

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY, 16TH MARCH, 2023

MEMBERS: Councillors Mahym Bedekova (Chair), Ayten Guzel (Vice Chair), Alessandro Georgiou (Leader of the Opposition and the Conservative Group), Suna Hurman, Mohammad Islam, Joanne Laban, Elisa Morreale and Michael Rye OBE

Officers:

James Newman (Director of Finance - Corporate), Doug Wilkinson (Director of Environment and Operational Services), Kevin Bartle (Interim Director of Finance), Paul Neville (Interim Director Digital, Data and Technology), Penny Halliday (Commercial Programme Director), Gemma Young (Head of Internal Audit and Risk Management), Eleanor Brown (Head of Transformation), Martin Sanders (Head of Service Management and Governance), Annette Trigg (Chief Accountant), Rita Hammond (Principal Lawyer) and Marie Lowe (Governance and Scrutiny Officer)

Also Attending:

Lisa Blake, Partner (2020/21), BDO and Sebastian Evans, Manager, BDO

1. WELCOME & APOLOGIES

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and in particular officers new to the Council's employ, Kevin Bartle, Interim Director of Finance and Paul Neville, Interim Director Digital, Data and Technology.

The Chair announced that Kevin Bartle would be covering the role of James Newman who would be leaving the Council shortly.

Apologies for absence were received from the following:

Cllr Ozaydin who was substituted by Cllr Hurman

Cllr Ali who was substituted by Cllr Islam

Peter Nwosu, Independent Member

Apologies for absence had also been received from:

Fay Hammond, Executive Director, Resources

Terry Osborne, Director of Law and Governance

David Eagles, Partner (2019/20), BDO, External Auditor

Due the industrial action on National Rail, some officers and Sebastian Evans, Manager from BDO, External Auditor joining the meeting remotely.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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In relation to Item 8 - Audit and Risk Management Service Progress Update the following declarations were made:

Cllr Mahym Bedekova declared that she was a Trustee of the Mayor's Charity.

Cllr Michael Rye declared that he was a Governor at St Andrews School (Enfield) CE Primary School.

3. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 19 JANUARY 2023

Lisa Blake, BDO Partner/Head of Public Sector Assurance, requested that the minutes be deferred to allow more time for them to provide their comments, in writing, to the Director of Law and Governance.

Members **AGREED** to defer the minutes of the last meeting until the next meeting.

ACTION: David Eagles, BDO and Sebastian Evans BDO/Director of Law and Governance

The Chair requested that the action requesting information of the provision and attendance of training for Members in relation to the General Purposes Committee raised at an earlier meeting be completed.

ACTION: Head of Internal Audit and Risk Management/Head of Governance, Scrutiny and Registration Services

4. UPDATE ON CORPORATE COMPLAINT IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS

The Head of Transformation explained that the purpose of the report was to respond to the request from the committee in October 2022 to provide an update on improvements to corporate complaints handling as detailed in the Corporate Complaints Annual Report 2021-22 and an in-year progress update regarding Member Enquiry (MEQs) performance.

Members expressed concerns regarding the repeated missed bin collection for some residents over a number of months and stated that they expected that the issues be identified and addressed appropriately.

Dissatisfaction was expressed by Members regarding the MEQ system, which they did not consider to be intuitive and easy to use. They used the Council's website to submit service requests as they found this to be more responsive to the immediate needs of the resident. The MEQ system they considered to be useful to ascertain the reasons why a service request had been necessary.

Members accepted that not all service requests or MEQs could be responded to immediately or within the deadline. However, they did not consider some of the holding responses to be informative or proactive. When the responder did provide a further update, the quality of the response was sometimes poor and uninformative. These were the main reasons why Members rejected the response.

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Members were of the view that customers should be informed of the reason for the delay, the need to send a holding response, the timeline when to expect the full response and what action will be taken. The officers involved in the MEQ system and those who provided related training be advised of this and the guidance be amended to include this information.

