

INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT

FROM: Audit and Risk Manager SUBJECT: Corporate Governance –

Staff Working Groups

TO: Head of Governance **DATE:** 31 March 2024

Head of People and Communications

C.C. Chief Executive

Head of Finance

Portfolio Holder (Cllr Davison)

1 Introduction

- 1.1 In accordance with the Audit Plan for 2023/24, an examination of the above subject area has recently been completed by Ian Davy, Principal Internal Auditor, and this report presents the findings and conclusions for information and, where appropriate, action.
- 1.2 Wherever possible, findings have been discussed with the staff involved in the procedures examined and their views are incorporated, where appropriate, into the report. My thanks are extended to all concerned for the help and cooperation received during the audit.

2 **Background**

- 2.1 Each year, the Audit Plan includes an allocation of time to examine selected key elements of the Council's framework for providing assurance on corporate governance. The area(s) to be covered are normally agreed with senior management when the audit is scheduled to be undertaken.
- 2.2 Previous topics have included:
 - significant governance issues in the Annual Governance Statement
 - the effectiveness of the Citizens' Panel
 - the Member Development Programme
 - implementation of Executive decisions
 - organisational culture
 - Service Assurance Statements
 - gifts and hospitality
 - risk management framework
 - response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - involvement with external bodies and organisations
- 2.3 On this occasion, the agreed topic was the governance of staff working groups.

- In order to assist with the audit, the Performance Management Officer (PMO) had been tasked with pulling together all of the information and documentation for each of the (18) identified groups, through a review of the intranet and contact with the Members of SLT identified as the groups sponsors. The findings of the audit, set out below, are based on the information and documentation provided.
- 2.5 It may be that some of the groups have documentation which has not been supplied as requested but, as it was expected that most information should be available to all on the intranet, further chasing was generally not undertaken, although some further information was provided following discussions with specific members of staff.
- A summary of the groups covered and the documentation identified and obtained is included at Appendix B. Due to the passage of time from the issuing of the initial draft report to the agreement of the final report, a number of changes have been made to the group structures, publication of documentation etc. These are noted in italics within the appendix.

Objectives of the Audit and Coverage of Risks

- 3.1 The standing objective of auditing corporate governance is to evaluate the effectiveness of overarching structures, procedures, and monitoring arrangements that underpin the assurance framework for demonstrating good governance, with reference to relevant standards.
- The management controls in place have been assessed to provide assurance that the risks are being managed effectively. It should be noted that the risks stated in the report do not represent audit findings in themselves, but rather express the potential for a particular risk to occur. The findings detailed in each section following the stated risk confirm whether the risk is being controlled appropriately or whether there have been issues identified that need to be addressed.
- 3.3 In terms of scope, the audit covered the following risks:
 - 1. Staff groups operate without clear direction as there are no documented terms of reference.
 - 2. Meetings of the groups are not held with the required frequency to enable the group to fulfil its brief.
 - Membership of the staff groups is not representative of the organisational structure and the needs of the relevant groups, with certain service areas / individual members of staff either being absent or dominating the groups.
 - 4. The 'outcomes' of the meetings are not communicated to the relevant parties.
 - 5. The 'outcomes' of the meetings are not acted upon as required.
- 3.4 The risks identified above were drawn from an initial discussion of the topic between the auditor and the auditee and was not intended to cover all corporate governance risks faced by the organisation.

3.5 The structures and processes in place will help to ensure that the Council is fair, honest, open, transparent, and consistent in all its dealings. This cuts across all areas of the current corporate strategy in place.

4 Findings

4.1 Recommendations from Previous Report

4.1.1 As each audit of corporate governance examines different aspects, the recommendations from the previous report were not specifically reviewed as part of this audit.

4.2 Potential Risk: Staff groups operate without clear direction as there are no documented terms of reference.

Whilst the information gathered by the PMO did not specifically highlight whether there had been an identified need for each group, the purpose for the majority of the groups was ascertained, either from the group details held on the intranet or from the SLT sponsor.

Terms of reference were only identified for six of the 18 groups, with one further group in the process of drawing their terms of reference up.

