

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

Audit and Pensions Committee Minutes



Monday 15 March 2021

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Iain Cassidy (Chair), Jonathan Caleb-Landy, Alex Karmel, Matt Thorley and Rowan Ree

Officers:

David Hughes, Director of Audit, Fraud, Risk and Insurance
Mike Sloniowski, Risk Manager
Emily Hill, Director of Finance
Rhian Davies, Director of Resources
Lisa Redfern, Strategic Director of Social Care
Jacqui McShannon, Director of Children's Services
Moira Mackie, Head of Internal Audit
Phil Triggs, Director of Treasury and Pensions
David Abbott, Head of Governance

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Alexandra Sanderson.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES

Councillor Rowan Ree noted that he had not received a copy of the Council's current whistleblowing policy or information requested about violence incidents. He also asked to be resent a document on early repayment charges.

ACTIONS: David Hughes, Paul Barton, and Phil Triggs

RESOLVED

The minutes of the meetings held on 24 November 2020 and 1 December 2020 were approved as an accurate record.

4. RISK MANAGEMENT HIGHLIGHT REPORT

Mike Sloniowski, Risk Manager, presented the report which gave an update on risk management across the Council. He gave an overview of some key events that had taken place since the previous meeting – including a resurgence of Covid-19 infections across the country, another national lockdown, the conclusion of an EU trade deal, and the opening of a vaccination centre in Hammersmith – highlighting the pace of change and the shifting risk environment.

Mike Sloniowski then discussed some of the additions to the risk register – highlighting the risks of a widening of digital divide, the rise of cyber-crime, and the challenges for the visitor economy (those employed in music, the arts, and hospitality).

Councillor Matt Thorley asked how the Council planned to balance the requirements and resource implications of transitioning out of lockdown while retaining core services. He gave the example of environmental health officers who had been redeployed to support the Council's track and trace efforts but who would also be a key part of getting the hospitality sector up and running again as restrictions were lifted.

Mike Sloniowski said these considerations were part of the recovery strategy being led by the Strategic Director for Economy. He was of the view that there would continue to be a requirement for some Covid support services for some time. The workforce strategy was starting to look at some of these issues. He said the Council's pandemic response had been very dynamic and it would need to continue to be agile going forward.

Councillor Alex Karmel raised the issue of IT security in light of increased home working and a high-profile attack on Hackney Council. He asked if officers were confident that the Council's systems were secure. Emily Hill, Director of Finance, said cyber-security was a high priority and was closely monitored. The Council's systems had been reviewed after the Hackney Council incident, but officers hadn't identified any vulnerabilities. David Hughes, Director of Audit, Fraud, Risk and Insurance, noted that the Chief Executive had also ensured that SLT received regular briefings on cyber security. He said officers would also share 6-monthly updates with the committee.

ACTION: Veronica Barella

Councillor Alex Karmel noted that the South African variant of Covid-19 was becoming worryingly common in Wandsworth and asked for reassurance of what contingency plans were in place if it spread to the borough. David Hughes said the Council was reviewing its outbreak management plans and was carrying out surge testing where there were variants of concern. The situation was being actively reviewed. Mike Sloniowski said Linda Jackson, Director of Covid, could provide a more detailed written response.

ACTION: Linda Jackson

Councillor Alex Karmel noted there were concerns about Covid hotspots in South Fulham – particularly related to schools. He asked if resilience teams were informed

of outbreaks in schools and other areas and if sufficient measures were in place to deal with them. Lisa Redfern, Strategic Director of Social Care, said Linda Jackson could provide a detailed response but she assured members that there were daily (hourly in some cases) updates. Linda Jackson worked closely with all directors including the Director of Children's Services on the education sector's response. Members requested information on how outbreaks were tracked and managed.

ACTION: Linda Jackson

Councillor Jonathan Caleb-Landy raised the issue of women's safety in the borough in light of Sarah Everard's murder, and asked what action was being taken to protect residents and council staff. Councillor Alex Karmel felt the focus should be on addressing the fear of crime. The Council should take steps to ensure that women felt safe in the borough and be reassured that their actual risks of being a victim of crime were low. David Hughes suggested the community safety team provide a written update on the work they were doing to improve women's safety, combating the fear of crime, and improving staff safety.

ACTION: Matt Hooper / Community Safety

Councillor Jonathan Caleb-Landy noted the pandemic had forced a huge shift in working patterns and asked what consideration had been given to continuing these practices to remain attractive as an employer. Mike Sloniowski said the Council was putting a lot of work into a new workforce strategy and considering what work would look like in the future.

Councillor Rowan Ree asked why the Brexit risk score had dropped from 16 to 12. Mike Sloniowski said the change was because a trade deal had been agreed. Officers would continue to monitor longer term indicators.

Councillor Rowan Ree asked if officers had reached out to businesses based in the borough for their views on the impacts. Mike Sloniowski said he would follow up with Karen Galey.

ACTION: Mike Sloniowski / Karen Galey

Councillor Alex Karmel asked for further reassurance around the risks of staff burnout through the pandemic period. He asked what the Council was doing to safeguard people's physical and mental health. Mike Sloniowski said the organisation had put a lot of work and effort into this area. The workforce had been well supported throughout the pandemic period with a number of initiatives. Contact was stepped up, specialist support was made available to staff, weekly wellbeing sessions were available to all staff, and staff were encouraged to take leave. Workforce statistics showed staff had been remarkably resilient with very low sickness and absence rates.

RESOLVED

That the Committee noted and commented on the report.

5. INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT

David Hughes, Director of Audit, Fraud, Risk and Insurance, presented the report which provided an update on internal audit work carried out between November 2020 and February 2021. He noted that since the last report, two school audits had been completed, both of which received a Substantial Assurance opinion. A further 35 audits were now in progress and no significant concerns had been found so far.

Councillor Rowan Ree asked what 'journals' meant in the context of Key Control Objective 5. David Hughes said it related to coding – when amounts of money were moved from one cost code to another.

Councillor Rowan Ree, with reference to Key Control Objective 2, asked how often acting-up and other additional allowances were paid to staff. David Hughes said acting-up was only supposed to be for short-periods. Honoraria were one-off payments to staff that had gone above and beyond their normal job.

Councillor Alex Karmel asked if the concern around overtime was due to Covid or a systemic issue. David Hughes said they had tested 10 cases and found 1 with no appropriate approval so the service had been informed. Officers weren't seeing a significant upward trend.

RESOLVED

That the Committee noted and commented on the report.

6. INTERNAL AUDIT PLAN 2021/22

David Hughes, Director of Audit, Fraud, Risk and Assurance, presented the Council's Internal Audit Plan for 2021/22. He noted that the plan would be moving to a '3 plus 9-month' plan to be more flexible and responsive. The revised plan would be reported to the Committee on a quarterly basis. It would also become more targeted – looking at elements of a system rather than whole system reviews every time. This would create a tighter feedback loop to enable improvements to be implemented more quickly. The new plan would also bring in reviews by other bodies and authorities e.g. Ofsted inspections of Children's Services and Social Care.

Councillor Rowan Ree asked if other councils were using the '3 plus 9-month' approach. David Hughes said many councils were moving towards this type of model. A fixed plan that doesn't change throughout the year meant it wasn't possible to give a robust opinion at the end of the year. Councillor Ree said it seemed like a positive change.

RESOLVED

1. That the Committee reviewed and commented on the draft Strategic Audit Plan, as set out in Appendix 1 of the report.
2. That the Committee reviewed and commented on the draft of the Annual Audit Plan, as set out in Appendix 2 of the report.

7. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was noted as 22 June 2021.

Meeting started: 6.30 pm

Meeting ended: 7.33 pm

Chair

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