

Minutes of the Meeting of the Standards and Audit Committee held on 20 October 2022 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors James Thandi (Vice-Chair), Steve Liddiard and Kairen Raper

Charles Clarke (Co-optee Member)

Apologies: Lisa Laybourn (Co-optee Member)

In attendance:

Rachel Brittain, Binder Dijke Otte (BDO)
Paul Greenway, Field Intelligence Officer
Lee Henley, Strategic Lead, Information Management
Andy Owen, Corporate Risk and Insurance Manager
Jonathan Wilson, Interim Director Finance & S151 Officer
Rhiannon Whiteley, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting may be filmed and was being recorded, with the audio recording to be made available on the Council's website.

12. Minutes

The minutes of the Standard and Audit Committee meeting held on the 7 July 2022 were approved as a true and correct record.

13. Items of Urgent Business

The Chair agreed to a verbal update being provided from Rachel Brittain from BDO (Binder Dijker Otte) on the progress of the external audit.

Rachel confirmed that the audit had progressed well since she last spoke to the Committee and they have completed procedures in the lower risk areas. Rachel confirmed that they are not able to conclude the audit as a result of the Government intervention and Best Value Inspection. It will be necessary to consider the outcomes and the Council's response and action plans and the impact of these on the financial statements and on the value for money arrangement. The external audit is therefore unlikely to be concluded before March 2023.

Councillor Raper sought to clarify when the Audit should have originally been completed.

Rachel Brittain confirmed that originally it was expected to be completed by Christmas time 2022.

Rachel Brittain and Jonathan Wilson left the meeting.

14. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

15. Annual Complaints & Enquiries Report - 2021/2022

The Strategic Lead for Information Management presented the Annual report on Complaints and Enquiries.

The Strategic Lead for Information Management confirmed that there had been an increase in complaint volumes compared to the previous year and the main reason for this was due to an increase in complaints about waste and this was likely due to the industrial action last year. There has also been an increase in Housing Repair complaints, the reasons for this increase was due to Covid 19 as the repair contractors had staffing issues due to staff isolating and there were also material shortages.

Councillor Liddiard queried whether there had been an increase in residents saying they cannot get hold of Council staff.

Councillor Raper stated that residents that have spoken to her in surgeries in Tilbury have stated that they are not confident in using the digital system for reporting complaints due to being elderly or not being able to afford it. Councillor Raper highlighted that it is important that there is a clear route for those who don't want to use the internet.

The Strategic Lead for Information Management responded that he has not seen a significant rise in complaints about not being able to get hold of council staff however, the report shows residents are reporting delays in replies across certain areas and there is some learning that needs to be taken away from that.

The Strategic Lead for Information Management confirmed he is aware that some residents don't have access to the internet and he agrees that the members enquiries route can assist with this.

Councillor Thandi commented that it would be good for the Council to promote how to make a complaint through other methods such as in the paper.

RESOLVED:

1.1 **To note the statistics and performance for the reporting period.**

16. Annual Information Governance Report April 2021 - March 2022

The Strategic Lead for Information Management presented the report to the Committee.

The Strategic Lead for Information Management confirmed that during 2021/22, the council processed 98% of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests within the 20-working day legal timeframe. The Information Commissioner expect public authorities to answer at least 90% on time so this is very positive.

During the reporting period, the council received 148 Subject Access Requests under the Data Protection Legislation, 91% of these requests were processed within the legal timeframe. The volume of SAR's received for this reporting period has increased by 76% compared to 2020/21.

Councillor Raper queried on page 104 the meaning of legal professional privilege

The Strategic Lead for Information Management responded that this is where the Council have refused to provide a response and given the reason of legal professional privilege. This refers to where there are conversations between lawyers and there is potential litigation or ongoing legal proceedings and therefore the information cannot be disclosed for this reason.

RESOLVED

1.1 To note the Information Governance activity and performance

17. In Quarter 2 Refresh of the Strategic / Corporate Risk and Opportunity Register

The Corporate Risk and Insurance Manager presented the report. He explained that the report provides the Standards and Audit Committee with the key risks and opportunities identified by the review and the revised Strategic/Corporate Risk and Opportunity Register.

Appendix 1 is the dashboard which provides a summary of the items in the register mapped against the council's priorities, shows the significance of the risks and opportunities, the ratings for the items along with the management time frames.

Appendix 2 is the Risks and Opportunities In Focus report. This document highlights the higher priority items identified by the review. The rationale for items being in focus is based on the numeric value of the rating. Any risks/opportunities which are currently rated 16 or 12 automatically become in focus and any which are currently rated 9 or 8 would be considered on a case by case basis for the in focus report.

The Criteria Guide for Impact and Likelihood levels are included under Appendix 3 to show the guidelines used to rate and prioritise the items.

Any risk management improvement opportunities identified from the Best Value inspection will be used to inform plans to further embed the ROM arrangements across the Council and updates on the position will be reported in subsequent papers to Standards & Audit Committee.

Councillor Raper queried on the bottom of page 113 where it is stated that an organisation that was successful in the tender process has failed to deliver the capacity contracted for, she requested an update on this.

The Corporate Risk and Insurance Manager confirmed he was not the risk owner and therefore was not in a position to answer the question tonight however he will obtain a response from the correct person and provide an update at a later date.

RESOLVED:

- 1.1 That Standards and Audit Committee note the items and details contained in the Dashboard (Appendix 1).**
- 1.2 That Standards and Audit Committee note the 'In Focus' report (Appendix 2), which highlights the higher priority items identified by the review.**
- 1.3 That Standards and Audit Committee note the Best Value Inspection of the governance arrangements (including risk management) outlined in sections 2.7 and 2.8 of the report.**

18. Counter Fraud & Investigation Quarterly Update

The Field intelligence Officer presented the report to the Committee. He explained that the Counter Fraud department supports Thurrock Council and wider partners to protect the public purse where necessary. This includes proactive work to enhance the council's controls as well as responding to intelligence from that proactive work and information from other sources.

The Field Intelligence Officer highlighted the performance of the CFI team over the last quarter (Q1) ;

- 12 reports of suspected fraud have been received
- 6 Investigations have been closed as 'no fraud'
- 1 sanction has been delivered in cases of proven fraud
- 1 Social housing property has been recovered due to being abuse by a tenant

Councillor Liddiard queried if the workload had gone up or down.

The Field Intelligence Officer confirmed that they are proactive and reactive but the workload has stayed roughly the same, currently they have got around 100 open cases.

Councillor Liddiard asked if the team rely on people contacting them or do they look out for specific activities.

The Field Intelligence Officer confirmed that they work closely with other departments in the Council as they are their eyes and ears on the ground and they also have the relationship with residents. The Field Intelligence Officer confirmed that they also take direct referrals or referrals from law enforcement agencies. These partnerships are essential for the team to operate.

Councillor Liddiard queried that sometimes they get reports where on the face of it there is a woman and child living together but there is a man in the background.

The Field Intelligence Officer responded to confirm that is the kind of information the Counter Fraud team would welcome.

Charles Clarke queried how a member of the public would make a report.

The Field Intelligence Officer confirmed there is a report portal on the Thurrock Council website and there is also an email address reportfraud@thurrock.gov.uk

RESOLVED:

1.1 The Standards & Audit Committee comments on the performance of the Counter Fraud & Investigation Department.

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19. Work Programme

The Committee discussed the work programme. Councillor Liddiard raised that the Standards and Audit Committee should be best informed following the Best Value Inspection and he would therefore expect an update on this at the first Committee meeting after the 3rd January 2023 which will be on the 2nd March 2023.

The meeting finished at 7.24 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk**