

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the CORPORATE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE held in the DRAMA STUDIO, BURGESS HALL, ONE LEISURE, WESTWOOD ROAD, ST IVES, CAMBRIDGESHIRE, PE27 6WU on Tuesday, 14 September 2021

PRESENT: Councillor Dr P L R Gaskin – Vice-Chairman.

Councillors E R Butler, K P Gulson, P Kadewere, H V Masson, L W McGuire, R J West and Mrs S R Wilson.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors G J Bull, D A Giles and J P Morris.

20 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 22nd July 2021 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Vice-Chairman.

21 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

22 CODE OF CONDUCT COMPLAINTS - UPDATE

By means of a report by the Elections and Democratic Services Manager & Deputy Monitoring Officer (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Committee were provided with a summary and update of completed or ongoing complaints received regarding alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct under the Localism Act 2011 since the start of the year.

In addition to the cases outlined in paragraph 3.1 of the report, the Elections & Democratic Services Manager & Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that complaints/allegations had also been received in respect of Stilton Parish Council. Whilst guidance on the new Model Code of Conduct had now been received, in conjunction with South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City Councils, the Committee would be considering the matter at its next meeting ahead of its implementation in May 2022. In response to a question raised by Councillor Mrs S R Wilson, it was confirmed that correspondence would also be sent to the Town and Parish Councils encouraging them to adopt the new Model Code. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the progress of outstanding complaints and the conclusion of cases resolved since the meeting in June 2021 be noted.

23 REORGANISATION OF COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE ORDER - HOLME

By way of a report by the Elections and Democratic Services Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Committee were updated on the Community Governance Review of Holme following the request from the Parish Council to increase the size from 7 to 9 parish councillors.

In introducing the report, the Elections and Democratic Services Manager reported that owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the making of the Reorganisation of Community Governance Order would normally have taken effect from an election to be held in May 2020. Given that all polls had been postponed in May 2020, the Parish Council were consulted with regards to their preferred course of action to implement the increase in membership. Having been informed their preference was for Option 3, namely the option to hold an election in May 2022 in the normal cycle of scheduled elections, the Committee were advised that their decision was partly attributed to the cost implications but also the uncertainties around whether or not the May 2021 elections would still proceed or if they were poorly attended.

The Vice-Chairman informed the Committee that Councillor T D Alban, Ward Member for Stilton, Folksworth & Washingly had confirmed his support for the proposals. Having endorsed the report for submission to the Council's September 2021 meeting, the Committee

RESOLVED

- (a) to note the delay in the implementation of the Reorganisation of Community Governance order for Holme Parish Council to increase the membership from 7 to 9 councillors; and
- (b) that Council be recommended to approve the drafting of a reorganisation of Community Governance Order to be made in accordance with the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 for Holme Parish Council to take effect from the scheduled elections in May 2022.

24 ANNUAL COMPLAINTS REPORT 2020/21

The Committee gave consideration to a report (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) providing Members with information on complaints referred to the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGO) and those received by the Council between April 2020 and March 2021.

The Committee were informed that the LGO had been advised of 22 complaints of which there had been four detailed investigations, three of which had been upheld. The latter cases referred to Development Management, Housing Needs and Benefits/Tax.

With regards to internal complaints, it was noted that the number of Stage One complaints had decreased from 280 to 109 when compared to the previous year. Whilst encouraged that a significant reduction on the number of complaints relating to missed bin collections had been achieved, in response to a question which had been raised by Councillor K Gulson, the Committee were informed

that the Operations Service had reported that regular monitoring, continuous improvement and partnership working together with the implementation of new back office systems across recycling, waste and the streetscene service had provided a faster route for handling issues. Additionally, the Committee noted that residents were perhaps less likely to complain during the COVID-19 pandemic given that Huntingdonshire, unlike other local authorities, had not reduced its waste collection service. In respect of Stage Two complaints, 36 had been received, of which 16 related to Business Grants/Test & Trace Support Payments which largely related to lack of eligibility.

Having regard to Appendix 7 which detailed the number of LGO cases at neighbouring authorities, Members noted that case levels had declined in other areas when compared to the previous year but remained consistent in Huntingdonshire in 2020/21. The Committee were informed that there was no known reason but noted that the Council consistently advised customers to escalate their concerns to the LGO if they remained unsatisfied.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman local authority report for Huntingdonshire District Council and the data relating to formal Stage One and Stage Two complaints for 2020/21 be received and noted.

25 PROGRESS ON ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2019/20 - SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

The Committee received a report by the Internal Audit Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) summarising progress made against the significant governance issues reported in the 2019/20 Annual Governance Statement (AGS).

In introducing the report, the Internal Audit Manager reported that an update on the 2020/21 AGS would be provided at the Committee's January 2022 meeting. Having had their attention drawn to the areas of assurance outlined in Appendix 1, brief updates were delivered on progress which had been made since May 2021. Lone working was discussed as a topic which remained a focal point of interest. It was reported that a sustainable solution was being pursued with all responsible Service Managers via a formal governance action. Results of updated Risk Assessments would inform future corporate provision. Although home working was not currently in scope, it may be included as a future consideration.

