

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the CORPORATE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE held in CIVIC SUITE (LANCASTER/STIRLING ROOMS), PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON, CAMBS, PE29 3TN on Wednesday, 24 January 2024.

PRESENT: Councillor N Wells – Chair.

Councillors A Blackwell, J Clarke, J A Gray,
P J Hodgson-Jones, S A Howell,
A R Jennings, T D Sanderson and I P Taylor.

APOLOGY(IES): Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors E R Butler, J E Harvey and P Kadewere.

41. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 29th November, 2023 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

42. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

43. LEAD AND DEPUTY INDEPENDENT PERSONS

With the aid of a report prepared by the Elections and Democratic Services Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Committee noted that the Localism Act 2011 established the requirement for every principal authority to appoint one or more Independent Persons whose views must be sought and considered when dealing with allegations that members have breached the Code of Conduct. The terms of office of the current Lead and Deputy Independent Persons will expire on 30th April 2024.

By way of background, the Elections and Democratic Services Manager reported that the role of the Independent person has since been widened under the Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2015. These new regulations changed the localised disciplinary process in relation to the Council's Head of Paid Service, the Chief Finance Officer, and the Monitoring Officer Statutory Positions. In the case of any proposed disciplinary action against such a Statutory Officer, HDC is required to appoint the Independent Persons who have been appointed for the purposes of the Member's Code of Conduct regime to the Independent Panel who make recommendations to HDC regarding any decision to dismiss a statutory officer (i.e., the Independent Persons fulfil a statutory role both in relation to Member conduct issues and also disciplinary decisions involving Huntingdonshire District Councils (HDC's)

statutory officers).

Following comments from Councillors Blackwell; Hodgson-Jones and Taylor the Committee noted that details of the role and responsibilities of the Deputy Independent Person will be made available to the Members of the Committee.

Arising from a question raised by Councillor Hodgson-Jones it was noted that (i) whilst restricted tenure might maintain the Independent Person's judgment and independence (i.e., not be compromised by a long period of involvement with HDC) there is currently no requirement for a set term of office for the Independent Person role in law; and (ii) if required, HDC can request for an Independent Person from another local authorities within the Cambridgeshire area whose views would be sought and taken into account before a decision has been made to investigate, and in any other such circumstances it considers appropriate.'

Following a question from Councillor Blackwell regarding the Independent Persons relationship with the Committee it was noted that the Monitoring Officer is the principal advisor to the Committee supported officers from within Democratic Services and the Independent Persons are not a member of the Committee and therefore the cannot take part in the formal business of the meeting and cannot vote on any matters put to the meeting.

Following deliberation, the Committee RESOLVED

that for the purposes of Section of 28 of the Localism Act 2011, the Council affirm the re-appointment of Mrs Gillian Holmes to the post of Lead Independent Person for a further two-year period to 30th April 2026 without the need for further ratification in each year by the HDC at its Annual Meeting.

44. OUTCOME OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES REVIEW 2023

With the aid of a report prepared by the Elections and Democratic Services Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Committee noted that each authority is required to undertake a review of all of the polling districts and polling places in its area on a regular basis. The last full review the Committee was informed had been undertaken in October 2019 an. it is now necessary to conduct the next scheduled review which needs to be completed between 1st October 2023 and 31st January 2025. The Committee noted results of the formal consultation exercise detailing the representations made as summarised within the report.

Following comments from Councillors Blackwell; Howell and Jennings the Elections and Democratic Services Manager reported that the purpose of this report is to acquaint members with details of the process involved with a statutory review of polling districts and polling places within the District and consider details of the representations made during the formal consultation process before recommending approval by the HDC the Schedule of Polling Districts and Polling Places 2024.

The Committee noted that the Electoral Commission Act 2006, places a duty on each authority to undertake a review of all of the polling districts and polling places in its area on a regular basis. The last such review had been completed in 2019 and therefore it is now necessary to conduct the next scheduled review which needs to be completed between 1st October 2023 and 31st January 2025.

