

Minutes of the Audit Committee

7 November 2022

-: Present :-

Councillors Brooks, Douglas-Dunbar, Johns, Kennedy (Vice-Chair) and O'Dwyer

20. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Hill and Loxton. In the absence of the Chairman, Councillor Loxton, the Vice-Chairwoman, Councillor Kennedy chaired the meeting.

21. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting of the Audit Committee held on 28 September 2022 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Vice-Chairwoman.

22. Quarter 2 Performance Report

Members noted the Quarter 2 Performance Report and Quarter 2 Risk Report, Members were advised that the Quarter 2 Performance Report contained the summaries of progress, updates on projects and performance of key indicators used to deliver and track the priorities within the Community and Corporate Plan.

At the meeting Members were joined by the Director of Children's Services, the Divisional Director of Corporate Service and the Divisional Director of Planning, Housing and Climate Emergency and held a debate which focused on the indicators within their service areas.

The Director for Children's Services, Nancy Meehan provided an update on the pressure within Children's Services due to the number of residents in the hotel being used to accommodate asylum seekers presenting as unaccompanied children. When an individual presented as an unaccompanied child, the local authority had a duty to undertake a Merton Age Assessment, each assessment involved at least two social workers and other professionals, each assessment took around 35 hours to complete. Members were advised that as a consequence, children who were already within the service were being impacted.

Ms Meehan advised that upon an individual presenting as an unaccompanied child, the individual must be found alternative accommodation to the hotel. This was further complicated by the individual upon entry into the country claiming to be adults then presenting as an unaccompanied child upon arrival in Torbay. Therefore, normal accommodation routes such as foster families were not an option due to the need to safeguard other children. This added further pressure on staff and resources.

Members raised questions in relation to:

- The number of Merton Age Assessments completed, how many were underway and how many were outstanding;
- Whether medical or biological assessments could be undertaken;
- Whether assessments had to be undertaken face to face and what were considered to be suitable environments for the assessments;
- The emotional and physical toll the volume of assessments was having on staff;
- Staff caseloads;
- Who was responsible for the financial burden of the assessments;
- The number of children in receipt of Education, Health and Care Plans;

The Divisional Director Corporate Services provided an update in respect of the following projects:

- Customer Relationship Management Project;
- The IT system supporting Development Management in particular the elements regarding Land Registry and Section 106/Community Infrastructure Levy;
- Liquid Logic; and
- Power BI

Members raised questions in relation to the following:

- The complexity, timescale and likelihood to deliver the Customer Relationship Management Project for the 'go live' date in March 2023;
- The intended efficiencies as a result of the implementation of the Customer Relationship Management system; and
- Was the Liquid Logic project value for money and were there benefits in rolling the project out to Adult Services.

Members asked the Divisional Director of Corporate Services further questions regarding Complaint Performance data in particular the complaints being considered by the Local Government Ombudsman, and the backlog of complaints within departments.

The Vice-Chairwoman welcomed the Divisional Director Planning, Housing and Climate Emergency to the meeting and informed Members that in the absence of the Chairman of the Audit Committee she had raised concerns regarding the Local Plan consultation and timescales with Informal Cabinet. Members proceeded to ask the Divisional Director Planning, Housing and Climate Emergency questions in relation to the following:

- The climate change score in the risk report (currently 20) and whether it should be 25 as Members had concerns that the commitment of being net zero by 2030 was going to be met;
- That updates on the Local Cycling, Walking Infrastructure Partnership (LCWIP) be included in the climate change newsletter in order to brief/update members;
- Whether the risk score for the housing land supply should be higher than 16.

The Senior Performance and Risk Officer advised Members that a small number of Performance Indicator's had been updated since the report had been published for Audit Committee. PH04, number of sexual health STI treatment interventions and PH05, number of sexual health STI treatment follow ups were reported as being above target. PH06, number of sexual health (contraceptive) interventions remained on target. Members were advised that for Quarter 2, PH14, provision of IUD LARC in Primary Care (number of intrauterine device long-acting reversible contraceptive fittings (both contraceptive and non-contraceptive)) was below target.

To conclude the update, the Committee were advised that RECPI0 2, variance against Revenue Budget (projected), was showing an overspend as reported in the Revenue Budget Monitoring, considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Board.

23. Quarter 2 Risk Report

This item was considered alongside the Quarter 2 Performance Report, see the minute above.

24. Proposed Auditor Appointment from 2023/24

Members considered a report that informed them of the proposed appointment of the external auditor to the Council for the 2023/24 accounts and beyond as notified by the Public Sectors Audit Appointments (PSAA).

The Deputy Director of Finance, informed Members that under regulation 13 of the Appointing Persons Regulations, the PSAA must appoint an external auditor to each opted-in body having consulted on their proposal. The Council, in accordance with regulation 13 was informed of the outcome of the PSAA procurement to let audit contracts from 2023/24. Grant Thornton was successful in winning a contract in the procurement, and PSAA propose appointing them as the auditor of Torbay Council for five years from 2023/24. The appointment was currently being consulted upon.

In addition, PSAA have also indicated that bodies should anticipate an increase in the order of 150% on the total fees for 2022/23. PSAA will consult formally on the scale of fees for 2023/24 in Autumn 2023 and will publish confirmed scale of fees for 2023/24 for opted-in bodies on their website by 30 November 2023.

Resolved:

That the Director of Finance in consultation with the Chairman of the Audit Committee be requested to formally object to the proposed auditor appointment and proposed fee increase by midnight on 14 November 2022.

25. Exclusion of the Press and Public

(Note: Prior to consideration of the item in Minute 26 the press and public were formally excluded from the meeting on the grounds that the item involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 2 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

26. Planning, Housing and Climate Emergency - Service of the Future Project Update

Members noted an update on the Planning, Housing and Climate Emergency – Service of the Future Project. The Divisional Director of Corporate Services and Divisional Director of Planning, Housing and Climate Emergency informed Members that initially progress had been slow due to the need to review the impact of historical interventions in order to understand what needed to change. Members were advised that there were ‘green shoots’ of improvement, however given the challenge and cultural change required officers did not anticipate concrete changes and improvements until the summer.

Chairman/woman