In some cases where terms of reference were not provided, the 'purpose' of the group could be regarded as being, in effect, the basis for the terms of reference, although these do not tend to go into the level of detail required.

Where terms of reference were in place, it was not obvious upon review of the earliest sets of minutes that the groups had approved their terms of reference and some were very light in details (only really setting out a purpose on an intranet page).

Recommendation

Terms of Reference should be drawn up where they are not currently in place and, where they are in place, they should be reviewed to ensure that they remain relevant. All Terms of Reference should then be agreed by members at the next meetings of the groups.

Upon review, it was noted that two different intranet pages held slightly different terms of reference for the Health Officers Group (with slightly different reporting lines (changes to groups names) and membership). However, this was amended upon identification at the draft reporting stage.

4.3 Potential Risk: Meetings of the groups are not held with the required frequency to enable the group to fulfil its brief.

The frequency of meetings was recorded in most cases where the group was currently active although there was no information identified in two cases. Whilst some groups have a set frequency for their meetings, two were variable / as required, with another being dependant on when a Members committee was held.

As, on the whole, their frequencies were only stated in general terms (e.g. every six weeks), it was not clear whether they were specifically being timetabled with regards to their reporting lines.

In some cases, a number of different groups were meant to be reporting into specific groups, but the meeting frequencies of the 'feeder' groups varied (e.g. ESO group, Health and Safety Committee, Health Officers Group and others were all supposed to report to the Workforce Steering group, but the frequency of their meetings was 'variable', quarterly and every six weeks respectively, with the Workforce Steering Group being held every six weeks).

Due to the availability of minutes for these groups (see below), it was not clear whether any of them were meeting with these frequencies and whether they were meeting in an appropriate timescale to allow for their issues to be passed on accordingly.

Recommendation

Meetings of the groups should be formally timetabled to allow for any issues to be reported up to the 'senior' group as appropriate.

4.4 Potential Risk: Membership of the staff groups is not representative of the organisational structure and the needs of the relevant groups, with certain service areas / individual members of staff either being absent or dominating the groups.

Where terms of reference were found to be in place, they all contained details of membership, either with named officers on the intranet page or statements such as 'representatives are required from all service areas'. Three of the terms of reference named specific individuals or roles who would be the chair of the meetings.

Membership information was identified for eleven of the 18 groups, with three of the other groups currently being dormant, two not yet being fully established and two where membership information was not provided.

Three of the eleven groups did not need representation from each service area due to the nature of the groups and others, such as SLT and Managers' Forum being fully representative with membership from all departments as required.

For the other groups there seemed to be gaps that were not being filled:

Health and Safety Committee – the membership information on the intranet suggests no representation from the Climate Change and Projects teams, Customer and Digital Services, Governance and Place, Arts & Economy (PAE). As the group should include 'representatives from each service area that has an interest in health and safety', the lack of a member from PAE should be addressed.
 (NB the minutes show additional members who are not on the intranet list, including representation from the Climate Change and Projects teams, Customer and Digital Services, Neighbourhood and Assets,

People and Communications and SCLE but still no PAE membership. They

- also show that one person who is still shown as a member has resigned from the group).
- Health Officers Group no representation from the Climate Change and Projects teams, Customer and Digital Services, Governance, Neighbourhood and Assets, and PAE.
- Safeguarding the only service area not represented is Governance.
- Staff Voice whilst members of the SLT are not included in the group, there is no membership from the Climate Change and Projects teams.
- Sustainability Officers Group no representation from Customer and Digital Services and PAE. The purpose of the group suggests that it covers the built environment so the lack of a member from PAE is an issue that requires addressing.
- Workforce Steering Group the group details in the intranet suggest that membership covers each Service Area (SLT), with eight members of staff from People and Communications being on the group. However, the Head of People and Communications advised that the representatives from the service area attend on a rota basis, so do not all attend together.

Recommendations

The issues identified regarding gaps in membership and overrepresentation on certain groups should be addressed.

The intranet page for the Health and Safety Committee should be updated to reflect the current membership of the group so that staff know who represents their service area.

