



## **RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL AUDIT COMMITTEE**

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Audit Committee meeting held on Monday, 2 November 2020 at 5.00 pm.

### **County Borough Councillors - Audit Committee Members in attendance:-**

Councillor K Jones	Councillor G Caple
Councillor J Cullwick	Councillor M Adams
Councillor M Powell	Councillor G Davies
Councillor M Norris	Councillor D Owen-Jones
Councillor S Rees	Councillor S Powell
Councillor E Webster	Councillor R Yeo
Councillor L De Vet	Councillor J Harries

### **Lay Member in attendance**

Mr C Jones

### **Officers in attendance**

Mr A Wilkins, Director of Legal Services  
Mr C Hanagan, Service Director of Democratic Services & Communication  
Mr P Griffiths, Service Director – Finance & Improvement Services  
Mr I Traylor, Service Director – Pensions, Procurement & Transactional Services  
Mr M Thomas, Head of Regional Internal Audit Service  
Ms L Cumpston, Group Audit Manager  
Ms G Davies, Director of Education and Inclusion Services  
Ms N Morgan, School Organisation and Governance Team Leader  
Mr D Williams, Head of Attendance and Wellbeing Service

#### **13 Welcome**

The Chair welcomed County Borough Councillor E. Webster to his first meeting of the Audit Committee of the 2020/21 Municipal Year.

#### **14 Declaration of Interest**

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, there were no declarations made pertaining to the agenda.

#### **15 Minutes**

It was **RESOLVED** to approve the minutes of the meetings held on 28<sup>th</sup> September 2020 and 5<sup>th</sup> October 2020 as an accurate reflection of the meetings.

#### **16 Update on Governor Vacancies, Safeguarding and School Attendance - Director of Education and Inclusion Service**

With the aid of a PowerPoint presentation, the Director of Education and Inclusion Services, alongside the Head of the Attendance and Wellbeing Service and the School Organisation and Governance Team Leader, provided Members with an update on Governor Vacancies, Safeguarding and School Attendance, following the request of the Audit Committee at its meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2020.

## Governor Vacancies

Members were provided with information in respect of the type of governors, the number of governors appointed and the current vacancies as of 28<sup>th</sup> October 2020. Members were informed that there were currently 236 vacancies (14% of vacancies within RCT) which was 2% more compared to the position last year. However, it was explained that most of the governors are recruited in the Autumn Term and that there had been slight delays due to Covid-19.

Members were informed of the various recruitment processes for the different type of Governors and also the support available to Governors, which included Chair/Vice-Chair training and finance training. Members fed back that it was pleasing to note that the uptake for training had increased since working virtually and that solutions were available to those Governors without IT equipment to attend the schools and socially distance.

The Director added that during Covid-19, there had been significant engagement with Chairs of Governors to ensure they are well informed of Welsh Government changes in relation to keeping schools safe and the continuity of learning, which had been well attended.

One Member questioned whether many Governors renew their appointment following their four years of office and commented that from experience, the letter received following the four years of office, did not encourage individuals to apply for a second term of office. The Director noted the Member's feedback in respect of the letter and acknowledged the significant commitment needed to be a School Governor.

The Member then questioned whether high turnover of Governors was monitored and whether a leaving questionnaire was completed. The Officer explained that the reasons for resignation were monitored by the service but added that there were currently no governing bodies with a high turnover. In respect of the questionnaire suggestion, the officer agreed that it could be an effective step to be included within the process moving forward.

A number of Members commented on the need for a plan to be formulated to encourage individuals to apply to be on Governing Bodies. One Member questioned whether the high number of Governor Vacancies was a Wales Wide issue. The officer confirmed that this was a Wales Wide issue and advised Members that a neighbouring Council also had vacancies at 14%. The officer spoke of a Governors Support Group, which included colleagues from other Local Authorities and informed the Audit Committee that the Group had requested that Welsh Government look at introducing a nationwide recruitment drive to support Local Authorities in promoting their vacancies and the benefits of being a Governor.

## Safeguarding

Members were provided with details in relation to Education Safeguarding. The officer explained to Members that, historically, details of training completed was held by the schools but due to issues with training not being logged, the data team had been tasked with inputting all staff safeguarding training into Capita One. The officer spoke positively of the new system and explained that it was able to transport staff records when roles change, which was key to tracking safeguarding training for staff who undertake new roles. Members were informed that the new system had the ability to send reports to individual schools, in order for them to verify whether the records are up to date and

additionally, the system has the ability to send reminders when safeguarding training is due.

Members were then provided with the figures in relation to the Capita system such as the total records in Capita for staff safeguarding training (4680), the records of courses undertaken from 2017 to present (3770) and the records of courses undertaken prior to 2017 (910). The officer explained that when the schools undertake training outside of Cwm Taf, schools have been requested to send all details to the central unit.