Arising from a number of points raised by councillors it was noted that all wards within Huntingdonshire are divided into polling districts which form the basis upon which the register of electors is produced. Most are defined by parish boundaries, but there are exceptions. The Committee understood that HDC is responsible for dividing its area into polling districts and for keeping polling districts under review. HDC must also define a polling place for each of its polling districts within which the polling station is located.

The Committee was reminded that the details of the process of consultation and timetable was presented to the Committee on 27th September 2023 and the Committee authorised the commencement of the polling districts and polling places review in accordance with the consultation document.

Councillors noted that a formal consultation exercise had been undertaken and hosted on the HDC website from 2nd October 2023, running until 27th November 2023, whereby all residents, County and District Councillors, MPs, Town and Parish Councils, Returning Officers, Political Agents/parties, and local disability groups had been asked to make comments on the existing arrangements for polling places and polling stations. A small number of proposed changes had been set out in the consultation document and focussed on (a). Creation of a new polling district for Lady Olivia Centre, Brampton; (b). Merging polling districts FG and FK - Stow Longa; (c). Merging of polling districts DZ and EA - St Ives North; (d) the Creation of a new polling district for Wintringham Park, St Neots; and (e). Creation of a new polling district for Bearscroft, Godmanchester

A total of 7 responses were received and detailed at Appendix A in the Consultation Responses Schedule. Arising from the representations made the changes outlined in a) – d) are being confirmed as proposals for approval and in response to two representations made in respect of the proposal for Godmanchester, the responses confirmed that no changes were required to the current arrangements of polling districts or polling places.

Following comments by (1) Councillor Gray regarding the concerns that had been highlighted by St Neots Town Council in respect of electoral arrangements surrounding the town wards the Committee noted that this was out of scope of this review and will therefore be investigated further after the review; and (2) Councillor Hodgson-Jones regarding the new constituency boundaries for Cambridgeshire the Committee noted the Boundary Commission once it has completed this review will look at the constituency boundaries for the Parish and Town Councils.

Following deliberation, the Committee RESOLVED

- a. to note the outcome of the Polling Districts and Polling Places Review and consultation undertaken.
- b. that the Council approve the Schedule of Polling Districts and Polling Places 2024 as appended to the report now submitted.
- c. that the Schedule of Polling Districts and Polling Places 2024 as appended to the report now submitted to Council for approval.

45. DISPOSALS & ACQUISITIONS POLICY: LAND AND PROPERTY - UPDATE ON THRESHOLDS

With the aid of a report prepared by the Director of Finance & Corporate Resources (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Committee noted that the Disposals & Acquisition Policy: Land and Property had been approved by Council in December 2017. This Policy it was noted included a requirement to review the disposal and acquisition thresholds included within it. The limits were reviewed in January 2022 with a recommendation they be reviewed again after 24 months.

By way of background, the Director of Finance & Corporate Resources reported that having considered the wishes of the Executive Member for Strategic Finance and the use of the Policy over the past 24 months, the Committee noted that the thresholds were last reviewed in January 2022 and the Council has not acquired or disposed of any commercial property investments. Therefore, after consultation with the Executive Member for Finance it is proposed the thresholds remain at the current levels as they allow for appropriate scrutiny of relevant acquisitions and disposals.

Following comments by a number of Councillors the Committee (i) asked for written clarification to be provided on the partners of the Council who would be contacted to determine if there is an alternative use for any land and property that has been considered surplus to requirements; (ii) decided after careful consideration that whilst the current thresholds for disposal and acquisitions should remain as they are at present but to be the subject of review of the policy within 12 months' time.

The Committee having considered and commented on the report RESOLVED that:

1. A review on the policy should be undertaken in 12 months' time.

46. RISK REGISTER

With the aid of a report prepared by the Director of Finance & Corporate Resources (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Committee was reminded that it had requested the latest version of the Corporate Risk Register should be presented at each Committee meeting. A summation of the discussions is outlined as follows.

