

## **WEST LINDSEY DISTRICT COUNCIL**

MINUTES of the Meeting of the Governance and Audit Committee held in the Virtual Meeting - MS Teams <https://west-lindsey.public-i.tv/core/portal/home> on 16 June 2020 commencing at 2.00 pm.

**Present:** Councillor John McNeill (Chairman)  
Councillor Mrs Jackie Brockway (Vice-Chairman)

Councillor Mrs Tracey Coulson  
Councillor David Dobbie  
Councillor Mrs Caralyne Grimble  
Councillor Mrs Angela White  
Alison Adams  
Andrew Morriss  
Peter Walton

**In Attendance:**

Alan Robinson	Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer
Tracey Bircumshaw	Assistant Director of Finance and Property Services and Section 151 Officer
James O'Shaughnessy	Corporate Policy Manager & Deputy Monitoring Officer
Lucy Pledge	Internal Audit
Stacey Richardson	Principal Auditor
Katie Storr	Senior Democratic & Civic Officer
Ele Snow	Democratic and Civic Officer
James Welbourn	Democratic and Civic Officer

### **1 REGISTER OF ATTENDANCE**

The Chairman undertook the register of attendance for Members and each Councillor confirmed their attendance individually.

The Democratic Services Officer completed the register of attendance for Officers and, as with Members, each Officer confirmed their attendance individually.

### **2 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PERIOD**

The Democratic and Civic Officer confirmed there was no public participation for the meeting.

### **3 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

A Member of Committee raised concerns regarding the discussion detailed in the Work Plan

section of the minutes as he felt points raised during the meeting had not been reflected in the minutes. After some discussion, it was agreed that the minutes would be amended as follows:

A Member expressed concerns about the possibility of the risks with regard to covid-19, which, at the time the officer responded, were thought to be operational rather than strategic and would not form part of the six month review of strategic risks.

With this amendment agreed, the minutes of the meeting held on 10 March 2020 were agreed as an accurate record.

#### **4 MEMBERS DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest at this point in the meeting.

#### **5 MATTERS ARISING SCHEDULE**

The matters arising schedule setting out the current position of previously agreed actions as at 8 June 2020 was noted.

#### **6 REVIEW OF MEMBER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME**

The Democratic and Civic Officer introduced the delayed report regarding Member Development. She explained that it had been due to be heard at the cancelled April meeting however, the restrictions introduced as a result of the global pandemic had meant that the proposals suggested in the report would not have been possible at that time. She explained the work of the Member Development Group had been focussed on two main strands of work, those being, the introduction of online development options and the introduction of a By-Election Induction Programme template. The purpose of the report was to seek agreement for the proposed online training platform along with the template for the induction process following a by-election.

Members of the Committee indicated support for both options, although it was questioned whether anything further could be done to encourage higher attendance rates. It was explained that, unless a session was mandatory, such as the committee specific sessions, there was little that could be done in terms of further encouragement or using penalties for those who chose not to attend. This would be the same with the online options. It was agreed that the use of online options would ensure flexibility for Councillors as well supporting time and financial efficiencies.

The Chairman explained to the Committee that he had tested the online platform and, as it had been designed for use by council officers, it could be seen as slightly clunky for Members to use. The Democratic and Civic Officer explained that she had held conversations with the Officer responsible for the council's use of the platform and it had been confirmed that the opening page could be amended for Members meaning it would be easier access for them.

There was further discussion regarding the Planning specific development sessions which had been scheduled to take place during lockdown. Members were assured that these sessions would still be offered to Members and Parish Council representatives although it was not yet clear how they would run. There would be communications sent out once these were rearranged.

**RESOLVED** that

- a) the introduction of online training, via Learning Pool, as an additional development tool for Councillors be approved; and
- b) the By-Election Induction Programme template be agreed.

## **7 REVIEW OF WHISTLEBLOWING ACTIVITY**

The Monitoring Officer introduced the annual whistleblowing report. He stated that, owing to a review of how such reports were communicated to Members, there had been no report seen by the Committee in 2019 however he could confirm that, as with the current report, there had been no whistleblowing activity during that period. He explained that the purpose of whistleblowing was to give officers a route of complaint outside of their line management, however, there had been no instances of this on which to report. He added that there were several procedures in place at the council which gave employees to opportunity to raise concerns before there would be any need to use the whistleblowing policy.

Members of the Committee praised the council for a cultural attitude of honesty, as had been noted in the recent Peer Review, although concerns were raised about the negative connotations of 'whistleblowing'. It was acknowledged that there could be negative associations however, the terminology was widely used across all sectors of employment and the ethos of transparency at the council was credited with the lack of whistleblowing activity.

A Member of Committee noted that the need to share information could be more clearly identified, to ensure there was no expectation of confidentiality, and it was agreed this could be included at the next review of the policy.

