

Minutes of the Audit and Standards Committee Meeting held on 1 November 2022

Present: Mike Worthington (Chair)

Attendance

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| Carolyn Trowbridge (Vice-Chair) | Philippa Haden |
| Bernard Williams | Phil Hewitt |
| Richard Ford | Janice Silvester-Hall |

Also in attendance:

Debbie Harris – for all items
Rebecca Lee - for item no. 31
Halit Halusi - for item no. 35

Apologies: Ann Edgeller, Graham Hutton, Bernard Peters, Ian Wilkes, Arshad Afsar and Keith Flunder

PART ONE

28. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

29. Minutes of the Meeting held on 20 September 2022

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 September 2022 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

30. National Fraud Initiative – Update

Committee members were presented with a report from the County Treasurer relating to the Cabinet Office National Fraud Initiative (NFI) 2022. The report informed members of the biennial National Fraud Initiative data matching exercise which is aimed at preventing and detecting fraud. The initiative allowed data to be matched across both private and public sector organisations, with 1200 participating organisations. The notification process informing employees and pensioners about the data matching exercise would be taking place and how data would be handled started in April 2022.

Committee members heard that the data submission process had already started. Data had been extracted from payroll, pensions, trade creditors,

transport passes (including Blue Badges) and had been shared via secure database, directly with the Cabinet Office. The first deadline to submit the dataset was the 21st October 2022, although data could continue to be submitted until mid-November. Any potential data-matches would be returned by the third week of January 2023. An update would be brought to the July Audit and Standards Committee as part of the counter fraud outturn report.

One dataset that could not be matched was the direct payments to residential care homes as this information was now considered "patient data" which fell under different legislation. The same issue was experienced in the 2020 review but remained unresolved. Members were reminded that, as a result of this issue, the council's Counter Fraud Manager undertook an exercise in 2021 using data from the "Tell us Once" service which identified over £124,000 of payments that had been made to residential care homes for the care of individuals that had passed away. The council intended to undertake this exercise again.

In response to a question relating to the future inclusion of the residential care home dataset in the NFI, it was confirmed that it was hoped that this would be included in the future once the necessary legislative changes had been implemented.

Resolved: That the report on the requirements of the Cabinet Office's National Fraud Initiative (NFI) 2022, be received.

31. Health, Safety and Wellbeing Performance Annual Report 2021/22

The Committee received a report from the Head of Health, Safety & Wellbeing which provided an overview on the health, safety, and wellbeing performance of the council during 2021/2022. This included the key achievements and significant findings during this period along with performance data and outcomes. The report also outlined the 2022/2023 work programme and key priorities.

Members queried why not all schools had purchased the health and safety service during 2021/2022 and it was confirmed that they had access to competent advisors through other channels.

In relation to the increase in staff absence, it was noted that there were a significant amount of preventative measures in place. Members queried if this was due to the age profile of the organisation and it was confirmed that Staffordshire County Council (SCC) did have an ageing workforce and this had been considered as part of the wider "People Strategy" agenda to understand how staff absence levels can be improved. It was explained that there is a good well-being offering available to officers.

Members queried who was responsible for asbestos in school buildings following the transition to academisation. It was confirmed that, although the Council remained the landlord of the property, this was fundamentally the responsibility of the Academies. It was further clarified that most organisations had accessed Entrust's Asbestos Management Service.

It was noted that there had been an increase in figures of occupational health referrals despite the large number of interventions. In response to a question relating to what was being done to improve mental health and loneliness issues as a result of working from home, it was explained that the Council had undertaken a number of activities in conjunction with Mental Health Awareness week which included encouraging people to get out for walks in nature. It was also highlighted that more people were returning to the workplace more frequently, and whilst managers were encouraging staff back into the workplace, it was accepted that working from home was considered the "new norm" and many preferred working from home than commuting into the office.

Comment was made on the importance of ensuring that staff homebased working arrangements conformed with H&S requirements relative to the workplace.

Resolved: a. That the findings and management information detailed in the report be noted.

b. That the key actions identified for 2022/2023 be noted.

32. Forward Plan for the Audit and Standards Committee

The County Treasurer submitted the Forward Plan setting out this Committee's meeting schedule and provisional agenda contents for 2022/2023.

Resolved – That with updates resulting from decisions at this meeting, the Forward Plan be approved.

33. Exclusion of the Public

Resolved – That the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business which involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in the paragraph of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 as indicated.

34. Exempt Minutes of the Meeting held on 20 September 2022 (exemption paragraph 3)

35. SEND Accelerated Progress Plan Six Month Review (exemption paragraph 3)

Chairman