

Audit and Standards Committee

Meeting held 24 March 2022

PRESENT: Councillors Sioned-Mair Richards (Chair), Simon Clement-Jones (Deputy Chair), Angela Argenzio, Mohammed Mahroof, Josie Paszek, Ben Curran and Alison Howard

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 An apology for absence were received from Councillor David Barker.

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 The minutes of the meetings held on 24 February 2022 were agreed as an accurate record.

4.2 The Chair read a statement to the Committee, which was produced by Democratic Services Team Manager, Sarah Hyde. This explained there was an error in the Annual Standards Report which was presented to the Committee on the 24 February 2022. The report stated there was {0} open cases although there was still 1 case going through the information gathering stage. The Acting CEO and Assistant Director Legal and Governance had both been in touch with the complainant to explain the situation.

4.3 The Assistant Director Legal and Governance agreed to follow up on circulation of the Procedure for dealing with standards complaints.

5. ANNUAL AUDIT REPORT 2020/21

5.1 The Committee received a report of the External Auditors, Ernst and Young (EY).

5.2 The Head of Strategic Finance explained the report concluded the audit for the year 2020/21. The report summarised the position on the audit opinion which was that there was a clear opinion.

5.3 Janet Dawson, EY, referred to the value for money commentary

section of the report. It was mentioned that there were 3 main areas in which EY had explored throughout the year.

- Financial Sustainability
- Governance
- Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness

- 5.4 EY were satisfied the Council had sufficient arrangements in place to manage how decisions were made around these developments.
- 5.5 Members of the Committee asked questions and the key points to note were: -
- 5.6 The Acting Chief Executive, Eugene Walker, explained the Council's finances had become more pressured over the years. The Council's budgetary position was announced early last year in which the Council had accepted their position and worked alongside external auditors so the situation could be monitored appropriately. It was added that reports around the Council's budgetary position would be brought to future the Audit and Standards Committees.
- 5.7 A Member of the Committee welcomed regeneration in the city, although added concerns that since the Council had agreed to sign a lease for properties in the West Bar development, there could potentially be liable to pay rent for those properties.
- 5.8 A Member of the Committee was happy to see an error of £2.4m was picked up by the external auditors.
- 5.9 EY were asked what they thought were the Council's main risks were for the next 12 months. EY believed the main financial challenges would be around social care expenditure. EY added that they will continue to monitor how the Council intended to save money.
- 5.10 EY confirmed there was transactions with two previously undisclosed parties. These related parties were not disclosed by Members on their annual declarations.
- 5.11 The Head of Strategic Finance explained the importance of acting on errors found by EY, which were highlighted in their report. He added the Council were already working with EY to improve on these aspects for the following years. There was also a formal response to recommendations report on the work programme for June 2022.
- 5.12 **RESOLVED:** that **(1)** the Committee noted the report **(2)** the Group Whips ensure their party Members had their declaration of interest forms up to date and correct **(3)** the importance of filling in declaration forms correctly should be expressed in new Member training with examples provided; and **(4)** the Monitoring Officer was asked to send out a further reminder to members to review declarations, 6 months after the elections.

6. COMPLIANCE WITH INTERNATIONAL AUDITING STANDARDS

- 6.1 The Committee received a report of the Head of Strategic Finance which drew together much of the work that had been undertaken by the Audit and Standards Committee. It demonstrated that the Audit and Standards Committee had complied to meet the international standards on auditing.
- 6.2 The Head of Strategic Finance explained the report was brought to the Committee on an annual basis.
- 6.3 The Chair added that a private meeting with Members of the Committee and External Auditors should take place next year.
- 6.4 **RESOLVED:** that **(1)** members of the Committee confirmed that the report gave an accurate reflection of the reports they had received and considered throughout the year **(2)** Members also confirmed they now had an overview of the Council's systems of internal control so that they were assured that they were fulfilling the requirement of 'those charged with governance' under the International Auditing Standards; and **(3)** that a private meeting be scheduled for Members of the Committee and External Auditors.

7. EDUCATION HEALTHCARE PLAN UPDATE

- 7.1 The Committee received a report of the Director of Education and Skills.
- 7.2 The Director Education and Skills, Andrew Jones, agreed to circulate a glossary for the acronyms referred to in the report.
- 7.3 The Committee were informed that the Council's special educational needs (SEN) service was last inspected in 2018, in which 7 areas of significant weakness were identified. The service should then have been re-inspected 2 years after, although the pandemic delayed that from happening.
- 7.4 The SEN service had now recently been re-inspected, in February 2022 although the inspectors had not yet published their findings. Therefore, information presented to the Committee was following the 2018 inspection, and the service's self-evaluations carried out prior to the 2022 inspection.
- 7.5 The SEN service's self-evaluation believed that progress had been made across all the services. Although, it was added that more work is yet to be done.
- 7.6 It was mentioned that progress had been made to 6 of the 7 significant areas of weakness. Although the 7th area, which was multi-agency

transitions, was still a weakness for the service and will be a main area to target and improve. The service will still continuously improve the remaining 6 areas.