By way of background, the Director of Finance & Corporate

Resources reported that Effective Risk Management is a critical part of the organisation's governance. The Risk Register identifies those areas where HDC should take action to mitigate its exposure and informs the annual plan for Internal Audit. More information on this can be found in the Council's Risk Management Strategy.

As part of a full and wide-ranging discussion on the report the Committee considered the risks to HDC and if these are being managed in line with the Risk Management Strategy. The Committee agreed that Effective Risk Management is a critical part of governance within HDC and that the Risk Register identifies those areas where HDC should take action to mitigate its exposure and informs the annual plan for Internal Audit.

Following comments by Councillors Jennings and Hodgson-Jones the Committee agreed that it would help if the Committee could have a graphical analysis going forward of the Corporate Risk Register and as a result of comments made by Councillor Blackwell that it would be useful if a glossary of the abbreviations used in the report could also be made available as there can be some contextual ambiguity of these acronyms and a glossary would provide Members with some clarity.

Finally, the Committee was pleased to note that a new Risk and Controls Officer should be in post very soon this officer would support (i) Service Managers to understand their risk profile and risk appetite; and (ii) assist with the overall Risk Management process for HDC (Including attendance at the Committee).

The Committee having considered and commented on the report RESOLVED to formally note that:

1. progress and performance made on the risks to the organisation is being managed in line with the Risk Management Strategy.

47. IMPLEMENTATION OF 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 received an update on the implementation of audit actions.

It was noted that following each audit review, audit conclusions, associated actions and implementation dates are agreed between the audit client and the audit team. Recommended actions following an audit are discussed, and the audit report is a record of what has been agreed by way of actions and their target dates.

Members noted that the target for the implementation of 'agreed internal audit actions to be introduced on time' is set at 100% in line with best practice that suggests that all recommendations are implemented by the agreed deadline. The deadline date is set/agreed with the client service; actions should be completed by their target date or reasons presented where this is not possible e.g., system changes take longer than expected or other service demands which carry a greater risk take priority.

The Committee understood that operational circumstances sometimes mean non-implementation or missed deadlines for an audit action. Accordingly increased efforts have been made to ensure Service Managers are aware of outstanding actions, update whether progress has been made or operational factors have impacted on their implementation. Overdue actions are also reported to Committee for governance oversight. It was noted that extensions to deadlines are no longer given. Instead, Action Owners can insert their own 'progress update,' which will give a better indication of work being taken to implement the action and to notify any reasons for delay. Councillors observed that as of the 4th of January 2024 18, actions have not been implemented within target and are now overdue actions.

The Committee was advised that in preparation for this report, owners of overdue audit actions have been asked to provide an update as to the status/progress of their action(s), provided within Appendix 1. This it was intended to provide the Committee with meaningful information as to the progress being made, delays or hold-ups and potentially a new expected completion date. Those officers with actions assigned to them have direct access to the system to enable them to manage those actions. Reminders are sent from the 4Action system in advance of the target date and managers are expected to act on these and SLT leads are advised to discuss and actively monitor their Services' audit actions during 1.2.1.s with their managers.

Following questions from Councillor Gray on the Small Works Contract the Committee was advised that whilst it is taking longer than anticipated to resolve this issue Members were assured officers have a "path to success" and are working to accelerate and streamline the procurement processes within HDC, and the intention is to have this in place by April 2024. Committee indicated that it would like more details to a future meeting on how this will be delivered.

Accordingly, the Committee

RESOLVED.

that the progress on the implementation of audit actions be noted.

48. DELEGATED AUTHORITY TO AMEND THE INTERNAL AUDIT PLAN AND PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO THE PLAN.