The Lay Member recognised that training is provided to schools from a number of sources, including external providers and questioned whether the quality was consistent across the board. The officer explained that quality was an issue in previous years, but advised that this had since been rectified, and all Head Teachers are encouraged to source training material from the central Cwm Taf Training Unit. Similarly, any safeguarding training provided by an external source must be reviewed by the Training Unit in advance of delivery.

**(Note:** At this point in proceedings, County Borough Councillor S Powell left the meeting)

When questioned how long the new system would take to embed, the Director advised that she was unable to provide a specific time frame, but expected improvements to take place swiftly and assured the Committee that it would be continually monitored. One Member added that from a Governors point of view, the system was working in that it provides notification of the required training on a termly basis, which had allowed them to address training requirements regularly. The Chair commented that he was pleased to note the increase in records of training.

### School Attendance

The officer provided Members with an overview of Education Attendance and sought to address Audit Committee's concerns in respect of unauthorised absence. Members were informed that as part of All Wales Attendance Framework, schools were encouraged to challenge and investigate explanations for absence by parents, where appropriate, and to record the absence as 'unauthorised' until the explanation is deemed satisfactory by the school. The officer explained that prior to the Framework's release in 2011, there was less effective challenge from the schools in respect of absence. The officer also spoke of the introduction of Fixed Penalty Notices in 2015, which reinforced the need for schools to record absences correctly, in order to meet the Fixed Penalty Notices Code of Conduct.

Members were provided with graphs, which illustrated the absence rates in both primary schools and secondary schools from 2010/11 through to 2019/20. Both graphs showed that there was a slight increase in unauthorised attendance rates across the academic years, following the onus placed upon schools to investigate absence, as a result of the release of the All Wales Attendance Framework in 2011 and the increase in Fixed Penalty Notices since 2015.

The officer provided the Committee with details in respect of the attendance approaches undertaken by the Attendance and Wellbeing Service, which included termly registration compliance checks for all settings, attendance and exclusion graduated support and challenge for schools causing concern and the successful appointment of six Secondary Family Engagement Roles across schools in order to encourage school attendance and build better family

relationships.

One Member sought confirmation that no Fixed Penalty Notices were to be issued during the term and the officer explained that Welsh Government's current position was that Fixed Penalty Notices would not be reinstated and there was no indication of when the next review would take place.

The Chair sought clarification in respect of the referral process to the Attendance and Wellbeing Service, when attendance falls below 86% in a 6 week period. The officer explained that prior to the referral process, the schools must send a letter to parents in the first instance, to advise them that the attendance has fallen to an unsatisfactory level, before sending a second letter to parents to invite them to a meeting. It was explained that, at times, the process is not always undertaken in a timely manner at a school level, which can result in a lower attendance percentage at the point of referral.

One Member queried whether there was a correlation between attendance data, behavioural data and exclusion data and questioned if there were interventions in place to detain the pupils in schools. Members debated whether the matter was an overlap with the work of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee. The Director confirmed that attendance and exclusion data is routinely reported to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee together with an update on the Attendance Strategy. The Director also indicated that there are robust systems in place to challenge attendance and coding, including termly compliance checks with the Attendance and Wellbeing Service across all settings, to ensure authorised/unauthorised absences are recorded in line with Welsh Government legislation.

The Chair thanked the officers for their detailed presentation and the Audit Committee **RESOLVED:**

1. To refer the matter of school attendance and 6<sup>th</sup> form attendance to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee to consider in greater detail and receive feedback in due course.

(**Note:** Following consideration of this item, County Borough Councillor J Harries left the meeting)

## **17 Audit Committee Development and Support**

The Service Director, Finance and Improvement Services provided the Audit Committee with the report, which set out an action plan to support the on-going development and effectiveness of Audit Committee in line with its Terms of Reference.

Members were reminded that the Audit Committee Annual Report for 2019/20 included a self-assessment against the CIPFA 2018 Practical Guidance and that the main conclusions of the self-assessment were:

- The Committee has discharged the responsibilities placed upon it in 2019/20 in line with its Terms of Reference;
- A number of proposals for improvement identified that will help further improve the Committee's arrangements and effectiveness; and
- That the proposals for improvement form the basis of an action plan that will be led by Audit Committee.

The Service Director added that Audit Wales also plan to undertake work with Audit Committee, with the opportunity for this to be progressed in parallel with

the Committee delivering its action plan.

As such, Members' attention was drawn to the Action Plan, which was attached at Appendix 1 to the report. The Service Director provided an overview of the three sections within the Action Plan, namely, Learning and Development, Risk Management and Provision of Information brought to the Committee.

The Service Director went on to advise Members that the Action Plan should be a LIVE document to enable further areas of development and Audit Wales feedback to be considered / included within the Action Plan, and for it to be led by the Audit Committee and supported by key officers.