- 7.7 The Interim Head of SEN, Rosemary Ward, highlighted there was approximately 4041 children and young people that had Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) within the City. That constituted to approximately 5% of the child population in Sheffield.
- 7.8 In May to July 2021, the compliance within the 20 weeks Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) process dipped from 32 to 18%, with 102 plans exceeding the statutory 20 weeks' timescale. (National average compliance for plan completion is between 55-65%). It was mentioned that had now risen to 61.8%.
- 7.9 The Committee were informed the SEN service had increased their staffing from 16 to 22 full time equivalent Inclusion Officers. There had also recruited to the 3 vacant manager posts therefore there was now 5 locality managers in post. They had recruited 2 new leaders, 1 for the Autism Team and 1 for HI/VI services. A new Principal Educational Psychologist were also now in post. They had also recruited a Post 16 Manager.
- 7.10 The SEN service had reviewed how they audited EHC plans. Following the Audit, they had decided to trial a buddy system where 3 members of staff would audit EHC plans on a triangulation system.
- 7.11 The SEN service did not have sufficient specialist places for children who need them, despite ongoing work with commissioners. It was added that commissioners had increased the amount of specialist places given to children over the previous year.
- 7.12 The Interim Head of SEN highlighted the new performance management structures put in place to ensure performance did not dip in the service again.
- 7.13 Members of the Committee asked questions and the key points to note were: -
- 7.14 A Member of the Committee raised the importance of understanding the acronyms and localities mentioned in the report. It was suggested that mapping areas of deprivation and affluency to where EHC plans had been issued in city would be welcomed. The Interim Head of SEN stated it was a known statistic, that the more affluent areas of the city had more EHC plans issued compared to the more deprived areas.
- 7.15 A Member thanked the Officers for the report although it was added the report needed to be more honest. The Member stated that being honest would allow the Committee to review and comment in detail, to help the service improve and ultimately support young people in the

city.

- 7.16 A Member of the Committee suggested that a SEND update report appeared at a future Audit & Standards Committee.
- 7.17 It was suggested that Officers in service travelled out to schools and worked more closely with them around support and delivering EHC plans. The Interim Head of SEN mentioned that the service did offer extensive training for schools which explored many processes in depth. They had also carried out lots consultation with schools to develop how the team around the schools operated.
- 7.18 A Member mentioned that a previous issue was around not having consistency between what the SEN service was saying in Committees and what parents in the city were saying to Councillors. Although now, it seemed that there was a lot more consistency happening, which was good to hear.
- 7.19 The Director of Education and Skills explained the funding for SEND came from a budget called the high needs block. This funding was not evenly distributed across the city. Different areas in the city would receive different amounts of funding depending on their level of priority. It was added that this could be highlighted in a future report to the Committee.
- 7.20 A Member of the Committee explained that it would be useful for the Committee to be informed when other Policy Committees were reviewing the same topics. It was added that it would be useful to have sight of the reports that went to Policy Committees, so that this Committee could identify areas that needed further consideration, or to inform them that certain areas had been looked at by Audit & Standards Committee, which did not need to be explored further by the Policy Committee.
- 7.21 The Director of Education and Skills informed the Committee that the localities referred to in the report, were set out that way due to a historic grouping of schools in the city.
- 7.22 **RESOLVED:** That the Committee **(1)** Noted the information set out in the report and appendices **(2)** Requested any further information or briefing on SEND **(3)** Supported and challenged regarding SEND development; and **(4)** received a further update report on SEND in the next municipal year.

8. CUSTOMER SERVICES CONTACT CENTRE PERFORMANCE

- 8.1 The Committee received a report of the Director of HR and Customer Services. The report provided an overview of 2021-22 year to date performance for Customer Services Contact Centre. The report identified issues that affected performance and identified future

developments and areas for improvement.