With the aid of a report prepared by the Internal Audit Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Committee received a report on the that changes can be made to the Internal Audit Plan following consultations between the Internal Audit Manager and S.151 officer and the Chairman of Corporate Governance Committee.

By way of background, the Internal Audit Manager reported that the Internal Audit Plan 2023/24 was approved by Corporate Governance Committee at its July 2023 meeting. At the same meeting Committee

was asked to approve that changes can be made to the Internal Audit Plan following consultations between the Internal Audit Manager and S.151 officer and the Chairman of Corporate Governance Committee. Whilst this approval was made at the July meeting unfortunately not detailed within the minutes for the meeting. Therefore, as the minutes have since been approved and published, they cannot be amended and instead the same recommendation is now put before committee to 're-approve' the same delegation to Chair.

Following comments by Councillor Hodgson-Jones the Committee:

- (a) formally noted that the following removals had been made to the Internal Audit Plan since July 2023:
 - 1. Risk Management (follow up review)
 - 2. Debtors /Accounts Receivable
 - 3. Minor Works follow up.
 - 4. Climate - Biodiversity
 - 5. HR – Recruitment – follow up.
- (b) Agreed that Members should receive and note any details in relation to future amendments that are made to the Internal Audit Plan under the delegated authority and reported back to the next available meeting of the Committee.

Following deliberation, the Committee RESOLVED

To:

- (a) Approve the changes that were made to the Internal Audit Plan and had been reported to the Corporate Governance Committee on Wednesday, 12th July 2023
- (b) Approve that changes can be made to the Internal Audit Plan following consultations between the Internal Audit Manager and S.151 officer, and the Chairman of Corporate Governance Committee.
- (c) Agree that Members should receive and note any details in relation to future amendments that are made to the Internal Audit Plan under the delegated authority are reported back to the next available meeting of the Committee.

49. COMMITTEE EFFECTIVENESS SELF-ASSESSMENT, IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN, AND AREAS FOR KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

With the aid of a report prepared by the Internal Audit Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Committee considered a report that summarised the outcome of the two informal sessions of the Corporate Governance Committee members when they considered Committee's overall effectiveness.

By way of background, the Internal Audit Manager reported that whilst it is not a statutory requirement, it is considered best practice – both in the public and private sectors – that the 'audit committee' (the Corporate Governance Committee at HDC) review its own effectiveness.

The Internal Audit Manager prepared questions based upon the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) model questions and incorporating the key principles set out in CIPFA's Position Statement: Informal sessions had been held on 21st September (5 Members present) and 29th November (11 Members present), facilitated by the Internal Audit Manager.

The Committee agreed that the exercise has highlighted areas of partial conformance with best practice. Where a partial conformance areas has been identified, an action with a deadline has been outlined in the action plan (Appendix 2).

Following questions raised by Councillors Blackwell; Hodgson-Jones; and Jennings the Committee noted the following raised in regard to:

- ❖ Point 10 The Committee needs to take more control over what items are included in future agendas and that this point overlaps with No. 21
- ❖ Point 12 Revised the wording to read that private meetings (1-2 per year) with external audit of the whole Committee should resume.
- ❖ Point 13 Whilst this is not prohibited it is not recommended that a Member of the Executive should ideally not sit on the Committee;
- ❖ Point 21 Felt that the Committee would benefit from minor improvement so should be scored as a 3 and not a 5.
- ❖ Point 22 Felt that this should be scored as a 5 and not a 3.
- ❖ Point 25 requires amendment as it was scored both as a "Yes" and "Partly Met".

Following deliberation, the Committee RESOLVED

That the self-assessment record subject to the above amendments is an accurate reflection of their discussion and the actions required.

50. 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.

As a result of discussions of the report it noted that:

1. The Code of Procurement Waivers Procedures - no waivers were ready for submission at this meeting; and
2. Appointment of the Independent Member to the Committee would be going out to advert and the Committee would receive details of the Advert and Job Description.

Chair

