

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the
Audit and Governance Committee
Held in the Committee Room 1 at 6.00 pm on **Thursday, 30 June 2022**

PRESENT

Councillors: Ruth Smith (Vice-Chair), Luci Ashbourne, Andrew Beaney, Jill Bull, Nathalie Chapple, Owen Collins, Colin Dingwall, Jane Doughty, Harry Eaglestone (substituting for Norman MacCrae), Gill Hill, David Jackson, Andrew Prosser and Alex Wilson (substitute).

Officers Elizabeth Griffiths, Chief Finance Officer, Lucy Cater, SWAP Internal Audit Services, Mike Butler, (Strategic Support Officer), Michele Ouzman and Anne Learmonth (Strategic Support Officers).

1 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 April 2022 were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

2 Committee appointments and start time for civic year 2022/23

The Committee confirmed the appointment of Councillor Alaric Smith as Chair of the Committee and Councillor Ruth Smith as Vice Chair for the civic year 2022/23.

Members agreed a start time of 6pm for the Committee for civic year 2022/23.

3 Apologies for Absence

The Chair of the Council, Councillor Julian Cooper sent his apologies as he was already on Council official business elsewhere, and was therefore unable to attend.

Apologies for absence were also received from Alaric Smith, Norman MacRae Michele Mead, Elizabeth Poskitt, Richard Langridge and David Jackson.

4 Chairs Announcements

The Committee confirmed the appointment of Councillor Alaric Smith as Chair of the Committee and Councillor Ruth Smith as Vice Chair for the civic year 2022/23.

Members agreed a start time of 6pm for the Committee for civic year 2022/23.

5 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

6 Participation of the Public

No public were present.

To receive any submissions from members of the public, in accordance with the Council's Rules of Procedure.

There were none.

7 Annual internal Audit Opinion 2021/22

Lucy Cater from SWAP Internal Audit Services introduced this item. In accordance with Public Sector Internal Audit Standards, the Head of Internal Audit is required to provide an annual opinion on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the organisation's control arrangements. This is achieved through a risk-based programme of audits, agreed with management and approved, for 2021/22, by the Audit and General Purposes Committee (now Audit and

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Governance), which should provide a level of assurance across a range of Council activities. The opinion does not imply that the internal audit service has reviewed all risks and controls relating to the Council or the systems it reviews but rather an agreed sample that is reviewed on a rolling basis to ensure that all areas are covered as adequately as possible.

Councillors discussed the need for a separate Audit Committee and the relationship between this committee and the Scrutiny Committees. It was noted that there had been discussions earlier in the year about the number of and size of committees and that this would be considered as part of any further review of the Council's Constitution.

Councillors asked who decided what should be audited and whether all the work of the Council was audited every year. It was explained that normally only parts of a service would be audited but that some might be reviewed more often than others. Auditing involves sample checking. Areas of concern might be audited more often. External auditing is a different process.

There were questions around the significance of the different priorities and timescales. It was explained that there may be good reasons why some actions had not yet been taken forward and confirmed that the pandemic, and subsequent worldwide events had had significant impact on the work. Councillors agreed that training explaining the auditing process would be helpful and asked that slides be circulated separately by email.

There followed a discussion on the issues around recruitment and retention. Audit work on this had been deferred but the Committee felt that this was an area of considerable concern. It was noted that there were a number of elements contributing to retention and recruitment. The Chief Finance Officer gave some examples of recent recruitment exercises which demonstrated that it is very much an employees market. Many people want to work nearer to home or spend more time working from home although the agile working strategy recently adopted does accommodate that. Retention problems were particularly acute in the Planning Department but were being experienced across the whole Council. It is important to develop a culture which encourages retention of staff. This should also include staff wellbeing.

The Committee decided that it should flag this up as an area of concern. Internal Audit will include these areas within the HR audit for 2022/23 and once completed will present the report to a future Audit and Governance Meeting. A decision might then be made about referring the matter to Cabinet.

It was noted that work was ongoing on Emergency planning. There was no guidance on the use of the Emergency Response WhatsApp groups. Officers said that they would be following up outstanding actions and would report progress at the next meeting.

The Chief Finance Officer said that she had some concerns about processes. She emphasised the importance of ensuring that the agreed actions arising from audits are the right ones and are agreed and adopted by the service areas. She also emphasised that information is only as complete to the extent that it is provided by Service Managers. It was important to know if there were gaps.

The Committee agreed to identify three key issues:

- The recruitment and retention of staff and their wellbeing.
- The need to progress on Emergency planning
- Processes for reporting

8 Annual Governance Statement Action Plan

Mike Butler introduced this item. He explained that the AGS areas of focus, identified for 2021/2022, are:

- Risk registers
- Performance report
- Constitution and schemes of delegation
- Approval of AP expenditure against budget
- Project and programme management

A new Annual Governance Statement is being finalised and a new Action Plan would flow from that.

The Chief Finance Officer said that the fact that a policy is in place does not mean that things are happening. She was concerned that some project and programme reporting was flagged as green when she knew they shouldn't be. She emphasised the point that these reports were only as good as the information provided. There needed to be change of culture within the organisation so that service managers saw reporting problems as a good, rather than a bad thing. She wanted to record her recognition of all the good work that had gone into getting this far, especially with the development of the policy, but emphasised that a huge amount still needed to be done and on that basis, some items marked as complete should not be marked as complete and the report needed to be amended.

The Committee agreed that the report needed to be redrafted and, in particular, there needed to be more clarity around which actions were complete and which were still outstanding. Consideration also needed to be given to training service managers to better identify risk.

The Committee delegated authority to the Chief Finance Officer to allow her to review and redraft the document.

9 Corporate Risk Register Update

Mike Butler introduced this item. He said that the Committee need to assure itself that a Risk Register was in place which identified corporate strategic risk. The register had improved over the last twelve months but is still a work on process.

There was a discussion around how data was gathered on the public services provided by the Council. If that was provided by service managers was a true reflection of public opinion? It was noted that the system was not expected to pick up an individual complaint but would record areas of major concern. Customer surveys were carried out from time to time.

It was noted that in relation to the GLL contract there had been complaints about cleanliness but that these should be picked up by the service manager and dealt with as an operational service matter rather than a strategic risk. It was recognised that improved services would result in higher usage and more income. It was confirmed that the Risk and Opportunities Register should also identify opportunities but that similarly to the concern around risks not being escalated in spite of their being a policy in place that says they should be, opportunities weren't either.

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The Chief Finance Officer again emphasised that having policies in place did not ensure that procedures were being followed. She was concerned that the lack of processes meant that Senior Management might be missing important strategic risks. It needs to be a living document which is kept up to date with accurate and complete information.

The Committee noted the report.

The Meeting closed at 7.55pm

CHAIR