- 8.2 The Head of Customer Services, Paul Taylor, explained that a similar report was presented to the Committee in October 2021. It was mentioned that this report looked at quarter 3 for the financial year 2021/22 and quarter 4 up to the 28 February 2022.
- 8.3 The Head of Customer Services stated that performance in the Contact Centre had improved during March although agreed that there was a lot of work that still needed to be done to achieve a higher standard.
- 8.4 The Committee were informed that the contact centre was impacted following the pandemic which did influence performance. Most of the staff did begin to work from home and that was still the case for some members of the team. There was also several members of staff assisting with the Council's Test, Track and Isolate team although it was anticipated that they would return to the team at the end of March.
- 8.5 The Head of Customer Services believed the staff were working efficiently and was proud of how they dealt with high volumes of calls daily. It was added that the performance figures highlighted in the report was due to various factors such as delays with cross service enquires and losing 4 front line advisors.
- 8.6 The Committee were informed that improvement measures and future developments were highlighted under 5.1 of the report.
- 8.7 It was explained that there were new technological innovations taking place which would improve the customers experience, these were set to be trialled over the upcoming weeks.
- 8.8 Customer Services were also looking to cross skills two if the teams so that they were able to deal with enquiries relating to the others team. This would reduce delays in responding and relieve some pressure off the teams.
- 8.9 The Head of Customer Services referred to the Local Government Association's (LGA) peer review of the contact centre, mentioned in the report. Following the review, the LGA also stated that some grant funding may become available.
- 8.10 There was an ambition to deliver a customer portal, that informed customers on the position of their enquiry. This aimed to reduce the number of follow up calls. The LGA funding would partly fund that project.
- 8.11 Members of the Committee would be welcome to observe members of staff in customer services and also to test new innovations if they wished.

- 8.12 Members of the Committee asked questions and the key points to note were: -
- 8.13 A Member of the Committee raised concerns around the pace at which the contact centre was improving. It was mentioned that it was continuously being stated that new developments would be put in place which would improve the performance, although nothing seemed to really change or make a difference. The Member sympathised with members of staff and mentioned the underlying issue was that residents have problems directly contacting other areas in the Council. Therefore, they had to contact the contact centre. The Head of Customer Services agreed with the comments made by the Member of the Committee. It was added that a new telephony system was introduced during the pandemic which had also led to introducing new innovations such as live chat.
- 8.14 The Head of Customer Services mentioned how it was important to deal with issues the first time around, so that residents were not trying to contact the contact centre constantly to follow up on their enquiry.
- 8.15 A Member raised concerns as residents could potentially receive phone call charges whilst waiting for the contact centre to answer their call. It was also suggested that future reports also outlined the quickest and slowest answer times, along with the averages so the Committee had more indication of how long some people had to wait. The Member also suggested that the Committee saw a timeline of when mentioned developments were likely to be implemented. The Head of Customer Services agreed to circulate a document to the Committee on this.
- 8.16 A Member did not believe that following the same approach continuously, would solve any of the issues raised at the meeting and highlighted in the report. It was stated that the same promises were constantly been brought up at Committee, yet there was not much progress on performance over the past several years. It was mentioned that a wider approach needed to be carried out, to look at how the fundamentals could be changed to improve performance. The Acting Chief Executive, Eugene Walker, stated there was many aspects the Council needed to consider before looking to change the fundamentals within customer services. A lot of the issues were cross service issues therefore, joined up working needed to be improved and there needed to be a clear and realistic plan for the Council to follow. The Acting Chief Executive agreed to take Members comments away and bring back a report to the Committee that addressed these issues.
- 8.17 **RESOLVED:** That the Audit & Standards Committee **(1)** considered the report in order to provide its view on the performance of the Contact Centre and the issues raised **(2)** received a timeline of when developments were to be implemented by the Head of Customer Services; and **(3)** received a report of the Acting Chief Executive

following discussions from the committee at 8.13 to 8.16 above.

9. ANNUAL HOUSING OMBUDSMAN COMPLAINTS REPORT 2020/21

9.1 The Committee received a report of the Director of HR and Customer Services and the Director of Legal and Governance.

9.2 The Housing Ombudsman had now issued annual Landlord performance reports for 2020-21 but had only done so for those landlords that had 5 or more cases determined during 2020-21. For all Landlords with less than 5 determinations they had issued basic decision data in a table. This was highlighted in the report.

9.3 **RESOLVED:** The Audit & Standards Committee noted the limited information published by the Housing Ombudsman in respect of Sheffield City Council for the 2020-21 period.

10. WORK PROGRAMME

10.1 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.

10.2 The Committee agreed to include an update on SEND report to the work programme which would be brought to the Committee around September/October 2022. As mentioned above at 7.22 of these minutes

10.3 The Committee agreed to include a report of the Acting Chief Executive to the work programme as agreed above at 9.3 of these minutes.

10.4 **RESOLVED:** - that **(1)** the work programme be noted; and **(2)** that the reports mentioned above at 10.2 to 10.3 be included on the work programme.

10.5 Following the conclusion of items on the agenda, the Committee received a report of the Head of Strategic Finance. The purpose of this report was to provide Members of the Audit and Standards Committee with information on the reallocation of tasks following the retirement of the current Head of Strategic Finance in March 2022.

10.6 The Chair thanked the Committee for their work throughout the year and wished them well for the following year.

11. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

11.1 It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on 16 June 2022.