The Service Director, Democratic Services and Communication spoke of the 'Fit for Future' work undertaken in respect of the Council's scrutiny arrangements, which sought to allow the Committees' business time to be more focussed. The Service Director spoke of the Learning and Development aspect and commented that there was a need for all Elected Members to be clear of the distinction between the role of the Audit Committee and the role of Scrutiny to continue the good governance of the Council.

The Audit Committee **RESOLVED:**

1. To review the draft action plan and identify further updates considered necessary, where appropriate; and
2. To approve an action plan, the implementation of which to be led by Audit Committee and supported by Council Officers.

## **18 Finalised Audit Assignments**

The Audit Committee were provided with a summary of audit assignments completed between 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020 and 20<sup>th</sup> October 2020. Members were asked to consider the following Audit Assignments:

### Education and Inclusion Services

- Hawthorn High School;
- Mountain Ash Comprehensive School – Purchase Card Follow Up; and
- DCELLS – Post 16 Planning & Funding.

In respect of the Audit Assignment for Hawthorn High School, one Member noted that there was an Acting Head Teacher at the School during the time some of the issues had arisen and questioned what support had been provided in light of the fact the school had previously had significant issues with its processes. The Head of the Regional Internal Audit Service explained that the school had requested an audit to be undertaken and that it was therefore recognised that the school sought independent assurance on certain aspects of its processes.

One Member raised concerns in respect of 5.1.2 of the Audit Assignment, which stated that there was a lack of continuity or follow up with items in specific governing body minutes, which appeared to not be acted upon and no deferred decisions subsequently made. There were occasions where separate committee meetings were held jointly, which may have resulted in Governors making decisions on a Committee for which they are not responsible.

The Head of the Regional Internal Audit Service acknowledged that the issues identified were not best practice and as such, had been flagged as high priority. Members were informed that assurance had been given from the school that the recommendations had been implemented. The Group Audit Manager referred

Members to the recommendations outlined in section 5.1.3 of the report and explained that there was a requirement for schools to forward the agendas and minutes of all Governing Body meetings to RCT Governor Support. The officer explained that by ensuring the documents are sent to a central location, there is assurance that the schools are following the correct procedures.

In reference to 5.6.3 of the assignment, one Member noted that a total of £9,985 was owed to the school in respect of outstanding invoices in excess of 61 days old and questioned whether the invoices had been recovered. The Group Audit Manager informed the Committee that the school had advised that all of the debt had since been recovered and that the school was now on the Local Authority's Financials system, which meant that any debts would now be recovered through the Debtors system, rather than the school raising its own invoice.

**(Note:** At this point in proceedings, County Borough Councillor M Powell declared the following personal interest, 'I am a member of the Governing Body of Hawthorn High School. I believe my personal interest is not prejudicial because of the exemption set out in paragraph 12(2)(a)(iii) of the Code of Conduct')

In reference to 5.2.1 of the assignment, one Member raised concerns that only three members of staff had up to date Level 3 Child Protection training, with the Headteacher also having not received the training. Although Members recognised that the school had an Acting Headteacher and that there may have been an issue with timing, it was felt that a follow-up review in four months was necessary to ensure the appropriate number of staff at the school undertake Level 3 training, including the Acting Headteacher, as required by the Council's Safeguarding Team.

In respect of the Audit Assignment for DCELLS – Post 16 Planning & Funding, a Member spoke of the issues identified at a number of the schools, whereby class registers were not maintained and voiced his concerns that this could be a recurring theme throughout other schools, which were not sampled within the audit before the Committee. Members agreed that the matter would be referred to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee for further consideration.

**(Note:** At this point in proceedings, County Borough Councillors S Rees and K Jones left the meeting)

The Lay Member commented that each of the detailed Audit Assignments before the Committee were evidence that the processes adopted by the Committee were working to make the necessary change.

The Audit Committee **RESOLVED:**

1. To seek clarity and explanation where there are areas of concern;
2. To identify further action to be taken where deemed necessary;
3. To undertake a follow-up audit in four months' time of Hawthorn High School and to ensure the appropriate Level 3 Safeguarding Training is undertaken; and
4. To refer to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee, the matter of 6<sup>th</sup> form attendance and teachers maintaining 6<sup>th</sup> form class registers and issues with recording of pupils signing in and out.

It was **RESOLVED:** "That the press and public be excluded from the meeting under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act (as amended) for the following items of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of the exempt information as defined in paragraph 14 of Part 4 of the Schedule 12A of the Act".

**20 Overview of the National Fraud Initiative and update on the work delivered by the Corporate Fraud Team**

The Service Director - Pensions, Procurement and Transactional Services outlined the progress made to date against the Anti-Fraud, Bribery & Corruption work programme for 2020/21.

Following discussion, it was **RESOLVED:**

1. To review the work undertaken in 2020/21 and provide direction and guidance where necessary within the Terms of Reference of the Committee.

**This meeting closed at 7.20 pm**

**Cllr G Davies  
Chairman.**

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