

SPECIAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 12th October, 2010 at 6.00 p.m.

Conference Room at the Council House, Walsall

Present

Councillor Turner (Chairman)
Councillor Rochelle (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Chambers
Councillor Douglas-Maul
Councillor D. Shires

In Attendance

Paul Davies, Executive Director, Social Care and Inclusion
Andy Rust, Head of Joint Commissioning
Gary Mack, Head of Provision
Sean Wood, Head of Access Assessment and Care Management
John Fell, Head of Strategic Development
Mike Jones, Locality Manager
Julie Bride, Assistant Technology and Telehealthcare Manager
William Henwood, Major Projects Manager
Tina Faulkner, Press and PR Officer

755/10

Apologies

Apologies for non-attendance were submitted on behalf of Councillors Flower and Robertson.

756/10

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

757/10

Deputations and Petitions

There were no deputations submitted or petitions received.

758/10 **Local Government (Access to Information) Act, 1985 (as amended)**

There was no business on the agenda in private session.

759/10 **No or Limited Assurance Audit Reports**

The Chair welcomed all who were present and invited everyone to introduce themselves.

Further to Minute No. 740/10, the Chairman advised that the Committee were convened to consider the four no or limited assurance reports from the social care division which related to the following:-

- Home Care
- Community Alarm Service
- Inventories and stock - links to work
- Direct payments, personal budgets and individualised budgets

The Chairman reminded Members that they were there to review and scrutinise administrative systems and processes and to seek assurance that the agreed action plans of these reports were being properly implemented in a timely manner. In closing, the Chairman stated that the social care and inclusion directorate carried out great work and helped thousands of Walsall residents on a day-to-day basis.

The Chairman then invited Ms. Rebecca Neill, Head of Internal Audit, to address the Committee.

Ms. Neill reminded Members that the Committee, at its meeting on 1st September, 2010, had received a new type of report detailing internal audit reports, produced by the Council's own internal audit service, which had been finalised since 1st April, 2010 receiving either a no or limited assurance opinion. That Committee had resolved to consider those 4 reports relating to the social care and inclusion directorate at this, a special meeting of the Committee. Ms. Neill commented that she felt it was important to note that consideration of these reports in the public arena demonstrated the following three key facts:-

- (1) The Council's absolute commitment to openness, accountability and transparency;
- (2) That the Council had strong internal governance arrangements in place to identify areas in need of improvement;
- (3) That the Council was absolutely committed to making any improvements necessary. This could clearly be demonstrated by the agreed management action plans appended to the reports.

For the three remaining Audit reports which had been issued with a no or limited assurance, not pertaining to the social care and inclusion directorate, namely:-

- (1) Dolphin House - homelessness establishment
- (2) Information security management
- (3) Frank F. Harrison Engineering College

Ms. Neill indicated that she would provide Members with a brief update this evening, after the 4 Social Care limited or no assurance reports had been concluded.

The Chairman then invited Mr. Paul Davies, Executive Director, Social Care and Inclusion to address the Committee.

Mr. Davies thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to attend Committee and address the issues and concerns raised by the limited or no assurance reports. Mr. Davies advised Members that the limited or no assurance reports before them, although finalised in April, 2010, related to the 2009/10 financial year. In fact, these reports pre-dated his arrival. Mr. Davies reported that during the period in question, there had been a number of senior managers whom had retired or whom had left the Authority, including the Executive Director, Assistant Director and various Heads of Service. In view of this, Mr. Davies felt that such a big turnaround of Senior Managers was a contributory factor to the content of the limited or no assurance reports.

Mr. Davies reported that he had joined the Authority in April, 2010. Soon after his arrival, the Internal Audit Team made him aware of the various issues as highlighted within the reports. As a result of this information, Mr. Davies advised that he had investigated the issues thoroughly and agreed various new systems which had helped to address the concerns.

Mr. Davies then invited Mr. Henwood, Major Projects Manager, to explain to the Committee the various systems that had been set up.

Mr. Henwood reported on the various systems that were now in place to help address the issues raised within the limited and no assurance reports. Of particular note, Mr. Henwood advised Members that there was an audit agenda item on the Management Team Meeting agenda which met fortnightly. Under this item at the meeting, Mr. Davies's Managers were required to give him assurance and regular updates that the various outstanding issues were being adequately addressed. In this way, Mr. Davies was able to monitor the situation closely and ensure that all the action programmes were properly implemented in a timely and satisfactory manner.

In relation to the reported information, Councillor Douglas-Maul asked whether the reports submitted to the Management Team Meeting were formally signed off. Mr. Davies confirmed that this was the case. In addition, Mr. Davies also reported that his fortnightly Senior Management Team Meetings were formally minuted so as well as the reports being signed off, there was a formal record of it being signed off.

