

Audit and Corporate Governance Committee – Extraordinary Meeting held on Thursday, 21st April, 2022.

Present:- Councillors Sabah (Chair), Ali, Brooker and Grewal

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Gahir

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Hussain

PART 1

57. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Brooker declared that he was Finance Committee Chair at Ryvers Primary School and remained and participated in the meeting.

58. Risk Management Update - End of Quarter 4 2021/22

In introducing the report, the Director of Finance highlighted that to ensure that the Council continued its development of a proper strategic risk register, this was the fourth revision of the risk register and that it was being reviewed on a monthly basis; and reported on a quarterly basis to the Corporate Leadership Team.

It was brought to Members attention that two new risks had been added to the register as a result of the impact of the conflict in Ukraine - the increase in energy prices and impact on housing, education and supply chains.

A Member asked for an update on the Disposal of Assets and was reminded that following Cabinet approval in September 2021, to appoint external support to advise and manage the programme of asset disposals; Avison Young had been selected as the preferred supplier for Phase 1 – Development of Asset Disposals Strategy which was expected to be completed in July 2022. Addressing the Committee under Rule 30, Councillor Gahir sought clarification regarding the disposal of commercial assets. The Director of Finance explained that assets above £1m would be considered by Cabinet and those below this value would be referred to the relevant Lead Member (LM) and Director. It was noted that the threshold for decisions to be taken by the LM in conjunction with Director had not yet been finalised but likely to be for assets below £500k.

Referring to the sign off of the accounts 2018/19 to 2020/21 the Committee was informed that extensive work had taken place, with a number of issues that had been identified for 2018/19 and once these had been addressed; it was anticipated that accounts for subsequent years would be completed relatively swiftly. Concern was expressed that the majority of staff currently in the finance team were interim appointments and could leave prior to closing the accounts. The Director of Finance stated that a verbal commitment had

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been obtained that staff would remain until March 2023 and that work was ongoing to develop a new finance team structure and recruit permanent staff.

A Member referred to the Special Education Needs and Disability Local Area Inspection which took place in September/October 2021 that had highlighted significant areas of weaknesses and whether a risk assessment had been carried out to address these. The Assistant Director, Education and Inclusion explained that a Written Statement of Action had been produced which detailed how the areas of concern would be addressed. However, staff turnover and absence was significantly impacting on the delivery of SEND services and additional resources were required. The current position was that a business case was being compiled to ensure the service had the capacity to deliver on the improvements required to provide young people with the support they needed. Members stressed that the service had been inadequate for a significant period and it was vital that the needs of young people were met.

Addressing the Committee under Rule 30 Councillor Gahir queried whether the Right to Buy council properties had been discontinued. It was explained that although the scheme was still available, a backlog of requests were waiting to be processed. It was agreed that officers would be reminded that the right to buy scheme had not been suspended and that this message was also being conveyed to residents.

A Member queried why Slough Children's Trust was not on the corporate risk register. It was noted that it would be reviewed if it fell within the remit of Risk 14 Council Companies and consideration would be given as to whether it should be listed as a separate risk on the register.

Referring to Temporary Accommodation, the Chair asked whether living costs were taken into consideration and requested further details relating to the number of placements the authority made in temporary accommodation outside of the borough. The Committee were informed that temporary accommodation was a growing pressure and that further details would be provided.

Concern was expressed relating to Risk 10 (service delivery risks due to workforce recruitment and retention) and that current levels of service across a number of departments was extremely poor. The Director of Finance explained that this was a consequence of the Our Futures Transformation programme whereby savings were made without the digital infrastructure in place to support services. Resources had been put in for the short term to ensure continuity of service but further investment was required, including IT investment to ensure an integrated approach to quality delivery of services. Referring specifically to issues that had arisen in the planning department with

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planning application notices not being sent out due to an upgrade of the system, it was agreed that the matter would be raised with the Planning Manager. The Chair asked what measures had been implemented to mitigate the risk to the delivery of the Adult Social Care Transformation Programme as a result of the current Executive Director of People (Adults) leaving. Members were informed that an Associate Director would be acting up whilst a long term solution was found.

Resolved – That details of the report, including revisions to the risk register, be noted.

59. Internal Audit Update Report - End of Quarter 4 2021/22

The Committee considered details of progress made on the implementation of internal audit management actions for the end of Quarter 4 2021/22. 15 internal audit reports had been finalised in the financial year and officers were working with internal audit to ensure that reports were finalised within two weeks of the draft being issued.

Referring to the two council tax actions with a completion date of 21 December 2021 and why these remained outstanding, it was explained that capacity within the revenue and benefits team meant that these had not been completed. A revised target date of September 2022 had been agreed and it would be explored further if this date could be brought forward.

Speaking under Rule 30 Councillor Gahir raised the issue of parked invoices and was informed that Cabinet were due to consider a report on these. It was agreed that officers would check that all payments on the Arvato IT contract had been made.

Resolved – That details of the report be noted.

60. Chair's Remarks

Councillor Sabah addressed the Committee in his last capacity as Chair, stating that the level of scrutiny by Members had been unprecedented but necessary given the seriousness of the issues facing the Council following the issuing of the Section 114 Notice in July 2021.

Despite deadlines not met, the stability and continuance the Committee provided to pursue answers and accountability, for the benefit of the residents of the town was to be commended. It was deeply disappointing that the Committee was unable to sign off any accounts over a three year tenure.

However, a number of changes have been implemented during the past year, including enhanced member training for all members on financial and governance matters, introduction of DBS checks for all members, establishment of a Standards Committee and revised terms of reference for the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee. It was envisaged that these changes would provide greater clarity and accountability, whilst also maintaining the momentum for continuous improvement.

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The Chair placed on record his thanks to the committee members over the 3 year period for their outstanding level of commitment and tireless scrutiny and also the valued assistance of independent members and external audit.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.19 pm)