

**MINUTES of the meeting of Standards and Audit Committee held on 28 November 2013 at 7.00pm**

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**Present:** Councillors Tunde Ojetola (Chair), Yash Gupta, Cathy Kent and Simon Wootton

**Co-opted Members:** Jason Oliver and Stephen Rosser

**Apologies:** Councillor Terry Hipseley and Rhona Long

**In attendance:** Councillor Lynn Carr  
Sean Clark – Head of Corporate Finance  
Chris Harris – Head of Internal Audit, Baker Tilly  
Gary Clifford – Client Manager for Audit Services, Baker Tilly  
Lee Henley – Information Manager  
Andy Owen – Corporate Risk Officer  
Kathryn Adedeji – Head of Housing, Investment and Development  
Debbie Hanson – Ernst and Young  
Christine Connelly - Ernst and Young  
Daniel Toohey – Legal Services  
Kenna-Victoria Martin – Democratic Services

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**28 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of Standards and Audit Committee, held on 19 September 2013, were approved as a correct record.

**29 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no items of urgent business; however the Chair informed those present that Item 11 on the agenda was to be taken first.

**30 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**31 ANNUAL AUDIT LETTER**

The Councils external auditors informed the Committee that this letter was a summary of their finding over the last year and will be sent out to all Members.

Members were notified that on pages 128/129 of the agenda were the key finding and although there was room for improvement, this was a more positive letter than in previous years.

The Chair of the Committee asked if there would be the possibility of the fees being lowered for next year. Ms Hanson informed the Committee that the Audit Commission set the audit fees, however the authority could respond to the Audit Commission consultation on audit fees regarding the reduction in fee. The Head of Corporate Finance confirmed to Members that this was something he would look into.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the Standards and Audit Committee considered the comments of our external auditors as set out in the attached report and noted their findings.**

**32 ACCESS TO RECORDS REPORT – 2012/13**

The Information Manager introduced the report and explained to Members that the report provided a summary of Freedom of Information (FOI) and Data Protection requests received and processed. The Committee were further informed that work taken within the information team as of last year was being published on the council's website as part of the transparency programme.

Members of the Committee were notified that the information team could in line with legislation refuse an FOI request if it would take over 18 hours to complete, it was queried as to whether the team would completely refuse a request should it require 18hours work. Officers informed Members that all requests were assessed to establish how long each request would take and only requests that would take in excess of 18 hours would be refused in-line with the legislation. When exemptions are used to refuse requests, then these are done so by using Absolute exemptions and/or public interest test exemptions.

Members enquired as to the support the Information Team received from other departments within the Council. The Information Manager informed Members that his team had a good relationship with other area of Council.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the Standards and Audit Committee noted the performance and statistics for 2012/13 for both FOI and Data Protection.**

**33 2012/13 ANNUAL COMPLIMENTS, COMPLAINTS & ENQUIRES REPORT**

The Information Manager introduced the report and informed those present that there had been a 34% increase in complaints compared to 2011/2012.

He continued to explain that there had been a dip in performance and that for this year 2012/2013 the team had processed 91% within timeframe compared

to 97% for the previous year, this was mainly down to Morrisons not responding to complaints within timeframes.

It was explained to the Committee that a new informal stage would be rolled out in 2014 based on a pilot undertaken on landlord service complaints within housing.

Members enquired as to whether lessons had been learnt from the increase in complaints and were informed by Officers that there was a higher log of complaints as people now know the process. Officers further explained that the increase was mainly down to the Morrisons contract and that there were fewer complaints now the Council was working with Mears.

**RESOLVED that the Standards and Audit Committee:**

- 1. Noted the statistics for 2012/13.**
- 2. Noted that the Council will continue to drive forward work to embed learning from complaints as a mechanism to deliver service improvements.**
- 3. Noted the change in council process with the introduction of an informal stage in the way we process complaints (covered in 3.7.7 of the report)**
- 4. Receive a further report on 6monthly basis on compliments, complaints & enquires**

**34 RISK AND OPPORTUNITY MANAGEMENT - BENCHMARKING AND ACTION PLAN**

The Performance and Risk Officer introduced the report and explained that risk and opportunity management was recognised as good management practice and was part of the Councils Corporate Governance and performance management arrangements.

Members of the Committee were further informed that for all of the 7 strands the scores had improved and that the progress against the previous year action plan, along with the action to address the improvement opportunities identified by the review were outlined in Appendix B of the report

The Committee queried as to the timescale officers had for completion with regards to the aims within Appendix B of the report. Officers informed Members that a detailed plan would be put together.

