

Public Forum

Audit Committee

27 August 2020



1. Members of the Audit Committee

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PS01 Suzanne Audrey – Committee Access to Information

The minutes of the previous Audit meeting include the following: "Audit committee is a key part of the Authority's governance process and must have potential access to all papers without restriction. It is inappropriate to restrict access or make access more difficult than would be the case for other members of council" the discussion was also very clear that meant equal access to that of scrutiny and cabinet.

The Bundred report indicated officers are required to be even handed in their dealings with all councillors, regardless of the positions they may hold within the Council's administration. This does not prevent them from giving leading members early warning of issues before they become public, but it does mean that relevant information must not be withheld or misrepresented.

Are members of the Audit committee, and all relevant council officers, now confident that measures are in place to ensure the Audit committee has appropriate and sufficient access to all relevant information for to do its job properly?

PQ01 Suzanne Audrey - Committees Access to Information

Background

The minutes of the previous Audit meeting include the following: "Audit committee is a key part of the Authority's governance process and must have potential access to all papers without restriction. It is inappropriate to restrict access or make access more difficult than would be the case for other members of council" the discussion was also very clear that meant equal access to that of scrutiny and cabinet.

The Bundred report indicated: Local government officers have always had responsibilities to the whole Council. They are required to provide advice in public and to be even handed in their dealings with all councillors, regardless of the positions they may hold within the Council's administration. This does not prevent them from giving Leading Members early warning of issues before they become public, but it does mean that relevant information must not be withheld or misrepresented.

Question

Are members of the Audit committee, and all relevant council officers, now confident that measures are in place to ensure the Audit committee has appropriate and sufficient access to all relevant information for to do its job properly?

Answer:

The Audit Committee has reported its view in its Annual Report to Full Council that the Committee need to ensure it has access to all papers on a par with Cabinet and Scrutiny Committees and without restriction to enable it to operate effectively. The report to Full Council identifies the matter as priority for resolution during the 2020/21. Full Council will receive this report on 8th September 2020. The Committee will continue to monitor the position

Audit committee access to information is on the basis of the Committee's terms of reference, to enable the committee to discharge its function of providing independent assurance on risk and governance to the Council and in compliance with statutory provisions in respect of access to information and the Council's constitution. The Monitoring Officer provides advice and guidance to the Committee on access to information.

PQ02 Suzanne Audrey – Statement of Accounts

Background

The fees paid in respect of individuals engaged on an interim basis includes:

- C Molton who holds the position of Project Manager from November 2019 to March 2020 at a cost to the Council in 2019/20 of £89,064
 - N Owens who holds the position of Specialist Project Manager from April 2019 to March 2020 at a cost to the Council in 2019/20 of £164,850 (2018/19 of £163,566)
- Other interim posts more relate to specific pieces of work e.g. City Leap, Housing and Clean Air.

Question

Is it possible to have more specific information about which projects C Molton and N Owens are working on?

Answer

Colin Molton was engaged in advising and handover of Council regeneration projects including Temple Quarter, Bottleyard, Lawrence Weston Hub and Hengrove Park. All work was regularly reviewed and authorised by the Executive Director Growth and Regeneration.

Nigel Owens is engaged as a subject matter expert on the Strategic Partner Project until the end of November 2020.

CQ01 Cllr Stevens – Fraud E Learning module and Whistleblowing

My question relates to the mandatory (online) training that Councillors and staff are currently taking regarding Fraud Prevention Awareness. One of the questions in that section gives four options on how to report fraud but apparently only two of them are right. The options (from memory) are to report to Internal Audit, to report via the whistleblowing hotline, to report to your union or to report to HR. I don't wish to spoil the surprise for those who haven't yet taken this module, but surely all four can be right in appropriate contexts as well as also reporting to a Councillor and even to the Press?

Answer

The whistleblowing procedure advises employees to raise a concern by either:

- Completing a web based whistleblowing form
- Contacting Internal Audit on the Whistleblowing Hotline.

The aim of the procedure is to provide a clear line for reporting concerns internally that will ensure an independent, co-ordinated and consistent response and investigation of all matters raised.

The procedure also notes options for external reporting. It directs employees to the National Audit Office or the External Auditor for this. Additionally, it provides details of a confidential helpline provided by 'Protect', an independent whistleblowing charity if advice is required.

Employees are welcome to meet internal audit to discuss their concerns and bring union representatives or other colleagues with them for support.

Employees can choose alternative routes to report but the procedure directs them as above to ensure a consistent approach.

We have reviewed the E- learning question again and will ensure it reflects more clearly our desire for providing a clear line of reporting that will ensure matters are investigated appropriately. Thank you for taking the time to do the training and your comments. The feedback was useful.