Only Managers' Forum and Workforce Steering Group have specific mention within their 'terms of reference' (purpose statements on the intranet pages for the groups) on the attendance of substitutes if a member of the group is unable to attend. The MTU / JCF terms of reference specifically states that substitutes are not provided for, although this seems to be aimed at the Member representation.

No other mentions are made of the need (or otherwise) for substitutes to attend.

Recommendation

The need for the attendance of substitutes should be reviewed for each group, with the Terms of Reference being updated to reflect the agreed position.

Identifying actual meeting attendance was generally not possible due to the availability of the minutes (see 4.5 below), with minutes only held for six groups. Two groups where minutes were held had not met in 2023/24 and attendance had not been minuted for one of the groups.

One of the groups (SLT) was generally attended by all relevant members or substitutes had attended on their behalf.

Another group (Health and Safety Committee) had only met twice during the year, so 'trends' of attendance were not relevant, although issues regarding details of group membership (as per the intranet) were noted (see above).

In the other case (Staff Voice), one member of the group had not attended any of the five meetings during the 2023/24 financial year, and three other members had not attended four of the five meetings, although one was a new member who had only attended the last meeting and there was evidence that someone else from his team had attended the previous four.

The minutes of the latest Staff Voice meeting indicated that there was recognition that there were gaps in attendance and flagged that staff were being asked to send substitutes if they could not attend.

Ignoring the Heads of Service and 'Corporate Management Team' and their membership of SLT and Workforce Steering Group and the membership of Managers' Forum for all relevant members of staff, there are eight groups for which membership could be established.

Although there are a few officers that are members on three groups, there is one officer who is on four groups and another who is on five groups, with them both being in the same service area (and they both also attend Managers' Forum).

The minutes of the Health and Safety Committee also suggest that an additional officer is a member of the group (not shown as a member on the group's intranet page) which would make her a member of four groups.

Whilst their membership may be required on some of the groups, there is a danger that they may become too dominant a voice and, as a separate point, it may not be the best use of their time to be on all of these groups.

Recommendation

The group membership of the identified officers should be reviewed.

4.5 **Potential Risk: The 'outcomes' of the meetings are not communicated to the relevant parties.**

As identified above, minutes were only provided for six of the 18 groups. Where minutes were held, only three groups shared these on the intranet, with a further group having their minutes held on the Committee web pages on the Council's internet site.

Recommendation

Minutes should be formally taken for each group and should be published on the intranet where appropriate.

The reporting lines were identified for the majority of the groups. However, due to the unavailability of minutes for most of the groups, it could not be established whether reports were being received as suggested.

Where minutes were available for the groups that were meant to be receiving the reports (Health and Safety Committee and SLT), there was generally no evidence in the minutes that they were considering any reports from the groups that were reporting into them.

Recommendation

It should be ensured that reporting lines are appropriate and reports are being submitted and considered where relevant, with this being minuted appropriately.

4.6 Potential Risk: The 'outcomes' of the meetings are not acted upon as required.

A review was undertaken to ensure that actions to be taken were being appropriately recorded, with feedback on progress against the actions be provided to subsequent meetings of the group. Where minutes were available for meetings in the current financial year:

- Health and Safety Committee minutes include a column for details of the officers required to undertake the actions which are summarised in the body of the minutes. The latest set of minutes include a statement under the 'matters arising from the minutes' section that 'most items were complete or on (the) agenda'.
- Managers Forum specific actions are not recorded as this is (generally) an information sharing group with 'Council-wide' actions generally being flagged for dissemination onto teams.
- Safeguarding whilst there are no formal minutes, an action plan is maintained that is updated following discussion at the meetings.
- SLT the minutes and agendas include an item for a review of the action log. This log is held on the intranet page for the group.
- Staff Voice minutes include a column for details of the officers required to undertake actions, with the latest minutes including specific wording in them to highlight the actions required. The minutes of the following meetings do not have a specific section to feed-back on progress against the actions, although consideration of this was included as an action in the latest minutes.

Recommendation

It should be ensured that future agendas / minutes for all groups include sections for feedback on the progress against agreed actions.

