

Minutes of the Governance, Audit, Risk Management and Standards Committee (GARMS)

16 October 2023

Members Present:-

Councillor Arjun Mittra (Chair)
Councillor Ella Rose (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Rohit Grover	Richard Harbord
Councillor Humayune Khalick	Jack Chan
Councillor Peter Zinkin	Councillor Simon Radford

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 15.1 the Labour Group Leader had informed the Monitoring Officer of a change to the membership of the committee. Councillor Rose had replaced Councillor Monasterio as Vice-Chair, and Councillor Radford had replaced Councillor Whysall. The Chair welcomed Councillors Radford and Rose to the Committee, and he thanked Councillors Whysall and Monasterio for their contribution to the Committee.

1. ABSENCE OF MEMBERS

None.

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 24 July 2023 be agreed as a correct record.

3. DECLARATION OF MEMBERS' DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS AND OTHER INTERESTS (IF ANY)

The Chair indicated that he had an ongoing interest as a governor at Coppetts Wood Primary School. In relation to agenda item 10, he would vacate the Chair if the Committee discussed the school's audit.

4. DISPENSATIONS BY THE MONITORING OFFICER (IF ANY)

None.

5. DEPUATIONS (IF ANY)

None.

6. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS (IF ANY)

None.

7. STATUS OF THE 2020/21 AUDIT AND PLANS FOR 2021/22 AND 2022/23 AUDIT DELIVERY

BDO introduced the report and provided a verbal update on their delivery plan and indicative audit plan. The main delay regarding the 2020/21 audit was due to an ongoing complaint and the BDO representatives indicated that they would provide the Committee with an update in due course. Jessica Farmer (Monitoring Officer) confirmed that Members of the Committee would be briefed offline on the ongoing investigation that had caused the delays in reporting.

Councillor Zinkin suggested an amendment to recommendation 1 to include the word slow, which was seconded by Councillor Mitra.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Committee notes the slow progress towards the sign off of the Council's 2020/21 Statement of Accounts.
2. That the Committee notes BDO's verbal update on DHLUC's (Department for Levelling Up Housing & Communities) proposed backstop solutions for completing 2021/22 and 2022/23 audits.
3. For BDO to come back to the November GARMS meeting to provide an update on the delay regarding the 2020/21 audit.

8. LOCAL GOVERNMENT & SOCIAL CARE OMBUDSMAN (LGSCO) AND HOUSING OMBUDSMAN SUMMARY OF UPHELD COMPLAINTS REPORT 2022/23

Ali Saka (Head of Assurance and Business Development) presented the report and the report from the LGSCO. It was difficult to confirm what was causing the increase of complaints. However, officers were working on improving the accessibility of the complaints process. It was also confirmed that the Ombudsmen were impressed by the Council's response in addressing concerns. The Committee suggested including information on the improvements that were being undertaken in future reports.

Officers agreed respond to Councillor Zinkin after the meeting regarding his suggestion that this item should be reported bi-annually instead of annually. **(Action: Head of Assurance and Business Development)**

Officers would also provide a written response to Councillor Radford on the breakdown of time and the substance of the complaints. **(Action: Head of Assurance and Business Development)**

RESOLVED that the Committee:

1. Note the 2022/2023 Corporate Complaints and Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Annual Report (Appendix A).
2. Note the LGSCO's annual letter and relevant lessons and actions (Appendix B).
3. Note the actions taken by the Council to remedy the issues and to prevent recurrence.

9. Q1 2023-24 CORPORATE RISK REGISTER

Alaine Clarke (Head of Programmes, Performance and Risk) provided an overview of the strategic and high-level risks for Q1. It was clarified that high-level risks scored 15 and above and the report included a follow-up on actions raised at the last meeting.

In response to a question from the Committee, the process of a risk getting on the risk register was explained. Officers stated that they worked with the Risk Champions across the organisation who represent all the directorates.

RESOLVED that the Committee note the status of the council’s strategic risks and high level (15+) risks, including the controls/mitigations in place to manage these risks.

10. INTERNAL AUDIT EXCEPTION RECOMMENDATIONS AND PROGRESS REPORT Q2 1ST JULY - 30TH SEPTEMBER 2023

Caroline Glitre (Head of Internal Audit) introduced this item and provided a summary of the report and referred specifically to the Oracle implementation project. Officers confirmed that they would report back on progress against delivering against high priority actions at a future meeting.

The Committee agreed to informally refer the reporting on the progress against the action on premises licenses and gambling to the Licensing and General Purposes Committee to ensure the licenses were not misused.

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- 1. Note the general work completed to date on the internal audit Q2 report – 1st July to 30th September 2023.**
- 2. Note the work completed to date on Schools within the internal audit Q2 report – 1st July to 30th September 2023.**
- 3. Note the work completed on ‘Cyber Security – Third Party Security and Awareness’.**

11. GOVERNANCE REVIEW PROJECT CLOSEDOWN

The Chair thanked officers for their hard work on the Governance Review Project on behalf of the Committee.

Emily Bowler (Assistant Director of Assurance) introduced the report and Andrew Charlwood (Head of Governance) and Jessica Farmer (Monitoring Officer) expanded on the detail within the report. They discussed the chronology of the project and lessons learnt. It was reported that the timescale to deliver the report had been challenging as it would usually take longer to implement governance changes.

Following the change of governance system, officers would be promoting opportunities for democratic engagement to citizens in the Borough. It was noted that an informal Constitution Review Working Group had been established to discuss proposed constitution changes which would allow amendments to the constitution to be consulted via the Groups.

The Committee suggested that officers continue working on developing the scrutiny aspect of the new governance system. It was confirmed that Officers were working on a Scrutiny Handbook.

RESOLVED that the Committee note the overview of the project set out in the report and the Governance Review Project Closure Report attached at Appendix A.

12. CODE OF CONDUCT ALLEGATIONS 2022/23

Jessica Farmer (Monitoring Officer) introduced the report and highlighted that under the Localism Act 2011, every local authority must have in place a Code of Conduct to ensure Members. It was noted that there had been less complaints in the 2022/23 than the 2021/22 year.

In response to questions from the Committee, officers confirmed that the kind of sanctions which may be recommended where Members have not abided by the Code might include asking them to apologise or providing extra training for them.

Councillor Zinkin suggested an amendment to the recommendation to change the name of the report to 'Code of Conduct complaints about Members' and Councillor Mittra seconded.

RESOLVED that the Committee note the Members Complaints report.

13. PETITIONS (IF ANY)

None.

14. COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee noted the Work Programme and suggested including the return of BDO on the potential progress to the November agenda.

15. ANY ITEM(S) THAT THE CHAIR DECIDES ARE URGENT

None.

The meeting finished at 9.12 pm