

STANDARDS AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE  
9 NOVEMBER 2023

(7.15 pm - 9.15 pm)

PRESENT Councillors Councillor Martin Whelton (in the Chair),  
Councillor John Oliver, Councillor Laxmi Attawar,  
Councillor Sheri-Ann Bhim, Councillor John Braithwaite,  
Councillor Caroline Charles, Councillor Billy Hayes,  
Councillor Andrew Howard, Councillor Edith Macauley,  
Councillor Robert Page and Councillor Victoria Wilson

PRESENT Councillor Victoria Wilson, Katy Willison (Independent Person)  
ONLINE

ALSO John Scarborough (Monitoring Officer), Ruth Hammick  
ATTENDING (Complaints Manager), Margaret Culleton (Internal Audit  
Manager), Kevin Holland, Elizabeth Jackson (External Audit,  
EY), Richard Seedhouse (Democratic Services Officer)

ALSO Zoe Church (Head of Business Planning), Nemashe Sivayogan  
ATTENDING (Treasury and Pensions Manager)  
ONLINE

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies were received from Clive Douglas (Independent Person). Cllr Wilson attended online.

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

RESOLVED: That the minutes were agreed, subject to an amendment to note that the HR Update, the simpler report will be reviewed by both the chair and vice-chair before it comes back to Committee.

4 ANNUAL GIFTS AND HOSPITALITY REPORT (MEMBERS) (Agenda Item 4)

The Monitoring Officer introduced the report, noting that the items reported were as expected for a council of this size/nature.

In response to questions and comments, the Monitoring Officer confirmed that:

- 'significant' is a subjective term, and all members are encouraged to seek advice on a case by case basis if they have questions/concerns

- Not everything in the register is published on the council website or in the digest attached to the report, but it is available to be inspected if requested.

It was RESOLVED that

- the Committee noted the report.
- Members were reminded of their responsibility to complete declarations of gifts and hospitality including reasons for acceptance within 28 days of receipt.

## 5 ANNUAL GIFTS AND HOSPITALITY REPORT (OFFICERS) (Agenda Item 5)

The report was introduced by the Monitoring Officer, highlighting that the inspection of the registers showed that departmental registers continue to be maintained, and the number of entries was low.

In response to questions, the Monitoring Officer confirmed that:

- The 100 tickets were used by officers following the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II
- Officers were advised to run invitations/hospitality from AELTC by managers before accepting
- Officers are not named, this would not be appropriate, but an indication of grade is provided
- The wording can be considered next time the relevant section is reviewed.

## 6 REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES (Agenda Item 6)

The Head of Electoral Services introduced the report, noting that the last statutory review was in 2019, a full review for Merton was completed in 2021 due to the Boundary Commission review of ward boundaries. We were still required to complete this review and chose to complete as soon as possible given the electoral programme for 2024.

The online consultation began in October, local MPs, agents for political parties and members of the council have been contacted, along with Merton Independent Living and others to assess disabled access.

To avoid confusion, alterations have only been made where necessary.

- Lower Malden and St Helier, now at St Margaret's Church as previous venue being renovated
- Some movement from Raynes Park Library to Dundonald Church
- Minor change in Ravensbury, use of Gifford House lobby instead of a portacabin
- A marquee will be placed outside the Pavilion in Lavender Fields

In response to questions, the Head of Electoral Services confirmed that:

- Electoral Commission guidance is for 2250 voters per single polling station,
- Size of polling stations is also affected by expected turnout, GLA is at around 40%, but a general election is nearer 70%
- The marquee in Lavender Fields will be outside the front of the building
- There are around 25,000 postal voters in Merton, approximately 11,000 in Mitcham and Morden and the rest in Wimbledon
- A recent report on the introduction of Voter ID has gone to LSG, there will be a working group to engage departments with more reach into communities, along with direct mailing and leafletting through canvass. Another leaflet will go in January, information is also on polling cards and there will be an email shot to everyone for whom we hold an email address. Communications Team have a campaign running on Twitter, the council website and on billboards throughout the borough.
- We will be in touch with Clarion about use of space in community rooms, but it can't be guaranteed at this time.
- The marquees do have floorboards, so there shouldn't be an issue with excessive mud in inclement weather.
- There is a new style polling booth with greater privacy if there is a queue.
- There is interest on our side in moving the Wimbledon and Dundonald polling station across Kingston Road, however the property owners have not shown much interest.
- 7 schools are used, only 4 need to close on polling day. Historically 20 schools were used, we are always on the look out for new potential stations and avoid schools as much as possible
- If marquees or portacabins are sited in school carparks, there is nowhere for the staff to park, and they cost a lot of money and are difficult to source, don't always meet accessibility requirements and incur extra costs for security and electricity generators.
- Headteachers have the final say on opening/closing school on polling day

## 7 22/23 ANNUAL COMPLAINTS REPORT (Agenda Item 7)

The Complaints Manager introduced the report.

