

LISBURN & CASTLEREAGH CITY COUNCIL

Minutes of the Meeting of the Governance and Audit Committee held in the Island Civic Centre, The Island, Lisburn, on Tuesday, 12 January, 2016 at 5:34 pm

PRESENT:

Alderman W A Leathem (Chairman)

The Right Worshipful the Mayor
Councillor R T Beckett

Deputy Mayor
Councillor A Redpath

Aldermen D Drysdale, A G Ewart and J Tinsley

Councillors A P Ewing, O Gawith, A Girvin, A Grehan,
V Kamble, H Legge, J McCarthy, U Mackin,
B Mallon and T Mitchell

OTHER MEMBERS:

Councillor A Givan

IN ATTENDANCE:

Chief Executive
Director of Leisure and Community Services
Lead Head of Planning and Building Control
Project Manager – Finance
Transition Manager
Head of Finance and IT
Head of Audit
Museum Curator
Performance Development Officer
Audit Officer
Financial Accountant
Committee Secretary

Northern Ireland Audit Office

Mr A Knox
Mr B O'Neill

Commencement of the Meeting

At the commencement of the meeting, the Chairman, Alderman W A Leathem, welcomed those present to the first meeting of the Governance and Audit Committee of 2016. In particular, he welcomed Officers to the meeting, as well as Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) representatives, Messrs A Knox and B O'Neill.

1. Apologies

It was agreed to accept an apology for non-attendance at the meeting on behalf of the Community Planning Manager who was unwell at present. The Chairman, Alderman W A Leathem, asked that the Committee's best wishes be conveyed to Mrs McWhirter.

2. Declarations of Interest

During the meeting, Alderman D Drysdale declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item 4.1 "Audit Reports" (item d, Castlereagh Borough Council Report to Those Charged with Governance), as he was a former Director of Hanwood Trust.

3. Minutes

Councillor J McCarthy arrived to the meeting at this point (5.35 pm).

It was agreed that the minutes of the meeting of the Governance and Audit Committee held on 8 December, 2015, as adopted at the meeting of Council held on 15 December, 2015, be confirmed and signed.

At the request of the Chairman, Alderman W A Leathem, it was agreed that the Confidential Report be considered at this point in the meeting.

4. Confidential Business

Councillor A P Ewing arrived to the meeting at this point (5.35 pm).

It was agreed that the report and recommendations of the Chief Executive be adopted, subject to any decisions recorded below.

The Chairman, Alderman W A Leathem, advised that the matters contained in the confidential report would be dealt with "In Committee" due to containing (a) information which was likely to reveal the identity of an individual; and (b) information which revealed that the Council proposed to make an order or direction under any statutory provision.

"In Committee"

It was proposed by Councillor J McCarthy, seconded by Councillor B Mallon, and agreed that the following matters be considered "in committee", in the absence of members of the press and public being present.

Councillor V Kamble arrived to the meeting at this point (5.36 pm).

4.1 Audit Reports

Alderman D Drysdale arrived to the meeting during consideration of this item of business (5.41 pm).

Members had been provided with the following audit reports:

- (a) Lisburn City Council Annual Audit Letter
- (b) Castlereagh Borough Council Annual Audit Letter
- (c) Lagan Rural Partnership Annual Audit Letter
- (d) Castlereagh Borough Council Report to Those Charged with Governance
- (e) Lagan Rural Partnership Report to Those Charged with Governance
- (f) Lisburn/Castlereagh Statutory Transition Committee Report to Those Charged with Governance
- (g) Lisburn City Council Report to Those Charged with Governance
- (h) Lisburn-Castlereagh Peace III Joint Committee Annual Audit Letter
- (i) Lisburn-Castlereagh Peace III Joint Committee Report to Those Charged with Governance

During discussion of the above reports, it was agreed to recommend that:

- (1) in relation to report (d), Mr B O'Neill liaise with the Project Manager – Finance in relation to what the audit fee was likely to increase to;
- (2) in relation to report (d), the Project Manager – Finance would provide a report to the next meeting of the Committee in relation to the implementation of the recommendation by the NIAO in respect of the single status process;
- (3) in relation to report (d), the Project Manager – Finance provide the Committee with information on the average pay increase by employees as a result of single status;
- (4) a “traffic light” report would be presented to the February and March meetings of the Committee in respect of progress made on the various recommendations by the NIAO in the above reports; and
- (5) in relation to the item on “Members’ Declarations of Interest” in report (g), in future, Party Group Leaders should be informed if Members did not return declaration of interest forms.

Messrs Knox and O'Neill having answered several queries raised by Members in relation to the above reports, it was proposed by Alderman J Tinsley, seconded by Councillor J McCarthy and agreed to recommend that their contents be approved.