Councillor Chambers then asked if there were any good practices or procedures that could be shared amongst directorates. Ms. Neill reported that because each directorate was specialised and specific in its area of expertise, that only certain procedures would be universal. Councillor Chambers followed up by asking Ms. Neill if Social Care were in a 'good place'. Ms. Neill responded by stating that she could only base judgement on the reports before Committee which were a snapshot of the 2009/10 financial year and at that point, Social Care was not in a 'good place'. However, as with all audit reports, Action Plans had been issued and they would be monitored at regular intervals to ensure that things were improving.

The Chairman then invited Mr. Davies to guide Members through each of the no or limited assurance reports starting with Home Care.

Home Care

Mr. Davies asked Mike Jones, Locality Manager, to update Members on home care.

Mr. Jones reported that the actual audit took place in November/December, 2009. As at March, 2010, Mr. Jones reported that the Action Plans had been completed and all issues had been addressed. In view of this, Mr. Jones advised that they were now looking to move on and learn from the lessons and mistakes that they had previously been made.

There then followed a period of questioning by Members in relation to whether spot checks presented a true record of the present situation and if there was any evidence to suggest that some elderly service users might 'put up' with a poor service.

Community Alarms

Members considered the report and there then followed a period of questioning by Members in relation to how and whether deposits were reclaimed; how the relationship between Social Care and the Fire Authority was; what the process was for the return of equipment once someone had passed away; and if the Fire Service contributed towards the cost of alarms.

Councillor Douglas-Maul requested Mr. Davies to consider advocating the use of sprinklers in care homes and, where possible, to see if they could be incorporated into any new build.

Councillor Turner sought clarification to determine if all actions within the Action Plan had now been completed. Mr. Davies reported that not all of the actions had been completed but the vast majority had and the actions that were outstanding were in progress.

Direct payments, personal budgets and individualised budgets

Mr. Davies reported that good progress had been made on this. However, he reported that it is not a simple system and there were several systems he wanted to draw together into one unified system which would take time. Mr. Davies did, however, assure the Committee that steady progress was being made.

There then followed a period of questioning by Members in relation to whether vacancies amongst Social Workers affected the system; how Walsall compared with other Local Authorities and whether any audit trail errors was down to human error or an I.T. error.

Links to Work

Mr. Henwood reported that all recommendations had now been implemented.

At the conclusion of the debate on these reports, Councillor Chambers thanked Mr. Davies and all his staff for their attendance and stated that he found it very useful and inter-active. Councillor Chambers thought it could be a good idea in future to invite the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the relevant Scrutiny Committee along to such meetings where no or limited assurance reports are considered. Ms. Neill advised that this would be possible but reported that it would be important to ensure that the clear boundaries between Scrutiny and Audit Committee were maintained.

In closing, Mr. Davies thanked the Committee for the opportunity to attend the Committee so that he could provide Members with assurance that the no or limited assurance reports were being managed properly and adequately. Mr. Davies stated that he was proud of the services provided by Social Care and that he wanted to be open and transparent in all of its business. He stated that he was happy with the progress that had been made on these reports but felt there was still much that needed to be done and much that could be learned from these lessons to ensure that, as far as possible, such occurrences would never happen again.

The Chairman thanked Mr. Davies and his staff for their input and for being open, honest and transparent.

Mr. Davies and his staff then withdrew from the meeting whilst the Committee received updates on the other three limited or no assurance reports from Ms. Neill.

Dolphin House

Ms. Neill reported that good progress had been made on this report and that 21 out of the 27 recommendations had now been implemented.

Information security management

Ms. Neil reported that 4 out of the 5 recommendations had now been implemented.

Frank F. Harrison Engineering College

Ms. Neill reported that an officer from Serco was now mentoring Frank F. Harrison to ensure that the recommendations in the Action Plan would be properly implemented. Furthermore, Ms. Neill reported that Audit would be re-assessing Frank F. Harrison Engineering College in November, 2010 to see how everything was progressing.

Councillor Chambers questioned audit's role within schools and, in particular, schools with Trust status. Ms. Neill reported that they did not audit Walsall Academy as this was the responsibility of the Governing body. In addition, Ms. Neill agreed to report back to the next meeting on how schools with Trust status affects audit's role. Councillor Douglas-Maul requested if an approved list of qualified auditors for schools could be supplied.

At this juncture in the meeting, the Chairman asked his Members whether they felt that the officers had given suitable assurance on all the reports in question. All Members indicated that they had been satisfied with the information that had been given and felt that assurance had been given.

Termination of meeting

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.20 p.m.

Chair:

Date: