

GOVERNANCE AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

(Via Microsoft Teams)

Members Present:

18 February 2022

Chairperson: Councillor J.D.Morgan

Vice Chairperson: Councillor L.M.Purcell

Councillors: O.S.Davies, S.E.Freeguard, J.Miller, R.Mizen, S.Renkes, A.J.Richards, R.W.Wood and A.N.Woolcock

Officers In Attendance: H.Jones, D.Mulligan, A.O'Donnell C.Furlow-Harris, L.Cody-Davies and A.Thomas

Representing Audit Wales: G.Gillett and N.Jenkins

1. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

2. **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

It was agreed that the minutes of the meeting held on 26th November 2021 be approved as a true and accurate record.

3. **AUDIT WALES WORK PROGRAMME AND TIMETABLE - NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL - QUARTERLY UPDATE: 31 DECEMBER 2021**

Non Jenkins, Audit Wales, went through the report. A quarterly update is provided to each Council in relation to the audit work carried out throughout the year. Links to the final outputs are also included. The report provides a summary of work undertaken.

The performance work and audit work for 2021 has been completed. There is also an update on the 2021-22 performance audit work.

Page 13 refers to the springing forward piece of work, which will shortly be concluded and a report will be provided.

Members referred to Page 14, where the report refers to people sleeping rough. It was noted that the report outlines that this work will not be progressing in 2021-22. Officers advised that the Welsh Audit Office consult with the Council's on the programme of national studies. The study identified is one that will be delayed, but it should hopefully be carried out in the forthcoming years.

Members agreed to note the report.

4. **TREASURY MANAGEMENT MONITORING REPORT**

Huw Jones introduced the item. The report outlines treasury management activity since the last report.

Members agreed to note the contents of the monitoring report.

5. **INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT**

Diane Mulligan introduced the report. Members noted the error on the title of the report. It should only read 'Internal Audit Update Report.'

Members considered the staffing issues and the number of days lost due to staff sickness. Members were advised that if this continues it could have an impact on the output at the end of the year.

On Page 30, the report outlines the proposal to leave a post vacant. Members expressed their concern about this and the exposure to possible risk to internal controls if there are not enough staff in the roles. Officers confirmed that whilst remote working was still in place and if someone was to be appointed to the Grade 5 post it was likely that they would not have audit experience. This could possibly be a drain to existing staff resources in terms of training the new member of staff.

Page 36, the report outlines that the schools have provided no information in response to the relevant requests. Members queried what action will be taken in regards to this. Officers confirmed that when the audit was reviewed the schools were contacted and advised that if the information was not provided the report would be issued and indicate that two schools have failed to respond. The

headteacher's were subsequently contacted directly by an officer to advise of the consequences of their failure to respond. Officers confirmed that the two headteacher's have now replied and were apologetic for the delay in response and indicated that there were staffing pressures due to COVID. All documentation has now been received in full.

Page 39, concern was expressed that the Fraud Officer was providing assistance to the team administering COVID related grants. Members were reminded of the work on COVID grants throughout the year. The work was based on grants that had been paid out. At the moment the COVID isolation grants team are under considerable pressure. It was determined that it would be beneficial for the team to have assistance and the Fraud Officer to review the systems and also sample some of the grants that had been applied for before they were paid out. As a result some of the grants have been refused. The Fraud Officer continues to provide support to the team.

With regards to the forthcoming requirement for the Chair of Governance & Audit to be appointed from the lay members, officers were asked to confirm if the Vice-Chair also had to be a lay member. It was confirmed that both the Chair and Vice-Chair will be required to be lay members from May 2022.

Members noted the report for information.

6. COMPLAINTS HANDLING - REVIEW OF EFFECTIVENESS

Caryn Furlow-Harris went through the report.

This report is something that has not been received before. Under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act, the committee has a new duty to discharge. The committee must assess the authorities' ability to handle complaints effectively.

The report provides background information with regards to how complaints are dealt with. When a complaint is received they can be dealt with in two different ways. Social Care complaints follow the statutory social care complaints procedure. All other complaints are dealt with by a corporate comments, compliments and complaints policy. The policy was revised last year in response to a guidance issued by the Welsh Ombudsman. The amended policy was approved by Cabinet last year. The new approved policy was shared

with the Ombudsman, who confirmed that it was compliant with their model policy.

Members were informed that overall the number of complaints received by the authority is relatively low. In terms of effectiveness members were asked to consider how many complaints progressed from stage 1 to stage 2. Members noted the increase of complaints progressing to stage 2 in the first six months of 2021-2022 compared to 2020-2021.

Members were provided with two examples where the complaint had progressed to stage two, and the learning that had resulted from this to assist with the improvement of Council response to complaints and services.

Refresher training has recently been delivered to staff to ensure that staff are up to date with regards to how to deal with complaints. The training was delivered by the Ombudsman office.

With regards to the complaints policy itself Members made reference to the 'what is expected from the complainant' element of the policy. Members asked that it be outlined earlier within the policy to ensure this is clear.

Members noted that if stage 1 and 2 were exhausted without resolution, then the complainant would be directed to complain to the Ombudsman.

Members raised the use of the term customer. Members outlined that they would prefer the use of the term service user or complainant when looking at this item.

It was agreed that the Governance & Audit Committee:

1. Note the information presented in this report
2. Review and assess the authority's ability to handle complaints effectively.
3. Make comments / recommendations in relation to the authority's ability to handle complaints effectively

7. **RISK MANAGEMENT UPDATE**

Huw Jones outlined the Risk Management Report. There has been an update to Cabinet in terms of the strategic risk register. The Risk

Management Policy is currently being reviewed and will be reported back to a future meeting of the Governance & Audit Committee.

It was agreed that Governance and Audit Committee note the risk management update.

8. **DRAFT ANNUAL REPORT OF THE AUDIT COMMITTEE 2020-2021**

Members noted the report and commended the report to Full Council.

9. **URGENT ITEMS**

There were no urgent items to consider.

10. **ACCESS TO MEETINGS**

RESOLVED: that pursuant to Section 100A(4) and (5) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded for the following items of business which involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 12, 13 and 14 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A to the above Act.

11. **SPECIAL INVESTIGATIONS**

Members received an update on the private reports issued since the last committee meeting together with details of all current special investigations.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

CHAIRPERSON