Mr A Knox thanked all Council staff involved in producing the accounts and for having met the required deadline.

The Chairman, Alderman W A Leathem, thanked Messrs Knox and O'Neill for their attendance and they left the meeting (5.52 pm), as did the Financial Accountant.

4.2 Rolling Year Absence Figures for Chief Executive's Office for the Period 1 April, 2015 to 31 October, 2015

Members noted the contents of a table showing the absence figures for the Chief Executive's Office for the period 1 April to 31 October, 2015.

Discussion ensued during which the Chief Executive outlined steps being taken by the Council to address sickness levels throughout the organisation. The action taken was having a successful outcome, with sickness levels reducing, and Alderman D Drysdale congratulated the Chief Executive and other relevant Officers for how this matter was being managed.

4.3 Draft Estimates for 2016/17 for the Chief Executive's Department

Alderman D Drysdale left, and returned to, the meeting during consideration of this item of business (6.08 pm and 6.09 pm respectively).

Members were provided with a copy of the draft estimates for the Chief Executive's Department for the forthcoming financial year 2016/17.

During discussion, it was agreed to recommend that, for its next meeting, the Committee be provided with a breakdown of the 'Transition Team Salaries' for the 2016/17 financial year. The Head of Finance and IT took note of Members' comments regarding 'Reallocated Costs'.

Following discussion, during which several Members' queries were addressed and the Chief Executive thanked all staff involved in producing the estimates, it was proposed by Councillor A Grehan, seconded by Councillor T Mitchell and agreed to recommend that the draft estimates for the Chief Executive's Office for the 2016/17 financial year be approved.

4.4 Royal Borough Status

Members had been provided with a copy of a paper of supporting evidence prepared by the Museum Curator on the key linkages between the "Royal Family" and "Hillsborough Village" in support of the Royal Borough Status consideration. Those Members present at the meeting were provided with an updated copy of the paper which included illustrations.

The Chief Executive, the Chairman, Alderman W A Leatham, and other Members of the Committee congratulated the Museum Curator for his efforts in preparing this excellent paper.

During discussion, it was agreed to recommend that any Members' suggestions of people from whom the Council could seek letters of support be passed to either the Chief Executive or the Chairman, Alderman W A Leatham.

It was proposed by Councillor B Mallon, seconded by Alderman D Drysdale and agreed to recommend that the paper prepared by the Museum Curator be approved and that this matter be further progressed by the Royal Borough Status Working Group.

At this stage, the Chairman, Alderman W A Leathem, enquired if Members had any other matters of a confidential nature that they wished to raise while the meeting was still "In Committee". The following matter was raised by Alderman A G Ewart.

4.5 Salary Scales of Mayor's Secretary and Directors' PAs

Alderman A G Ewart stated that he had asked at the last meeting of the Committee about the salary scales of the Mayor's Secretary and Directors' PAs. The Chief Executive agreed that this information would be provided to the Committee.

Resumption of Normal Business

It was proposed by Alderman A G Ewart, seconded by Councillor T Mitchell and agreed to come out of committee and normal business was resumed.

The Director of Leisure and Community Services and the Museum Curator left the meeting this point (6.20 pm).

At this stage, the Chairman, Alderman W A Leathem, asked that the Project Manager – Finance convey the Committee's thanks to staff involved in the audit reports that were considered earlier in the meeting.

5. Report from Chief Executive

It was agreed that the report and recommendations of the Chief Executive be adopted, subject to any decisions recorded below.

Items for Decision

5.1 Further Consultation on Lisburn Courthouse

It was noted during consideration of this item of business that the Deputy Mayor, Councillor A Redpath, had arrived to the meeting.

Members were provided with a copy of a report prepared by the Community Planning Manager regarding the above. Following discussion, it was agreed to recommend that:

- (a) the Council respond to the consultation, by 18 January, 2016, as outlined in the Community Planning Manager's report;
- (b) an email be sent to Elected Members encouraging them to also respond individually to the consultation;
- (c) the Council suggest that consideration be given to each of the 11 Council areas retaining a courthouse, which would assist in reducing costs as this would be a reduction from the currently proposed number of properties for retention;

5.1 Further Consultation on Lisburn Courthouse (Contd)

- (d) Members' concerns be conveyed to the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service regarding the Public Prosecution Service being relocated to Belfast, even though it had current leases on two properties in Lisburn;
- (e) the Chief Executive agreed to ascertain how many staff would be deployed to Belfast as a result of any closure of Lisburn Courthouse – which would have a negative impact on the local economy in Lisburn;
- (f) meetings be convened between the District Judge, representatives of the Law Society and Bar Council, the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Governance and Audit Committee, or their nominees, and relevant Members and Officers;
- (g) following the meeting referred to at (f) above, a meeting be sought with the Justice Minister and the Justice Committee. The District Judge and representatives of the Law Society and Bar Council would be asked to participate in such a delegation.