In response to questions it was confirmed that:

- The level of complaints is not particularly high in relation to the number of service users, we expect levels to be at around 1-2%
- The Ombudsman advises that authorities should not fear the number of complaints as it can also be an indicator of accessibility
- Some of the complaints about council tax are linked to where the incorrect charge has been applied, for instance when a property is unoccupied, others have focused on how we collect monies due.
- If a complaint is upheld we have to review the service before further progress can be made
- Complaints team can only advise managers, it is managers' responsibility to instill learning and changes in their teams.

- There is ongoing work to improve complaint handling, to meet the targets we have set, staff can often fear complaints, and that is something we need to overcome, complaints are often not personal, they are about processes and practices.
- Weekly reports are provided to Directors and Executive Directors, to keep them abreast of new and in-progress complaints.

It was RESOLVED that the committee would receive a report on root cause analysis on Corporate and ASC complaints that considered any system or process changes to manage those complaints at the June meeting.

## 8 EXTERNAL AUDIT OF LONDON BOROUGH OF MERTON 22/23 (Agenda Item 8)

The External Auditor presented the report, highlighting that we are waiting for DLUHC to give guidance on the audit market and what's happening for 22/23 and how to move to 23/24 to get back on a regular time frame. Merton is in a good place with a statement of accounts published, but audit has not begun, it's a complex situation.

Value For Money work, sustainability and governance and economy efficacy and effectiveness are continuing, but we are not currently looking at accounts, the deadline is September or November 2024.

DLUHC Minister is still considering options instead of auditing, such as unqualified reports or limitation of scope reports. These would not be the fault of the council.

Value for Money work would allow a public report which would put the Merton accounts on record.

The DLUHC announcement is expected before Christmas with the aim to then have work signed off by the end of March.

In response to questions the committee was informed that:

- The organisation has a solid base to move forward from, Internal Audit also has a role in ensuring good processes
- EY did not want to start work until they know that they will be paid for the work undertaken, it can take a year to audit accounts, and did not want to invest six months of work to then be directed to move to disclaimers anyway
- While there is a deadline to submit accounts, there is not one for completing an audit.
- The pension audit is going ahead.

It was RESOLVED that the Committee noted the report.

## 9 MERTON PENSION FUND EXTERNAL AUDIT PLAN 22/23 (Agenda Item 9)

The report was introduced to the Committee and in response to questions were informed that:

- The audit had begun and would run until Christmas, the report set out the risks, there were three listed with a fourth to be added
- No indication that there was fraud within the fund, enhanced procedures are used to check this.
- we don't do Value for Money checks on pensions, but would do if there was a sudden spike or change in the custodian or investment manager.

It was RESOLVED that the Committee noted the report.

#### 10 INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT (Agenda Item 10)

The Internal Audit Manager introduced the report and in response to questions further informed the Committee that:

- Audit of issuing grants was on the plan, for quarter 4
- We have 47 schools in Merton, and try to audit 8 schools per year, there are two members of staff who regular visit and support schools and raise concerns where necessary, and factor these concerns into risk assessments.
- Schools are not immune to the financial situations we're all in, We have seen a significant rise in deficits, the volume has gone up nationally. The report highlights some procedural issues which are being rectified. 3 year deficit recovery plans are in place where needed.
- There is no arrangement with Central Government, nothing has been said centrally about deficits and we are waiting for a further review of school funding by the government in due course.
- The most significant expenditure in schools is staffing, we don't dictate to schools on how they should be set up, but the three year plan is key to finding a solution to seek to reduce costs.
- The council has a role to play in sharing knowledge on how other schools are approaching similar problems
- There is a risk that the Council could have to fund a deficit, schools are required to submit budget reports to show how they are managing, and the council provides oversight. There are sanctions we can take as an authority, but these are rarely exercised.

It was RESOLVED that the Committee noted the report and commended the Internal Audit Manager for the work undertaken.

#### 11 FRAUD UPDATE REPORT (Agenda Item 11)

The report was introduced to the Committee, there were no questions.

It was RESOLVED that the Committee noted the report and that it showed the council was doing all it can.

It was also RESOLVED that the Committee reviewed the Anti-Fraud and Anti-Corruption Strategy and agreed the amendments.

## 12 PROGRESS REPORT ON RISK MANAGEMENT (Agenda Item 12)

The report was introduced by the Head of Business Planning, who noted in particular that there were 10 items on the register, 7 that might happen and 3 issues that are actually happening. 4 items are of particular concern.

In response to questions, the committee was informed that :

- There are different methodologies in how to present risk, and the team will review this before the report is next presented to the committee
- The control actions should indicate what we think needs to be done to mitigate risks, there is not a significant area of risk with no controls in place.

## 13 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 13)

It was RESOLVED that the Committee agreed the work programme, noting that it was disappointing that the External Audit problems will ripple forwards.