**RESOLVED** that Members be assured that the Whistleblowing Policy in place was working effectively.

## **8 INTERNAL AUDIT ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20**

Members were asked to consider the Internal Audit Report for 2019/2020. They heard from the Head Audit & Risk Management (Lincolnshire County Council) that this gave the Head of Internal Audit's opinion on the adequacy of the Council's governance, risk and control environment and the delivery of the Internal Audit Plan for 2019/2020. She explained that as the global pandemic had started to have an affect prior to the close of the financial year, the report did make reference to this. She highlighted several areas of the report for Members, including the 91% delivery rate of the internal audit plan and areas of improvement within the council.

Members thanked the Internal Audit team for an open and accessible report and questioned whether the delivery of the audit plan had been impacted by the global pandemic. This was confirmed to be the case and explained that officers for the outstanding are had been involved with frontline work relating to covid-19 and therefore it had not been possible to complete the audit. It was highlighted that the quarter one audit report would be seen at Committee in July and it would update the delivery plan accordingly.

A Member of the Committee also enquired about the dates covered by the report and it was confirmed that the report covered from April 2019 to March 2020.

**RESOLVED** that

- a) the Committee had considered the Head of Audit's Annual Report and Opinion for 2019/2020 and no further actions had been identified; and
- b) the Committee would take into account this Annual Report and the Head of Internal Audit's opinion when considering the Council's Annual Governance Statement 2019.

## **9 INTERNAL AUDIT DRAFT ANNUAL PLAN REPORT 2020/2021**

Members gave consideration to a report regarding the internal audit draft annual plan for 2020/2021/ They heard that although the plan had previously been approved, it had been reviewed as a result of the global pandemic. Three audit streams had been deferred and other risks had been identified. It was agreed that the deferment of those audit streams was understandable. The Chairman enquired about the Equality and Diversity audit and it was explained that the associated policy had been reviewed and therefore it was considered sensible to allow time for the policy to become established before undertaking an audit.

It was also questioned what impact a second spike in covid-19 might have on the fulfilment of the audit plan. The Committee heard that there were resources in place to be able to adapt to changing circumstances but it was also important to consider the resilience of services during such times. The key point was to ensure processes were flexible and adaptive.

A Member of Committee raised concerns regarding income loss and additional expenditures as a result of the pandemic and enquired what role there was for the Committee. It was explained that the Corporate Policy and Resources Committee would receive a report regarding the estimated financial risks and that the role of this Committee was to looking at the governance, the 'how' of proceedings rather than the policy decisions themselves.

There was considerable discussion regarding the impact of the pandemic on not only the District Council, but also the wider community such as education and health services. The Monitoring Officer highlighted the frequent communications from the Chief Executive, which were aimed at keeping Members informed as to the recovery from lockdown and also noted there would be a wider report considered at Council at the end of June. Members were advised there was also the option for a further workshop for Members in relation to the impact of, and recovery from, the global pandemic and associated restrictions.

**RESOLVED** that the contents of the report be noted and agreed and Members be assured that the plan provides robust coverage of the Council's critical areas and services.

## **10 COMPLETION OF 2018/19 ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT ACTION PLAN**

The Corporate Governance and Policy Manager introduced a report to present to Members the Annual Governance Statement action plan for 2018/19. He explained that over the course of the year, work had been undertaken against the action plan, with Members receiving a six-month progress report in January 2020. Since that date, further work had been completed to the point where all matters contained within the action plan had been completed.

Having been moved and seconded, it was

**RESOLVED** that closure of the action plan be approved as all actions had been completed satisfactorily.

## **11 DRAFT ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2019/20.**

The Committee again heard from the Corporate Governance & Policy Manager regarding the draft Annual Governance Statement for 2019/2020. He explained there had been six areas identified for possible inclusion in the action plan, those being:

- To implement the Senior Management restructure
- The production of the Council's Climate and Sustainability Strategy
- To address issues arising out of effectiveness of G&A Committee survey
- Post-Pandemic recovery response & plans
- A review of the effectiveness and understanding of corporate procurement procedures
- To maintain oversight and assurance of progress of the Peer Review action plan

He added there was an extended date for sign off of the action plan as a result of the pandemic.

There was discussion regarding both the feedback from the Peer Review and whether there would be a governance review of the council's partners in light of the potential financial changes due to covid-19. The Committee heard that the action plan from the Peer Review would be under the remit of this Committee to maintain oversight of progress. Regarding a review of the key partnerships, it was explained that these were reviewed biennially however in such unusual times, partnerships were being constantly reviewed in some manner as action continued to be recovery focussed.

A Member of the Committee queried the period covered by the draft statement, in particular why there was reference to covid-19 if the period covered ended in March 2020. It was explained that, as the final statement would be published after the outbreak of the virus, likely in July, it was important for the report to be contemporary. The full impact would be

picked up next year but it was still important for it to be referenced at this point.

