

**MINUTES of the meeting of Standards and Audit Committee held on 06  
February 2014 at 7.00pm**

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**Present:** Councillors Robert Gledhill (Chair), Yash Gupta, Cathy Kent and Tunde Ojetola (substitute Simon Wootton (left at 7.50))

**Co-opted  
Members:** Jason Oliver, Stephen Rosser (left at 7.30) and Rhona Long (from 7.05)

**Apologies:** Councillor Martin Healy

**In attendance:** Sean Clark–Head of Corporate Finance  
Gary Clifford–Client Manager for Audit Services  
Les Billingham -Head of Adult Services  
Andy Owen – Corporate Risk Officer  
Kathryn Adedeji – Head of Housing, Investment and Development  
Gavin Dennett – Environmental Health and Trading Standards Manager  
Debbie Hanson – Ernst and Young  
Daniel Toohey – Principal Solicitor for Contracts & Procurement  
Kenna-Victoria Martin – Democratic Services

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**39 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of Standards and Audit Committee, held on 28 November 2013, were approved as a correct record.

**40 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no items of urgent business; however the Chair informed those present that Item 10 on the agenda was to be taken first.

**41 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**42 REPORT FROM ERNST AND YOUNG: CERTIFICATION OF CLAIMS AND RETURNS ANNUAL REPORT 2012-13**

The external auditors introduced the report and explained to the Committee that this was the summery findings of the certification of claims and returns. It was explained that claims and returns were audited differently to the statement of accounts as the auditors applied the concept of materiality to the audit of accounts; however there was no materiality to the audit of grant claims which

were reviewed in line with procedures agreed between the funding Government department and the Audit Commission.

Members of the Committee were informed that there were four main areas, Housing and Council Tax Benefit Subsidy Claim, Teachers Superannuation Return, Pooling Housing Capital Receipts and National-Non Domestic Rates Return. The external auditors explained that for the Housing Benefit Claim an initial sample of 20 cases were looked at and should any errors be identified then a further 40 cases were tested. The Committee were notified that it was not unusual for errors to be identified in the Housing Benefit claim, which was a very complicated and high value claim.

The Committee were informed that the external auditors had included a number of recommendations within section 4 of the appendix and were satisfied that management responses were reasonable.

## **RESOLVED**

**That the report attached at Appendix 1 and the agreed actions are noted.**

### **43 2012/13 – RECHARGING TENANTS**

The Head of Housing, Investment and Development introduced the report to Members of the Committee explaining that the report was an update asked for by the Committee.

Members were informed that the previous audit was undertaken when works were being carried out by Morrison's, this was no longer the case and an interim contract with Mears was now in place.

It was explained to the Committee that a range of processes and procedures were now in place to enable the Council to raise and recover tenant recharge debts. The Head of Housing, Investment and Development further explained that consultations with the procurement team were in place to introduce a new repairs policy.

Members queried as to whether Officers visited properties to seek recharging tenants. Officers informed the Committee that they didn't visit properties, however most tenants would contact the Council at least once within a 12month gap for repairs. It was explained that this is when Council Officers would determine whether it was wear and tear or tenant damaged.

It was queried as to whether any debt would be written off by the Council, the Head of Corporate Finance explained that there was no limit that the Council wouldn't chase, and took any action necessary to recover debts. The Committee were informed that it was a long process to write off any debt and as the signing Officer an audit trail would be needed. For anything less than two thousand pounds would have to be incorporated within the relevant services budget, anything over two thousand pounds would have to be signed

off by the Head of Corporate Finance and the Monitoring Officer, Should the debt be over twenty five thousand pounds it would have to be agreed by cabinet to be written off.

The Chair of the Committee queried as to whether Officers were confident they knew what was to be recharged to tenants. Officers confirmed they were confident as new tenant agreement was in place which outlined the tenant's responsibility.

The Chair asked that the Chair of the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee be made aware of the report, Officers agreed to this.

**RESOLVED that the Standards and Audit Committee noted the contents of the report.**

#### **44 RISK AND OPPORTUNITY MANAGEMENT – POLICY, STRATEGY AND FRAMEWORK**

The Corporate Risk Officer introduced the report and explained that the Council ROM was benchmarked against the national model of best practice and the results, along with the action plan for improvement were presented to the Committee at the November meeting.

The Committee were informed that the review of the ROM Policy, Strategy and Framework, including the arrangements for the monitoring and reporting of the Strategic/Corporate Risk and Opportunity Register were two of the key actions contained in the improvement plan

The Committee were further informed that the review had been undertaken and the revised ROM Policy, Strategy and Framework were included in Appendix 1, and the proposed timetable for the monitoring/reporting of the Strategic/Corporate Risk and Opportunity Register included in Appendix 2.

The Committee discussed the revised arrangements for the monitoring/reporting of the Strategic/Corporate Risk and Opportunity Register and requested that accountable Directors or Head of Service attend the Committee to answer any queries or questions the Members may have for any high level risks identified in the reports

**RESOLVED that Standards and Audit Committee noted the review and the revised Risk and Opportunity Management Policy, Strategy and Framework**

#### **45 UPDATE REPORT ON STRAY HORSES**

The Head of Corporate Finance explained that this report had been brought back to committee at the request of members as there were concerns regarding contracts on the Greenyard.