Summary and Conclusions

- 5.1 Section 3.2 sets out the risks that were reviewed as part of this audit. The review highlighted weaknesses against <u>all</u> the identified risks. Several of the recommendations have been rated as High or Medium in terms of their importance.
- 5.2 In overall terms, therefore, we can give only a MODERATE degree of assurance that the systems and controls in place in respect of the governance

arrangements for Staff Working Groups are appropriate and are working effectively to help mitigate and control the identified risks.

5.3 The assurance bands are shown below:

Level of Assurance	Definition
Substantial Assurance	There is a sound system of control in place and compliance with the key controls.
Moderate Assurance	Whilst the system of control is broadly satisfactory, some controls are weak or non-existent and there is non-compliance with several controls.
Limited Assurance	The system of control is generally weak and there is non-compliance with controls that do exist.

6 **Management Action**

6.1 The recommendations arising above are reproduced in the attached Action Plan (Appendix A) for management attention.

Richard Barr Audit and Risk Manager

Appendix A

Action Plan

Internal Audit of Corporate Governance (Staff Working Groups) - March 2024

Report Ref.	Risk	Recommendation	Rating*	Responsible Officer(s)	Management Response	Target Date
4.2	Staff groups operate without clear direction as there are no documented terms of reference.	Terms of Reference should be drawn up where they are not currently in place and, where they are in place, they should be reviewed to ensure that they remain relevant. All Terms of Reference should then be agreed by members at the next meetings of the groups.	High	Workforce Steering Group	Suggestion that not only should the Terms of Reference be completed for each group, but we should adopt a standard format for them. For example, each should include details of the groups purpose and objectives, key roles, general membership, reporting lines, meeting frequency and administration and, standards and behaviours (including how decisions are made). The Workforce Steering Group Terms of Reference has all of this information which we will consider to adapt as a template.	End of December 2024

Report Ref.	Risk	Recommendation	Rating*	Responsible Officer(s)	Management Response	Target Date
4.3	Meetings of the groups are not held with the required frequency to enable the group to fulfil its brief.	Meetings of the groups should be formally timetabled to allow for any issues to be reported up to the 'senior' group as appropriate.	Medium	Workforce Steering Group	If the group hasn't met for some time, this frequency will be reviewed and updated accordingly in the revised Terms of Reference. The timescales will be representative of previous interactions.	End of December 2024
4.4 (a)	Membership of the staff groups is not representative of the organisational structure and the needs of the relevant groups, with certain service areas / individual members of staff either being absent or dominating the groups.	The issues identified regarding gaps in membership and over-representation on certain groups should be addressed.	Medium	Workforce Steering Group	This is something that can be remedied through administrative updates with the lead Officers and consideration of the group membership (if required).	End of December 2024
4.4 (b)	Membership of the staff groups is not representative of the organisational structure and the needs of the relevant groups, with certain service areas / individual members of staff either being absent or dominating the groups.	The intranet page for the Health and Safety Committee should be updated to reflect the current membership of the group so that staff know who represents their service area.	Low	Workforce Steering Group	This is something easily remedied through administrative updates with the lead Officers.	End of December 2024

Report Ref.	Risk	Recommendation	Rating*	Responsible Officer(s)	Management Response	Target Date
4.4 (c)	Membership of the staff groups is not representative of the organisational structure and the needs of the relevant groups, with certain service areas / individual members of staff either being absent or dominating the groups.	The need for the attendance of substitutes should be reviewed for each group, with the Terms of Reference being updated to reflect the agreed position.	Low	Workforce Steering Group	This is something that can be remedied through administrative updates with the lead Officers and consideration of the group membership (if required).	End of December 2024
4.4 (d)	Membership of the staff groups is not representative of the organisational structure and the needs of the relevant groups, with certain service areas / individual members of staff either being absent or dominating the groups.	The group membership of the identified officers should be reviewed.	Low	Workforce Steering Group	This is something that can be remedied through administrative updates with the lead Officers and consideration of the group membership (if required).	End of December 2024
4.5 (a)	The 'outcomes' of the meetings are not communicated to the relevant parties.	Minutes should be formally taken for each group and should be published on the intranet where appropriate.	High	Workforce Steering Group	We will review a possible standard format.	End of December 2024