There was further discussion regarding partnership working and whether there had been any new partnerships created or any cross-boundary working. Members heard that although there were no new partnerships, there had been increased and improved working with existing partners as well as close national communications. In terms of cross-boundary working, there had been detailed communications with North Lincolnshire, North East Lincolnshire and Humberside although most work had been closely linked within Lincolnshire.

**RESOLVED** that

- a) No additional governance related matters be identified for inclusion in the draft statement; and
- b) The proposed set of issues that had arisen during the year that were intended to form the Action Plan for 2019/20 be reviewed and agreed.

**12 ANNUAL CONSTITUTION REVIEW 19/20 AND MONITORING OFFICER'S ANNUAL REPORT**

The Senior Democratic and Civic Officer introduced the report and explained the purpose of the report was for the Governance and Audit Committee to recommend to Council the proposed amendments to the Constitution. For the second year running, the report also included an Annual Report from the Monitoring Officer. The report aimed to provide an holistic view of all governance associated matters. The Governance and Audit Committee were also asked to approve the amendment(s) made to the Financial and Contract Procedure Rules, which would subsequently be noted by Council as part of the Annual Review.

She detailed the amendments that had been recommended and also identified the areas that were highlighted for further review in the coming year. She explained that the majority of amendments were considered to be housekeeping however there were more significant changes in relation to planning applications and how to facilitate improved call-in functions for Parish Councils. It was proposed that through the coming year there would be further attention placed on the planning processes in terms of engagement with the local communities, such as workshops and further training sessions and any recommendations from these would be incorporated in the Constitution Review next year.

The Chairman proposed an amendment to the report that the fourth recommendation contained within the 'Table of Proposed Amendments for Inclusion', relating to the footnote regarding membership of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be removed and that Section 5.3.6 of the report similarly be amended to explain it was not being taken forward. This proposal was seconded and voted upon and

**RESOLVED** that the amendments as detailed above be approved.

There was further discussion regarding the level of detail contained both within the report and within the Constitution itself and it was suggested that Members may find it useful to

receive training on the content of the Constitution. The Monitoring Officer confirmed this was something that had been provided in the past and it would be possible to run workshops or sessions focussing on specific areas of the Constitution.

Members of Committee expressed their support for the focus on planning applications and greater communications with Parish Councils. It was acknowledged that the cancelled training sessions would have been a great resource for Members and Parish Council representatives but it was highlighted that these sessions would still be provided, albeit perhaps in a different format considering current circumstances.

**RESOLVED** that the Governance and Audit Committee **APPROVE** the following recommendations:

a) Subject to (i) below, the amendment(s) made to the Contract and Procurement Procedure Rules and Financial Procedure Rules detailed at Section 3 of the report (the full set of Procedure rules are attached at Appendix 3 and 4 for completeness).

(i) delegated authority be granted to the Head of Paid Service, in consultation with the Chairman of the Governance and Audit Committee, to make any necessary housekeeping amendments to both sets of procedure rules, arising from the on-going re-structure, and the final versions be noted by Council as part of the Annual Review in due course

b) that delegated authority be granted to the Head of Paid, in consultation with the Chairman of the Governance and Audit Committee, to confirm the final version of the Officer scheme of delegation, in light of the on-going re-structure, and the final version be included within the report, for approval at Annual Council

c) That Members agree the governance outlined in this report, in respect of managing Commercial and Economic Growth, provides assurance that the council is taking appropriate mitigating measures against the risks identified in its commercial approach and note the updated position provided at Section 7 of the report

The Governance and Audit Committee **RECOMMEND** to Council the following recommendations:

d) that the outcome of the annual review be noted.

e) that amendments detailed throughout Section 2 of the report, including those detailed in Appendix 2 relating to the Planning Delegation scheme be adopted and implemented with immediate effect;

f) that the proposed amendments, raised through the review process, but which are not being progressed, detailed at Section 2.8 be agreed for non-inclusion.

g) The appointments of Parish Councillors Elizabeth Hillman and Bruce Allison to the Standards Sub-Committee (Section 9)

h) That the progress made with regards to:-

- the areas of work agreed for further development in the 2019/20 review

- (Section 5);
  - the further planned work for 2020/21 (Section 6)
  - the statistical data provided within the report in respect of the number, nature and outcome of Code of Conduct Complaints (Section 8); and
  - the support offered to Parish Councils (Section 11) be noted
- i) That the interim decision making process(es) that have been in place during the COVID -19 Pandemic be acknowledged.

### **13 WORKPLAN**

It was highlighted that the workplan had been amended as a result of the global pandemic.

The current workplan was noted.

The meeting concluded at 4.01 pm.

Chairman