ACTION: Head of Transformation/Digital Services Training Officer

The Director of Environment and Operational Services reported that as a result of the information extracted from the high levels of data received a full-service review had been initiated. With regards to parks and cemeteries, he accepted that there were issues in this service area and explained that these were down to insufficient management and business support, particularly where managers were carrying out administrative work rather than managing the staff and operations. The pandemic had and continued to have to some extent, an impact on service provision, particularly in some areas such as waste collection for a number of reasons. The poor quality of the responses had been recognised and was acknowledged and was being addressed with further training. Continuous service review and improvement was critical to the work of the Council, including the use of advances in information technology. He advised that all Members used the Council's website to report missed bins and similar service requests as this was a speedier way to resolve the issue.

The Director of Environment and Operational Services welcomed the suggestion regarding the possible use of information technology including bar codes on individual bins. He acknowledged that it was not ideal that the only way to obtain a resolution to the long standing or repetitive issues such as those referred to by the Member earlier, asked that Members emailed him directly and he would investigate and respond.

Members asked that their dissatisfaction with the Place Department especially regarding mould in residential properties and the effect on residents. Members asked that a quarterly update / progress report on Council Housing Repairs Service be brought to the General Purposes Committee by the Place department and that the Executive Director and Director(s) attend the meeting to explain the reasons for the performance of their department and service areas. This methodology applied to all Council departments.

ACTION: Executive Director Place/Governance Team

The Head of Transformation advised that monitoring of complaints was no longer centralised but had been devolved to the individual departments.

AGREED that the progress updates on corporate complaints learning actions and in-year performance for MEQs as requested by the General Purposes Committee.

5. UPDATE ON THE AUDIT OF THE 2019/20 AND 2020/21 STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS AND PENSION FUND AND PROGRESS ON THE 2021/22 COUNCIL'S ACCOUNTS

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The Director of Finance – Corporate reminded the committee that the Council had open, unaudited, accounts for the three financial years 2019/20, 2020/21, and 2021/22. The report provided an update on the audit status for each year of open accounts, plus commentary on preparation of the 2022/23 accounts closure process.

Separately to the agenda, an update from BDO had been circulated and published on the progress with the 2019/20 and 2020/21 audits. The update was based on the position up to and including 8 March 2023.

The director, responding to questions from the Committee, advised that there had been significant progress made with regards to the outstanding items, with both the Council's Finance Team and the External Auditor working closely together.

Lisa Blake from BDO reiterated David Eagles' undertaking that staff at BDO would remain focused and anticipated that the accounts would be closed down by the end of April 2023 and be ready to be brought to the meeting of the General Purposes Committee in June 2023. This was dependent on no other material issues coming to light of material value to delay the work.

Members noted that, following a strategic review, BDO had chosen not to undertake further audits with local authorities.

Members expressed their disappointment and frustration with the continued delay, whilst acknowledging some progress had been made and the improved relationship between officers and the external auditors. Previously, an undertaking had been given to the committee that the accounts would be closed by early spring, a date that was very close. The Committee had expected the work to have been completed by the end of February 2023, but yet again there had been a delay. David Eagles absence was noted, and members expressed the view that they expected him attend the meeting in June 2023, preferably in person, but should this not be possible, remotely. Should the work not be completed, and the accounts not signed off, then David Eagles would be invited to explain the reasons why. It was acknowledged that David Eagles would need to attend the meeting when the accounts were signed off. Once the 2019/20 accounts had been signed off then work could continue on the 2020/21 audit. Any work on further years would not be possible until the 2020/21 had been signed off.

The Director of Finance - Corporate confirmed that the Government had stated, the previous week, it would be writing to all Local Authorities with open accounts. The Council had not received such a letter at the time of reporting.

AGREED that:

1. The information provided within the report be noted;
2. The current accumulated backlog of three years of open, unaudited, accounts be noted;

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3. The approach to be taken for 2022/23 accounts closure be noted; and
4. BDO be formally requested to provide an update at the June 2023 General Purposes Committee detailing their audit plan for completing the audits and the staff resourcing strategy to provide targeted progress.