Councillor R J West raised concerns around the function of Risk Management within the Council. The matter had previously been drawn as an area of concern to Members by the former Internal Audit Manager. Since then, assurances had been given that the matter would be resolved, however, the view amongst Members was that this continued to remain an area of concern. In response, it was noted that whilst a mechanism for risk management was in place, there was still some steps the Council needed to take to ensure effective management across the organisation. The Assistant Director (Corporate Services) added that this matter had caused him some concern when he first took up post and that he,

together with the Internal Audit Manager and other Officers within the Council were now trying to embed a cultural change within the organisation. The latter was proving challenging given that Service Managers continue to deal with capacity issues in delivering their services with change requiring considerable effort by the team.

A number of matters were discussed which included the effectiveness of the Council's risk management processes and whether they compared favourably to best practice guidance, the lack of resources and capacity available to complete risk management activities, the difficulties the organisation had faced in recruiting appropriately qualified and skilled audit staff together with the action which had been taken to introduce a new trainee role within the Team.

A suggestion was also made by Councillor Mrs S R Wilson on whether the Committee would benefit from viewing the corporate risk register. The Assistant Director (Corporate Services) advised that this could be done in a number of ways beneficial to the Committee and suggested that some more work would be required to update and refresh the current content to make it of genuine value to Members. Once this work was complete, the Committee would be presented with options on the extent of information they wished to receive.

Owing to the concerns which had been raised concerning risk management, Councillor L W McGuire suggested that the Committee's concerns should be raised with the relevant Executive Councillor. A further suggestion was made by the Internal Audit Manager to introduce some online training for risk management for Members.

In discussing the challenges and the subsequent risk the Council was facing in respect of recruiting and retaining planning staff, the Committee

RESOLVED

- (a) to note the progress which has been made against the significant governance issues identified from the Annual Governance Statement 2019/20 as outlined in Appendix 1 of the report now submitted; and
- (b) that the Chairman and Vice-Chairman meet with the relevant Executive Councillor to discuss the issues which had been raised at the meeting and invite to a future meeting of the Committee.

26 IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERNAL AUDIT ACTIONS

With the aid of a report prepared by the Internal Audit Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Committee were updated on the implementation of internal audit actions.

The Internal Audit Manager reported that she had taken the opportunity to refresh the data contained within the report which outlined the position as at 5 August 2021. The latest data now revealed a slight improvement with 79% of actions being introduced (including those with late implementation) and 15 overdue audit actions which now remained outstanding. A brief update was then delivered on the progress of actions undertaken by 3C ICT relating to antivirus software, security policies and admin domains.

Councillor R J West expressed his disappointment over the lack of progress made on a number of actions identified in Appendix 1 which had not yet started, specifically drawing attention to Cyber Security Risk Management which he felt posed a significant risk to the Council. Councillor E R Butler then went on to air views which he had previously raised regarding the need for active senior management involvement in such matters. Concerns related to staff shortages, unsuccessful recruitment campaigns and heavy workloads as reasons which now required action. The example referred to at the meeting was the Planning Service which was experiencing difficulties in attracting and retaining staff and causing a great risk to the Council. Comment was also made about the ongoing trend of capacity issues and resource constraints which had emerged since austerity measures were imposed by national government upon local government, dating as far back as 2006.

It was agreed that the above matters should be raised at the meeting to be held between the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee and the relevant Executive Councillor. A suggestion was also made by Councillor L W McGuire at the possibility for the Council to undergo an external peer review.

Having been informed that it had already been agreed that the audit actions assigned to the Chief Finance Officer would transfer over to the Interim Section 151 Officer once Mrs C Edwards had left her post at the end of September 2021, it was

RESOLVED

that the content of the report now submitted be received and noted.

27 INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE: INTERIM PROGRESS REPORT

By means of a report by the Internal Audit Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Committee received details of the performance of the Internal Audit Service for the period April – July 2021.

Having informed the Committee of the position with resources within the Internal Audit Team, the Internal Audit Manager reported that various financial audits had been completed to date. She then went on to apprise the Committee with the position in respect of the IT audit contract which had expired in March 2021.

Councillor E R Butler expressed his disquiet at the audit 'limited' opinions given for various 2020/21 audits and concern that the Council had not been taking appropriate action to improve the 'adequate' rating of the audit plan. In response, the Internal Audit Manager confirmed that these opinions were those given at the end of the individual audits and, as agreed audit actions are introduced, and thereby risks and weaknesses are mitigated/controlled, the assurance opinion of the area should improve.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

- (a) that the Internal Audit Manager's unchanged opinion of "adequate assurance" over the internal control environment and system of internal control be noted;
- (b) that the Internal Audit Plan as agreed by Committee in March 2021 remains a flexible list of reviews and is unlikely to be fully delivered this year; and
- (c) that it be noted that Senior Leadership Team have been invited to provide areas where assurance is required and also new/emerging areas, both of which should be continually considered for inclusion in the flexible Plan.

28 CORPORATE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE PROGRESS REPORT

The Committee received and noted a report (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) on progress of actions in response to any decisions taken at previous meetings.

The Democratic Services Officer advised that she would make contact with the new Information Governance Officer once the postholder had settled into her post to confirm an appropriate time for a report on the Data Protection Compliance Action Plan to be submitted to a future meeting.

In respect of the Code of Procurement Waiver Procedure, the Assistant Director (Corporate Services) reported that there had been a further use of the procedure since its inception in January 2021 which was currently undergoing formal sign off, details of which would be provided at the next Committee meeting.

Chairman