**RESOLVED:**

**That Standards and Audit Committee:**

1. **Noted the results of the benchmarking exercise, the progress against the previous year's action plan and further actions identified to address the improvement opportunities established by the review.**
2. **Receive a progress report on risk and opportunity management - benchmarking and action plan to the February meeting.**

### **35 GREEN YARD SCHEME FOR ABANDONED AND STRAY HORSES IN THURROCK**

The Client Manager for Audit Services introduced the report which outlined the findings of work carried out by internal audit following a request by the Chief Executive after concerns were raised by a Councillor on the use of a particular contractor for the green yard scheme for abandoned and stray horses in Thurrock.

Members of the Committee were informed of the main issues, which were found when carrying out the audit and were notified that Essex Police were now responsible for abandoned and stay horses within Thurrock.

The Chair allowed Councillor Carr to ask questions of officers in which she queried that after 14 days stray horses would be owned by the Council, it was her understanding that they would be owned by the Green Yard. Officers informed Councillor Carr that they unfortunately weren't aware of that and that this was the process they were told by the environmental officer.

Councillor Carr further enquired as to why if the horses no longer belonged to the Council; the Council were paying for stabling. Officers informed the Committee that protocol was that horses were to be re-homed within 28 days, subject to their condition and availability of suitable re-homing places, should they not be re-homed then the Council would pay the stabling fee.

The Chair asked that an update report be brought back to the Committee and that clarification of the term Green Yard Scheme and who is responsible for stray horses in Thurrock be included.

**RESOLVED that the Standards & Audit Committee:**

1. **Noted the contents of the response provided to the Councillor.**
2. **Receive an update report on Green Yard Scheme for Abandoned and Stray Horses in Thurrock.**

### **36 INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT 2013/14**

The head of Internal Audit informed the Committee that Internal Audit were no longer RSM Tenon but now Baker Tilly. The Client Manager for Audit Services then introduced the report in which he explained that this was the first progress report to be brought to the Committee.

Members of the Committee were informed that of 23 reports, 13 received a green assurance, 7 received amber/green assurances, 2 received amber/red assurances and 1 received a red assurance. The Committee were notified that Quarry Hill Primary School had since become an academy, therefore management comments and action plans hadn't been included but all recommendations would be monitored and followed up by Children's Services.

The Committee discussed the report and came to the conclusion that little attendance from Officers their questions could not be answered in full detail; therefore the Chair asked that the report be deferred to the next Committee on the 6 February 2014 where lead officers for the key items within the report will be invited to attend to answer questions from the Committee.

**RESOLVED that the Standards and Audit Committee defer the Internal Audit Progress Report 2013/14 to the next Committee on the 6 February 2014.**

### **37 2012/2013 - HOUSING CAPITAL PROGRAMME AUDIT**

The Head of Housing, Investment and Development introduced the report which outlined the background to the 2012/2013 Housing Capital Programme Audit.

Members were notified that an investigation took place in October 2013 to review the value for money that was obtained on housing contracts being delivered by SSP. Following the review the Council asked for an audit to be carried out, key findings of the audit were listed at 3.1 of the report.

It was explained to the Committee that the findings through the audit started the negotiations with Serco to have the functions and associated staff transferred back to the Council and this was finalised at no extra cost in August 2013.

Members enquired as to whether Officers were confident with the action plan that had been put in place. The Head of Housing, Investment and Development confirmed to Members that she was confident with the action plan in place, she informed the Committee that she felt it was a more robust plan and would stand up to scrutiny.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the Standards and Audit Committee noted the contents of the report.**

### **38 WORK PROGRAMME**

Members discussed the work programme for the municipal year and the following was agreed:

- That the Internal Audit Progress Report 2013/14 deferred from this meeting taken to the February meeting.
- That the Committee receive an update report on risk and opportunity management - benchmarking and action plan.
- That the Committee receive an update report on Green Yard Scheme for Abandoned and Stray Horses in Thurrock.
- That the Committee receive an update report with regards to Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA).
- That a report on the Accounts be taken to the March meeting.

Councillor Wootton took the opportunity to thank Councillor Ojetola for his time as Chair of the Standards and Audit Committee and this was supported by Councillor Gupta.

**The meeting finished at 9.23.**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIRMAN**

**DATE**

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact  
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