5.2 Council Risk Management – Corporate Risk Register

Alderman A G Ewart left the meeting during consideration of this item of business (6.41 pm).

Members were provided with a copy of a report prepared by the Transition Manager, together with a copy of the Council's Corporate Risk Register. It being noted that the Corporate Risk Register was a 'living' document, subject to continual revision, it was proposed by Alderman D Drysdale, seconded by Councillor O Gawith and agreed to recommend that it be approved.

5.3 Consultation on NI Local Government Code of Conduct – Alternative Action Proposals

Alderman A G Ewart returned to the meeting at this point (6.45 pm).

At the meeting of the Committee held on 8 December, 2015, it had been agreed that Members forward any comments they had on the above consultation document to the Transition Manager, no later than 21 December, 2015, for inclusion in a draft response, which would be presented at this meeting.

Given that no Members had provided comments on the consultation document, it was proposed by Councillor J McCarthy, seconded by Councillor A Girvin and agreed to recommend that the Council submit a nil response; however, should individual parties wish to respond, this should be done directly to the NI Commissioner for Complaints by 15 January, 2016.

The Chairman, Alderman W A Leathem, asked that item 8 of the Chief Executive's report be considered at this point.

5.4 Budget Report – Chief Executive’s Office

Members were provided with, and noted the contents of, a copy of a budget report for the Chief Executive’s Office for the year to 31 March, 2016, as at 30 November, 2015.

5.5 Report by Head of Audit

Members were provided with a copy of a report prepared by the Head of Audit containing the following matters:

5.5.1 Reimbursement of Travel Expenses

Members were provided with a summary report of the assessment of risks and controls relating to the reimbursement of Officers’ travel expenses. It was proposed by the Deputy Mayor, Councillor A Redpath, seconded by Councillor O Gawith and agreed to recommend that the summary report be approved.

During discussion of the summary report, it was agreed to recommend that:

- (a) at its next meeting, the Committee be advised of the total mileage figures for Officers; and
- (b) whilst the recommendation in the summary report was that the mileage systems of the two former councils would be merged in October, when the Transfare System would be implemented for all staff, Members would like such a merger taking place at an earlier date.

5.5.2 Annual Audit of Lagan Rural Partnership

Members were provided with a summary report on the annual audit of Lagan Rural Partnership. It was proposed by the Deputy Mayor, Councillor A Redpath, seconded by Councillor O Gawith and agreed to recommend that the summary report be approved.

5.6 Draft Guidance for Council’s Performance Improvement from April 2016 Onwards

Councillor A Grehan left the meeting at this point (6.55 pm).

Members were provided with a copy of a letter dated 10 December, 2015 from the Department of the Environment (DOE) Local Government Policy Division regarding the above draft guidance, a copy of which was available on the DOE website. The DOE was seeking views, by 25 February, 2016, on the draft guidance.

It was agreed to recommend that, if Members had any comments to make on the draft guidance, these be conveyed to the Policy Development Officer by 25 January, 2016, for inclusion in a response paper which would be presented to the February Committee meeting for approval.

5.7 LCCC – Customer Service Guidelines

Members were provided with a copy of the Customer Service Guidelines, the aim of which was to provide guidance on how the council would provide customer service to all its ratepayers. It was proposed by Councillor J McCarthy, seconded by Councillor O Gawith and agreed that the Customer Service Guidelines be approved, subject to section 7 “What You Can Do If You Are Not Happy With Our Service” being amended to read “What Can We Do Better”.

Items for Noting

5.8 Northern Ireland Audit Office – Query in Audit Fees

At the December meeting of the Committee, Members requested that the NIAO be made aware of their concerns regarding the performance improvement audit fees, especially given that since Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council had a higher number of performance improvement objectives, its cost of audit and assessment would be higher than other councils that had fewer objectives, which seemed unfair. This had been raised with the NIAO and confirmation had been received that it was the desire of the Audit Office to significantly reduce the fee of £30,000 as it was calculated based on the Welsh Performance Improvement Model and Welsh Local Government had a much wider remit to that of NI Local Government. The NIAO was currently working on a methodology for carrying out the performance improvement duties in NI councils and this was expected to be ready for the end of January 2016. It was noted that, when this was received, a paper would be brought to the Committee.

6. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

There being no further business, the meeting was terminated at 6.58 pm.

Mayor/Chairman