

Audit and Standards Committee

Meeting held 21 October 2021

**PRESENT:** Councillors Sioned-Mair Richards (Chair), Simon Clement-Jones (Deputy Chair), Angela Argenzio, Mohammed Mahroof, Josie Paszek and Alison Howard (Independent Co-opted Member)

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**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors David Barker and Ben Curran.

**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 at the meeting.

**4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

4.1 **RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the meeting held on the 23 September 2021 were approved as a correct record.

**5. FINAL ACCOUNTS AUDIT PROGRESS**

5.1 The external auditors, Janet Dawson and Hayley Clarke, from Ernst & Young were in attendance to give an update to members of the Committee on the progress of the audit of the 2020/21 Statement of Accounts.

5.2 Janet Dawson mentioned that due to staff absences, the external auditors were unable to carry out their audit procedures in September as originally planned. The audit would now take place in October and the external auditors aimed to update the Committee at the 16 December 2021 meeting.

5.3 Hayley Clarke mentioned that the risk assessment process, which was presented at a previous meeting, identified two potential risks of

significant weakness and that those risks remained. The risks related to financial sustainability and regeneration programmes.

- 5.4 Members of the Committee asked questions and the key points to note were-
- 5.5 The Chair asked if information related to the two sub-risks had been shared with other areas within the Council. The Head of Strategic Finance, Dave Phillips, informed the Committee that the information had been communicated within the Audit Plan. The information had also been discussed with a range of Council officers including the Director of Resources and the Chief Executive.
- 5.6 Councillor Simon-Clement Jones asked what the external auditors had done to mitigate the two potential risks of significant weakness. Hayley Clarke explained that they had looked at the decisions made by the Council since the beginning of the financial year and what governance arrangements the Council had put in place since then.
- 5.7 Concerns were raised that West Bar and the Heart of the City programmes were appearing as risks in the report. Councillor Mohammed Mahroof referred to the Council's agreement to lease office space in the city and mentioned how that could negatively impact the Council's budget. The Director of Resources mentioned that reports on the two programmes were taken to the Co-operative Executive, which highlighted the Council's decision making for those proposals. It was mentioned that information on the programmes were in the public domain.
- 5.8 The Head of Strategic Finance mentioned that it was good practice for the Committee to have an opportunity to meet in private with the external auditors, without officers being present, and invited the Committee to consider whether they wished to do so periodically. The Committee indicated that they would like to do so.
- 5.9 The Chair thanked the external auditors for attending the meeting and presenting their report.
- 5.10 **RESOLVED:** That **(1)** the Committee noted the audit progress update report and **(2)** a closed meeting be arranged.

## **6. ANNUAL OMBUDSMAN REPORT**

- 6.1 Jenny Callaghan highlighted that the report provided an overview of the complaints received, formally referred and determined by the three Ombudsmen (Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman, Parliamentary & Health Service Ombudsman and Housing Ombudsman) during the twelve months from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.
- 6.2 Jenny Callaghan mentioned that the Housing Ombudsman's annual report had been delayed until January 2022 due to resourcing issues.
- 6.3 The Committee received a presentation about the Annual Ombudsman Enquires and Investigations for 2021/22. The presentation covered;
- Departments within the Council that had received the highest number of complaints for 2021/22.
  - The average response times for the complaints identified.
  - The outcomes for the complaints identified.
  - Examples of training and learning provided across the service.
  - What had been introduced to improve the service and any other future developments.
- 6.4 Members of the Committee asked questions and the keys points to note were-
- 6.5 Councillor Josie Paszek asked if the timescales when issuing an apology could be reduced. Jenny Callaghan mentioned that payments and apologies in most cases were dealt with in a matter of weeks, it was the wider learning actions that were given a longer time period for a response.
- 6.6 Councillor Angela Argenzio asked if the number of complaints for 2020/21 had reduced due to the impact of COVID-19. Jenny Callaghan confirmed that COVID-19 had impacted the number of complaints. It was also mentioned that the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman had effectively closed the door to receiving complaints for a period at the beginning of the pandemic, this also contributed to the reduction in complaints.
- 6.7 Councillor Angela Argenzio stated how difficult it was to log a complaint, therefore that could have impacted how many people went through the process. Corleen Bygraves-Paul advised that the new CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system should address the issues around logging a complaint.

- 6.8 Councillor Angela Argenzio raised doubts around the sincerity of the apology from the Council, given to people involved and affected by the tree incident that took place in 2016. The Chair commented that she was unhappy to hear this and therefore expressed a sincere apology on behalf of the Council. Jenny Callaghan informed the Committee that her role was to oversee how the Council complied with the Ombudsman recommendations when issuing the public apology. It was added that the Ombudsman was satisfied with how the apology was carried out.
- 6.9 The Committee highlighted the benefit for members to take part in the next phase of the complaints project (customer panel) and observe live cases. Corleen Bygraves-Paul confirmed she would ask the relevant Executive Member if that was a possibility.
- 6.10 Councillor Simon-Clement Jones asked if the Committee could have an indication of figures from the Housing Ombudsman annual report. Jenny Callaghan advised that once the report from the Housing Ombudsman was received in January 2022, it could be shared with the Audit & Standards Committee.
- 6.11 The Chair expressed concerns around late/incomplete service comments leading to response delays and mentioned that Customer Services had the full support from the Committee to obtain information in a timely manner. Jenny Callaghan thanked the Chair for the support and acknowledged how difficult it could be to respond however, responding to Ombudsman enquiries should be seen as a priority.
- 6.12 The Director of Legal and Governance mentioned that the new complaints system would improve processes around how staff interacted with customers. It was important that customers had an input on how the current system could be improved.
- 6.13 The Chair thanked Jenny Callaghan and Corleen Bygraves-Paul for attending the meeting and presenting the report.
- 6.14 **RESOLVED:** That the Committee considered the Annual Ombudsman report and provided its view on the performance of Ombudsman complaints and the issues raised.

## 7. CUSTOMER SERVICES CONTACT CENTRE PERFORMANCE

- 7.1 The Director of HR and Customer Services, Mark Bennett, informed the Committee that the report gave an overview of the 2021/22 to date performance of the Customer Services Contact Centre.
- 7.2 It was mentioned that the report identified issues that affected performance, future developments and areas for improvement.
- 7.3 The Committee was advised that the Contact Centre had experienced issues on recruitment. It was also mentioned that inductions for new starters had been affected due to the pandemic.
- 7.4 New ways of working and how the Contact Centre could improve its performance were set out in the report for the Committee to review. Short-term issues and how to reduce immediate pressures along with long-term potential developments were highlighted.
- 7.5 Members of the Committee asked questions and the key points to note were-
- 7.6 Councillor Angela Argenzio referred to the Revenue and Benefits table which reported the longest waiting and handling times across all the departments outlined in the report. Councillor Argenzio asked why it was difficult to contact the Revenue and Benefits department. The Director of HR and Customer Services acknowledged that the waiting and handling times were unacceptable although it was mentioned that the nature of the calls directed to Revenue and Benefits, were usually more complex and required specialist responses.
- 7.7 Councillor Angela Argenzio asked what the Customer Services Contact Centre had done to improve their performance. The Director of HR and Customer Services informed the Committee that the Storm telephony system along with a new CRM (Customer Records Management) system had been introduced. The Director of HR and Customer Services outlined the ambition to improve the Council's Contact Centre webpage, adding that the aim was to make it the primary point of receiving adequate information, which would lead to the reduction of call volume. It was mentioned that approximately 60% of customers had tried to resolve their issues initially on the Council's webpage before calling the Contact Centre.
- 7.8 The Director of HR and Customer Services stated that approximately 30% of customers had previously called the Contact Centre and the purpose of their call was to follow up on existing enquiries. Therefore, it was noted that issues needed to be dealt with first time round, which

would also lead to the reduction of call volume.

- 7.9 Councillor Angela Argenzio asked if there was a timeframe on updating the Contact Centres webpage. The Director of HR and Customer Services advised that developing the webpage would not be a quick process and would require contribution from multiple services, therefore a deadline would not be confirmed.
- 7.10 Councillor Angela Argenzio asked if there was anything in place to encourage staff to remain in the Contact Centre. The Director of HR and Customer Services explained that Team Leaders, Supervisors and Managers were excellent at providing support to staff. Corleen Bygraves-Paul stated that regular one to ones and team meetings were scheduled. It was added that one reason why staff leave the Contact Centre was due to development opportunities as the Contact Centre is known for developing staff knowledge in various services which gave staff the ability to progress their careers, within the Council.
- 7.11 Councillor Josie Paszek expressed sympathy for the staff within the Contact Centre. Councillor Paszek asked if the Contact Centre was adequately staffed and how many posts required recruitment. Corleen Bygraves-Paul explained the difficulty around recruiting when the requirement is only for short-term contracts although active recruitment was taking place. Part-time staff had been asked to extend their working hours and the recruitment process had been adapted to attract quality staff. The training time for new starters had been reduced from 6 weeks to 3 weeks.
- 7.12 It was mentioned that 7 experienced Customer Service staff had moved to the Council's Test, Track and Isolate Team and that they would return to Customer Services in the future.
- 7.13 Councillor Mohammed Mahroof stated that some customers could become anxious when trying to resolve an immediate issue, and that long waiting times could worsen the customers' anxiety.
- 7.14 Alison Howard (Independent Co-opted Member) suggested that future reports should include benchmarking against other authorities and the private sector, this would assist the Committee understand the position of the Council compared to other organisations. There was also a suggestion to incorporate an action plan so the Committee could see the progress made at a future meeting.
- 7.15 The Chair thanked the Director of HR and Customer Services and