6. **2023/24 INTERNAL AUDIT CHARTER AND DRAFT 2023/24 INTERNAL AUDIT PLAN**

The Head of Internal Audit and Risk Management explained that, in line with the requirements of the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS), she had a responsibility to regularly review the Internal Audit Charter and to establish risk-based plans to determine the priorities of the Internal Audit activity.

The Head of Internal Audit and Risk Management confirmed that the same level of assurance could be provided although the number of audit days had reduced slightly. She advised that there was often considerable shift in the audit plan during the year and the aim was to enable the team to work smarter and more efficiently and effectively.

AGREED that the 2023-24 Internal Audit Charter and the 2023-24 Internal Audit Plan be approved.

7. **CORPORATE RISK REGISTER UPDATE**

The Head of Internal Audit and Risk Management introduced the report which informed members that since the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) had been presented to General Purposes Committee on 20 October 2022, reviews have been carried out by all Departments and by the Assurance Board. No risks had been added to the CRR; nor have there been any changes to risk scores.

CR06 Customer Demand - Increasing or decreasing demand changes (e.g., population). The Head of Internal Audit and Risk Management reassured the committee that the risk had not been downgraded.

CR10 Housing - Failure to deliver the housing strategy and respond to the changing regulatory environment around Council housing delivery. Members recognised the current issues with regard to the supply and condition of housing in all the London boroughs and nationally, which did not meet the current standards. The committee requested an update at the next meeting.

ACTION: Head of Internal Audit and Risk Management

AGREED that the latest Corporate Risk Register be noted.

8. **AUDIT AND RISK MANAGEMENT SERVICE PROGRESS UPDATE**

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The Head of Internal Audit and Risk Management introduced the Audit and Risk Management Service Progress Update report. (As set out in Appendix A of the report).

Members noted that the report detailed the outcome of audits undertaken by exception.

CR05 - Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) - Assurance Level - Limited

Officers recognised the concerns raised by members regarding the assurance level of this audit and the safeguarding implications arising therefrom. The efficient and effective use of information technology tools would reduce the duplication of the input of data, opportunities for missed reporting and ultimately improve the outcomes for the vulnerable residents, particularly children.

In response to questions, the Interim Director Digital, Data and Technology, informed members that in relation to the record keeping computer system, Liquid Logic, a migration, and upgrade was scheduled in the near future. Members requested that they be informed of when this had taken place together with an update on case monitoring.

ACTION: Interim Director Digital, Data and Technology

CR11 - Governance and Management of a Key Capital Project 2 - Building Bloqs - Assurance Level - Limited

Officers, in response to queries from members, advised that the lease had now been signed and the money was being recovered through a payment plan.

CR17 – Recycling Waste Services Contract - Assurance Level – Limited

The Director of Environment and Operational Services reassured the committee that the actions arising from the audit had been implemented and undertook to circulate information to Members.

Members welcomed the update on an action previously requested by the committee from the Head of Internal Audit and Risk Management which informed that the Assurance Board had agreed that should an identified risks continue with little or no improvement after an agreed amount of time e.g., high risks at three months or medium risk for six months, the Director of that service would attend the General Purposes Committee to explain directly to Members.

AGREED to note the report.

9. INFORMATION AND DATA GOVERNANCE BOARD ANNUAL REPORT

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The Interim Director Digital, Data and Technology introduced the report, which recognised that the governance arrangements had remained broadly the same and were working well, together with some of key changes which had introduced successfully since the last report.

Members noted and thanked officers, and in particular Martin Sanders, Head of Service Management and Governance, for the improvement in achieving over 98% compliance in completing mandatory training and introduction of Data Governance reporting into the board and the high standard data retention schedule now covering over 450 sets of data.

AGREED that:

The inclusion of Covid Inquiry Information and Data Governance to be monitored through the board until concluded be agreed;

The outcomes of the annual report be agreed;

The achievement of mandatory training compliance be noted;

The achievement of high standard data retention schedule be noted;

The plan for 2023/24 be agreed; and

The risks as set out in the report of Officers be noted.

10. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

NOTED that the date of the next meeting of the General Purposes Committee would be announced at the Annual Council Meeting in May 2023.

The meeting ended at 8.55 pm.