improvement activity has been taking place both prior and during the pandemic to the process and this had been done through updating letters to parents and carers in a plainer English style, greater telephone contact was being made to families from the SENDSAR Team throughout the EHC plan process to ensure clarity about the next steps and decision outcomes. It was felt this would make the process more personable and would allow any issues to be resolved in an easier way. It was advised that where possible earlier decision making would be made throughout the 20-week period

5.12 Members asked numerous questions and responses are summarised as followed –

5.13 In terms of the amount of EHC plans for children in the City there was not

necessarily more applications for EHC plans than the national average, however there was a higher-than-average percentage of children with SEN needs in the City, this could be due to deprivation, however there was no national research to confirm.

- 5.14 The timeframe for dealing with an application for EHC plan was over a 20-week period. At the moment in Sheffield there was between 170-180 in the process, with 48 over the 20-week timeframe, however this changed daily. It was advised that officers were trying to drill down why. It was advised that some parts of the process were done well, with other parts needing improvement.
- 5.15 When questioned around the differences between different parts of the City the Head of Special Educational Needs advised that locality D, East of the City had the most children with EHC plans. It was advised that more informed parents would ask more questions.
- 5.16 There had been no reduction in requests for assessments due to covid, this had increased due to the impact of covid upon children.
- 5.17 It was advised that improvements had been made around home education provision. Elective home education had been invested in and the Council offered a dedicated home education advisory team to parents. Further investment had been made on additional officers to monitor and track children being home educated.
- 5.18 At present an officer could have up to 200 assessments in their caseload at any one time. It was advised that that a significant funding increase has allowed substantial investment to bring in four Inclusion Officers and Locality Managers.
- 5.19 The Committee were advised that the development of Education and Skills was a good way to respond to the issues raised. The department had a responsibility within the service for Adult Education and SEND as these sat within the same directorate. The Director of Education and Skills found the process with Members would help with improvements and would be happy to report back to the committee in 6 months' time.
- 5.20 Councillor Clement-Jones commented that he found the current way of working lacked compassion from the system. He found the report initially disappointing but thanked the Officers for the update and for trying to implement improvements.
- 5.21 The Director of Education and Skills advised the Committee that the service works closely with colleagues in legal services who provide advice to avoid tribunal cases. The tribunal process was already adversarial without legal colleagues.
- 5.22 The Director of Education and Skills advised that overall the service felt better, but it still had a long way to go with improvements.
- 5.23 **RESOLVED:** - That (1) the report be noted and (2) a further update be brought to the committee in 6 months' time.

## 6. CHANGE OF ORDER OF AGENDA ITEMS

- 6.1 **RESOLVED:** - The Chair agreed that Item 10 on the agenda, Audit Results (260) Recommendations be considered at item 7.

## 7. AUDIT RESULTS (ISA 260) RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 The external auditors Janet Dawson and Hayley Clarke from Ernst and Young provided an update on the Audit results (ISA 260) recommendations.
- 7.2 The external auditors advised the committee that they were now ready to give their opinion on the Audit results (ISA 260) recommendations. It was advised that there were no matters to report.
- 7.3 Key points to note were within the audit differences and this was set out in section four of the Audit Results report. It was reported that the differences made no material impact. It has been agreed with management that the final adjustments be made.
- 7.4 It was proposed that the Statement of Accounts would be signed off next week.
- 7.5 Following questions from members it was advised that an error within the report of £18.5m was due to a formula error and was not an overall issue, and in terms of the adjustments needed in the accounts these would be corrected where possible and any due to formula errors would self-correct in following years.
- 7.6 Thanks were given to all involved for their hard work over the tough year experienced.
- 7.7 **RESOLVED:** - that the Committee
- 1) Notes the 2019-20 Sheffield City Council Audit Results report, and
  - 2) That the Audit and Standards Committee approves the Statement of Accounts for 2019-20 and gives approval for the Chair of Audit and Standards Committee to conclude the audit by signing the Letter of Management Representations and the Statement of Accounts for 2019-20 following the meeting.

## 8 INTERNAL AUDIT PLAN 2021/22

- 8.1 The Senior Finance Manager (Internal Audit) submitted a report presenting the Internal Audit planning methodology and programme of work for 2021/22.
- 8.2 In introducing the report, Linda Hunter, Senior Finance Manager (Internal Audit), advised that because of the pandemic, the plan needed to be flexible and

reactive, to respond promptly to changing issues and risks that required internal audit review and input.

8.3 Appendix one to the report outlined all the audits for this year, assessed on priority of high, medium, low and statutory. There were 117 reviews with approximately 1700 days to complete them in.

8.4 **RESOLVED:** - in respect of the provision of the statutory internal audit function and to comply with best professional practice, the committee endorses the programme of work for 2021-22.

## 9. **PROGRESS ON HIGH OPINION AUDIT REPORTS**

The Senior Finance Manager, Internal Audit, submitted a report providing an updated position on implementation of recommendations contained in audit reports issued with a high opinion or a limited/no assurance opinion and high organisational impact assessment.

9.1 The report had recently been to Executive Management Team (EMT) and the new Chief Executive Officer was very supportive of the work and requested that a RAG rating be included to the report. Any critical recommendations have also been allocated a nominated EMT member.

9.2 There were currently two critical recommendations, OHMS system recommendation being taken forward by Mick Crofts, Executive Director - Place and Software Licensing recommendation being taken forward by Eugene Walker, Executive Director – Resources.

9.3 Following questions from members it was advised that the Chief Executive and EMT agreed that there would be a consistent approach for each portfolio to be able to track recommendations, for example through SharePoint. Priority would be given to red and amber recommendations.

9.4 **RESOLVED:** - that the Committee

- 1) Notes the content of the report
- 2) Agrees to the removal of the following from the tracker report
  - Revenues and Benefits Contact Centre
  - Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) Review

## 10. **COMPLIANCE WITH INTERNATIONAL AUDITING STANDARDS**

10.1 The Head of Strategic Finance submitted a report enabling the Committee to

demonstrate to the External Auditors and the wider audience that it had exercised the required oversight to meet the requirements of the International Standards on Auditing. The report drew together much of the work undertaken by the Committee in the past year.

10.2 **RESOLVED:** - that the Committee

- 1) confirms that the report gave an accurate reflection of the reports that they had received and considered throughout the year and,
- 2) confirms that they now had an overview of the Council's systems of internal control so that they were now assured that they were fulfilling the requirements of "those charged with governance" under the International Auditing Standards

11. **WORK PROGRAMME**

11.1 The Committee considered a report of the Director of Legal and Governance that outlined the work programme for the remainder of the municipal year. The committee were advised that a new work programme would be produced and brought to the next meeting of the committee in June. The Committee requested that guidance on report writing be included within the new work programme to aid officer's when writing reports for Audit and Standards Committee.

11.2 The next meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee would consider -

- Internal Audit Annual Fraud Report
- Annual Audit Fee Letter 2020-21
- Annual Audit Letter 2019-20
- External Audit Plan 2020-21
- Work Programme

11.3 **RESOLVED:** - that (1) the work programme be noted; and (2) guidance on report writing be included in the new work programme.

12 **DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

12.1 Future meetings of the Audit and Standards Committee would be held on:

Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> June 2021  
Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> July 2021