Report Ref.	Risk	Recommendation	Rating*	Responsible Officer(s)	Management Response	Target Date
4.5 (b)	The 'outcomes' of the meetings are not communicated to the relevant parties.	It should be ensured that reporting lines are appropriate and reports are being submitted and considered where relevant, with this being minuted appropriately.	Medium	Workforce Steering Group	This is something that can be remedied through administrative updates with the lead Officers (if required).	End of December 2024
4.6	The 'outcomes' of the meetings are not acted upon as required.	It should be ensured that future agendas / minutes for all groups include sections for feedback on the progress against agreed actions.	Medium	Workforce Steering Group	To consider the SLT format where actions recorded on the intranet persist beyond the minutes of the last meeting.	End of December 2024

^{*} The ratings refer to how the recommendation affects the overall risk and are defined as follows:

High: Issue of significant importance requiring urgent attention. Medium: Issue of moderate importance requiring prompt attention.

Low: Issue of minor importance requiring attention.

Appendix B

Group Summary

Group Name	Terms of Reference	Purpose	Frequency of meetings	Reports to which Group / Officer?	Group Members	Minutes / Actions
Employee Support Officers	Nothing provided	To support Staff	Variable	WSG	Current ESOs	Nothing provided
The ESO group no	o longer exists a	as it has been merged into the	Health Officers Gr	roup		
Enforcement Officers Group	Currently dormant so nothing provided	Not stated	Currently dormant	Nothing stated	Should include representatives from each service area that is required to undertake enforcement type activities, e.g. Planning / Building Control, Housing, SCLE, Benefits, Neighbourhood Services and Legal once / if reformed	Currently dormant
Health and Safety Committee	Held on the intranet (NB shows group name as Health and Safety Working Group)	To promote Health and Safety within the council	Quarterly	WSG - to discuss whether report should be sent to SLT Confirmed as just being reported to WSG	Membership recorded on the main Health and Safety page on the intranet (shown as Internal Health and Safety Group)	Documented minutes provided (not on the intranet)

Group Name	Terms of Reference	Purpose	Frequency of meetings	Reports to which Group / Officer?	Group Members	Minutes / Actions
Health Officers Group	Set out on the group's intranet page	To ensure the health and wellbeing of the organisation is monitored and reviewed	Every six weeks	SLT, WSG and Employment Committee Only reports to WSG	Membership recorded on the group's page on the intranet (NB still shows a member of staff who has now left the organisation but has not been replaced on the group Now updated)	Nothing provided Agendas and minutes for 2024 meetings now on the intranet page
ICT Steering Group	Nothing provided (being drawn up for SLT 16/05/2024)	Not stated – TOR being updated to include this	Group didn't meet in 2023 as was absorbed into the Transformation Steering Group. Subsequent decision taken that it will be re-established as a specific group (as per report to SLT 16/05/2024)	SLT (through Head of Customer and Digital Services as sponsor)	Yet to be reformed	No meetings for over a year so nothing provided

Group Name	Terms of Reference	Purpose	Frequency of meetings	Reports to which Group / Officer?	Group Members	Minutes / Actions
Induction Group	Nothing provided	Summary to date: Move to face to face induction. Ensure a 'buddy' is identified as part of onboarding. Regular office presence for the first three months with other team members to be agreed	As required	SLT (for action plan)	Not stated	Nothing provided
This was not a for	rmal group, so	should not have been included	in the group detai	ls provided to Int	ernal Audit	
Information Governance and CCTV Special Interest Group	Terms of Reference document provided (not on the intranet)	An opportunity for officers to discuss information governance and CCTV. A chance for the IG team to inform officers of updates to legislation, a reminder of IG responsibilities and a chance to share experiences and feedback on IG. A chance for CCTV officers to discuss matters, may be across SDC and WDC. An opportunity to discuss any issues and provide experience and feedback on CCTV. This ties in with IG as may need to discuss DPIAs, sharing agreements, personal data aspects	Bi-monthly	SLT	Group not established currently	Group not established currently