Corleen Bygraves-Paul for their detailed responses and requested that the Executive Member for Finance and Resources be made aware of the discussion that had taken place.

- 7.16 **RESOLVED:** That **(1)** the Committee considered the report in order to provide its view on the future performance of service, the improvements proposed, and the issues raised and **(2)** the minutes be circulated to the Executive Member for Finance and Resources.

## **8. PROGRESS REPORT OF MEMBER DEVELOPMENT**

- 8.1 The Director of Legal and Governance described the progress that had taken place with Member Development at the Council and outlined the plans for its future development.
- 8.2 The Committee were advised that the LGA (Local Government Association) had offered one years' worth of training and development to the Council and that the programme would run until May 2022.
- 8.3 Training for Members and Officers had also been provided on the introduction of Local Area Committees and the Transition to a Committee System.
- 8.4 Members of the Committee asked questions and the key points to note were-
- 8.5 The Chair suggested training on Personal Safety and Conflict Resolution for elected members be added to the programme. The Director of Legal and Governance referred to 3.6.1 in the report which highlighted that Personal Safety and Conflict Resolution along with other topics requested to be included in the programme.
- 8.6 The Director of Legal and Governance mentioned that Personal Safety sessions were held previously, with the help of the Police, and that this training would be looked at being brought forward. It was added that immediate advice and guidance on Personal Safety was accessible on the LGA website.
- 8.7 Councillor Angela Argenzio recommended the LGA safety training session to other Members.
- 8.8 Councillor Angela Argenzio raised concerns as the induction for new members had low attendance and asked if this was rolled out once. The Director of Legal and Governance advised that inductions for new member were scheduled once a year, usually a week after the

election, and that the session was carried out over a two-day period. If a member was not able to attend the induction, they would have to complete all the elements separately. It was mentioned that the low attendance could be a result of Councillors being re-elected, although it was advised that every Councillor should attend the induction whether they are new or returning Councillors.

- 8.9 Councillor Angela Argenzio asked whether training sessions could be recorded and provided to members who were not able to attend a training session. The Director of Legal and Governance stated that recording training sessions was a good principle and would be looked at where possible.
- 8.10 The Chair requested that Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion training be made mandatory for members. The Director of Legal and Governance agreed to raise mandatory training with the Whips.
- 8.11 The Chair thanked the Director of Legal and Governance for the report on Member Development.
- 8.12 **RESOLVED:** that the Committee note the progress of Member Development.

## **9. WORK PROGRAMME**

- 9.1 The Committee considered a report of the Director of Legal and Governance that outlined the work programme for the remainder of the municipal year. Members were asked to identify any further items for inclusion.
- 9.2 The Chair suggested that an Annual Housing Ombudsman Report be brought to the Committee on 20 January 2022 if the review was complete.
- 9.3 The next meeting of the Audit & Standards Committee would consider;
- - Statement of Accounts 2020/21
  - Educational Healthcare Plan Update
  - Report of those Charged with Governance (ISA 260)
  - Whistleblowing Policy Review
  - Progress on High Opinion Audit Reports



It was mentioned that the decision made by the Committee, to opt-in to using PSAA for appointing the Council's external auditors, would need to be agreed by Full Council. Full Council would receive a report of The Chair, Councillor Sioned-Mair Richards seconded by Vice Chair, Councillor Simon Clement-Jones in January 2022.

- 9.4 **RESOLVED:** that **(1)** the work programme be noted; and **(2)** that the report mentioned be included to the work programme; and **(3)** that the Committee agreed a report of The Chair/Vice Chair be taken to Full Council to agree using PSAA for appointing the Council's external auditors.

## **10. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

- 10.1 Future Meetings of the Audit and Standards Committee would be held on Thursdays at 5pm on:

16<sup>th</sup> December 2021

20<sup>th</sup> January 2022

24<sup>th</sup> February 2022 (Additional Meeting if required)

24<sup>th</sup> March 2022

16<sup>th</sup> June 2022

21<sup>st</sup> July 2022

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