Members confirmed they had requested an update report and queried as the previous meeting there was a discussion on figures and possible fraud involved. The Head of Corporate Finance confirmed to the Committee that there were no identification of fraud and no fraud involved with the audit that took place.

The Environmental Health and Trading Standards Manager introduced the report touching on the following points, Essex police were responsible for stray horses in Thurrock, the welfare of stray horses was the responsibility of the RSPCA, nevertheless the Council would co-operate with the RSPCA should it be Council land that the horses strayed onto.

**RESOLVED that Members of Standards and Audit Committee**

- i) Noted the contents of the report.**
- ii) Noted that Cleaner, Greener, Safer Overview and Scrutiny have Animal Welfare Policy on the forward plan and this will encompass the responsibilities of the Council in relation to horse**

**46 REGULATION OF INVESTIGATORY POWERS ACT 2000**

The Principal Solicitor for Contracts & Procurement introduced the report and explained that the Council had a RIPA inspection in October 2013, which was positive and areas for improvement were noted.

It was explained that the training log for RIPA had been included within the report and regular training was now in place for officers in particular training on the process and completing the relevant forms all of which had to be hand written.

Further checks had been put in place with the Monitoring Officer being the Senior Responsible Officer. The previous inspection in 2011 agreed that Director's Board would be the SRO's. Following the inspection in October 2013 it was agreed that this number could be lowered to four Officers.

Members of the Committee were notified that the RIPA policy had been updated and the recommendations following the inspection were noted and included.

The Committee queried as there was a lot of work involved, whether officers felt it was worth it. Officers informed members that although there was a lot of work involved and it was challenging for the Council to allocate the resource it was also worth it as it addressed the concerns within the community.

Officers continued to explain that they were reporting this to the community so that they were aware of what the council was doing. It was further explained that officers were duty bound to follow through as it was important to demonstrate what was happening.

## **RESOLVED That the Committee**

**Noted the report and the attached table of recommendations and implementation actions.**

**Noted the attached RIPA training log which includes proposed practical training on approvals.**

**Approved that in accordance with the Inspector's comments, a RIPA activity report will be brought before the Committee on a quarterly basis, supplemented by an annual report on whether changes to the RIPA Corporate Policy are required.**

**That the Committee note the statistical information relating to the use of RIPA from July 2013 to December 2013.**

**That the Committee approves the amended RIPA Corporate Policy, to incorporate the amendments set out in the report, including the reduction in the number of AO's, and a further SRO checking stage for quality control.**

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

The Client Manager for Audit Services introduced the report, during which he explained the report had been deferred from the November meeting.

Members of the Committee were informed that of 24 reports, 13 received a green assurance, 7 received amber/green assurances, 2 received amber/red assurances and 1 received a red assurance. There was also 1 advisory report where no opinion is provided. The Committee were notified that the majority of works mentioned within the report were virtually completed.

The Head of Adult Services then updated the Committee with regards to the recommendations within the audit report for his service:

- Ref 1.2 the use of agency staff had been decreased, a business case had been completed to enable the following recruitment 4 post from Agency staff to Permanent staff, 6 posts from Agency staff to Bank staff, 1 post had been redeployed.
- Ref 1.3 a business case had not yet completed however a meeting with HR had been held, the Committee were informed that short term contracts would be given to some agency staff and recruitment to remaining posts would follow once all agency staff had been offered employment.
- Ref 1.5 there had been a review of staffing levels completed which would be fed into the service improvement plan. Human Resources completed a bus escort risk assessment, the outcome of which decided that escorts are

to remain as the risk to service users and lone workers would be too great if escorts removed.

- Ref 2.1 it was explained that as refs 1.2,1.3 and 1.5 were being complied with, then this recommendation would also be complied with as they were all linked.
- Ref 2.2 Members were informed that the register of interest had been completed and that there was an ongoing discussion with the Legal department concerning management of information in the future.
- Ref 3.1 the Committee were informed that this recommendation had been implemented, in exceptional circumstances automatic approval would be granted and agreed by Head of Service.

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

**Considered reports issued by Internal Audit in relation to the 2013/14 audit plan.**

**Noted progress against the Internal Audit Plan for 2013/14.**

**Noted those areas of Internal Audit activity which are not formally reported to the Standards & Audit Committee.**

**48 WORK PROGRAMME**

Members discussed the work programme for the municipal year and the following reports were agreed for the March meeting of the Committee:

- Ernst and Young – Audit Plan 2013/14
- Ernst and Young – 2014/15 Audit Fee Letter
- Internal Audit Progress Report (October 2013 – February 2014)
- Draft Internal Audit Plan

**The meeting finished at 8.29pm.**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIRMAN**

## **DATE**

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact  
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or alternatively e-mail [kmartin@thurrock.gov.uk](mailto:kmartin@thurrock.gov.uk)**