Group Name	Terms of Reference	Purpose	Frequency of meetings	Reports to which Group / Officer?	Group Members	Minutes / Actions
Managers' Forum	Set out on the group's intranet page	Engagement with Senior Managers - update on key corporate projects and initiatives, involve them in decisions and provide them with the tools to share with their teams.	Four-weekly	Cascade to all managers	All team leaders and managers	Held on the group's intranet page
Members / Trades Unions Joint Consultation and Safety Panel	Held on CMIS (available through the internet)	As set out within the terms of reference	Ad-hoc (two weeks before Employment Committee)	Employment Committee (Members)	Represented by Members from each recognised political group, Trades Union representatives and the Chief Executive (non- voting)	Held on CMIS (available through the internet)
Project Management Community of Practice	Nothing provided	A Community of Practice is for people who share a common job role, responsibilities or remits. This CoP is for staff for whom project (or programme) management is a major part of their role. In time, the CoP will also provide support and resources for staff who are asked to manage projects on an occasional basis and lack experience.	Not stated	SLT	Not stated	Nothing provided This is a Teams group by invite only, so not minuted

Group Name	Terms of Reference	Purpose	Frequency of meetings	Reports to which Group / Officer?	Group Members	Minutes / Actions
Risk Management Group	Nothing provided (currently inactive)	To promote risk management best practice within the Council	Should be quarterly when re-established (no meeting since October 2021)	SLT	Suggested membership identified in an email when trying to restart the group in August 2022 but this is out of date due to some of the identified staff having left the organisation	Documented minutes provided (not on the intranet) from when the group last met
Safeguarding	Nothing provided	The purpose of the Safeguarding Group is to provide a key focus on safeguarding for WDC. Agenda items include regular updates about referrals, exploitation - including counter terrorism, modern slavery and human trafficking, domestic abuse, briefings and lessons learned from WSP	Quarterly	Not stated (suggested that redacted minutes could be circulated to all)	Membership set out in a document provided (not on the intranet)	No formal minutes but actions are recorded in an action plan (spreadsheet)which was provided (not on the intranet)
SLT (Senior Leadership Team)	Nothing provided	To consider significant reports and actions	Fortnightly (Thursday)	Indirect reporting to all staff (via minutes and action log on the intranet)	CMT and Service Area Heads	Held on the group's intranet page

Group Name	Terms of Reference	Purpose	Frequency of meetings	Reports to which Group / Officer?	Group Members	Minutes / Actions
Staff Alert Group	Nothing provided	To review and manage the staff alert list	Fortnightly	Health and Safety Committee	Not stated	Nothing provided
Staff Voice	Terms of Reference document provided (not on the intranet although aims, group format etc. are shown on the Group's intranet page which do not directly reflect the document provided)	To provide a voice for staff to feedback to Senior Management on corporate initiatives and projects that impact them. To support staff with their new ways of working To test, share and update corporate news with a sample of staff from across the organisation	Every six weeks	Workforce Steering Group	Membership recorded on the group's page on the intranet	Held on the group's intranet page

Group Name	Terms of Reference	Purpose	Frequency of meetings	Reports to which Group / Officer?	Group Members	Minutes / Actions
Sustainability Officers Group	Nothing provided	The Sustainability Officer Group (SOG) is a group of representatives responsible for delivering sustainability internally at the Council. Sustainability is about reducing our environmental impact on the natural and built environment and making social progress while at the same time enhancing our local economy. The SOG are tasked with delivering the Net Zero 2025 Plan that sits behind the Climate Change Action Programme (CCAP).	Every six weeks (although suggestion that this is currently on hold)	Not stated	Membership advised directly (not on the intranet)	Nothing provided
The Sustainability	Officers Group	has now been disbanded				

Ways of Working Group

No information provided

The intranet page has been set up and includes details of the group's purpose and membership along with copies of an agenda and minutes from meetings held in 2024

Group Name	Terms of Reference	Purpose	Frequency of meetings	Reports to which Group / Officer?	Group Members	Minutes / Actions
Workforce Steering Group (WSG)	Nothing provided	Operational working group whose overall scope is to ensure that workforce planning within the Council is service led within the corporate framework of the People Strategy.	Every six weeks	Not stated SLT when required	Membership recorded on the group's page on the intranet Suggestion that substitutes should be sent when members of the group are unable to attend	Nothing provided The intranet page now includes a place for minutes and agendas, with one agenda now being in place