

**AUDIT AND STANDARDS COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL CHAMBER -
COUNCIL OFFICES, LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, CB11 4ER, on
THURSDAY, 1 FEBRUARY 2024 at 7.00 pm**

Present: Councillor E Oliver (Chair)
Councillors H Asker, S Barker, A Dean, G Driscoll, C Fiddy,
M Foley (Vice-Chair), N Gregory and D McBirnie

Officers in attendance: D Hermitage (Strategic Director of Planning), P Holt (Chief Executive), N Katevu (Monitoring Officer and Head of Legal Services), C Shanley-Grozavu (Democratic Services Officer) and A Webb (Strategic Director of Finance, Commercialisation and Corporate Services)

Independent Person: D Pearl

AS21 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence had been received by Councillor Silcock, as well as G Butcher and D Paul (Independent Persons).

There were no declarations of interest.

AS22 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

Councillor Dean requested two errors be corrected within AS17 of the draft minutes; delivered was to be amended to deliver and resources to resourced.

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved as a correct record, subject to the minor amendments above.

AS23 EXTERNAL AUDIT OF OUTSTANDING ACCOUNTS

The Strategic Director of Finance, Commercialisation and Corporate Services provided an update on the Council's current position on the External Audit of Outstanding Accounts.

In response to questions from members, officers clarified:

- Whilst Uttlesford had more years of unaudited accounts than most Local Authorities, due to an internal issue which was resolved recently at a Standards Panel, the overall problem was due to national backlog, caused by a shortage of auditors and BDO leaving the market.
- The Strategic Director of Finance, Commercialisation and Corporate Services had requested that the Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA), who set the sector's audit fees, consider that a discount be given

to Local Authorities due to the delays, however this has yet to receive a reply. Members requested that this be followed up.

- The auditing fees had risen significantly in the last year by around 40 – 50%.
- The backlog of unaudited accounts had a detrimental impact to the organisation's reputation both publicly and as a perspective employer.

Members requested an update on the matter be brought to the next meeting.

The report was noted.

AS24

AMENDMENTS TO PROBITY IN PLANNING, PUBLIC ATTENDANCE AT PLANNING COMMITTEE, AND DELEGATIONS

The Strategic Director of Planning presented a report on proposed amendments to the Codes and Protocols (Part 5) and Responsibilities and Functions (Part 3) sections of the Council's Constitution in relation to the Planning Function.

Members discussed the proposed changes, and the following was noted:

- A Member who had no intention of sitting on the Planning Committee could meet with an applicant, agent or third parties in connection with a current or proposed planning application, but this was advised with caution. Good practice suggested that a Planning Officer be in attendance as a witness, or at least notified in writing of the discussions.
- There should not be any public criticism of Planning Officers, either verbally or in writing.
- Written Statements to planning committee should still be permitted for members, but not third parties.
- At the pre-application stage, a follow up letter shall be provided to an applicant, following any discussion with them about their proposed application.
- Members disagreed with the proposal to prohibit call-in for members that did not attend mandatory training, as this would be particularly disadvantageous to single-member wards. The Committee suggested that members shall have annual training, however non-attendance to these sessions would not preclude them from being able to call-in applications. This will be removed from the proposals.
- Under the new proposals, parties wishing to speak at Planning Committee would be entitled to up to 15 minutes for and against. In regard to objectors, there would up to 10 spaces available and members of the public would be expected to organise themselves as to how this time would be allocated between them. In exceptional circumstances, the Chair would have the discretion to extend the speaking times.
- The procedure for calling in Planning applications has always required members to state whether the application was to be called in if the officer recommendation was for approval or refusal. It was not possible to request both, just to have the application heard in public.
- References to the Director of Planning were to be updated to reflect the new job title of Strategic Director of Planning.

- When dealing with appeals against committee decisions, members expected that officers would put forward a robust defence, rather than seek to. Members requested the term “seek” be removed from the amendments. This change will be made.

Officers agreed to incorporate the feedback of the Committee into the proposed amendments and circulate a revised version for their approval before it is taken to Full Council.

RESOLVED: Subject to the approval of the revised draft by the Chair and Committee, members recommend to Full Council for approval the following amendments:

- Codes and Protocols (Part 5) section of the Constitution as set out in tracked changes at Appendix A:
 - i. 3.1 – ‘Pre-application Discussions’
 - ii. 3.2 – ‘Reports to Committee’
 - iii. 3.3 – ‘Committee Procedures and Decisions’ i
 - iv. 3.5 – Addition of ‘Appeals against committee decisions’ and to renumber thereafter
 - v. 3.6. – ‘Public Attendance at Committee Meetings’
 - vi. 3.7 – ‘Site Visits’
 - vii. 4.1 – ‘Member Training’
 - viii. 4.2 – ‘Monitoring of Decisions’
 - ix. Appendix 2 – ‘Procedure for Parish/Town Council Representatives/ Members of the Public Attending Meetings of the Planning Committee’
 - x. Protocol for Calling in Planning Applications
- Responsibilities and Functions (Part 3) section of the Constitution as set out in tracked changes at Appendix B to allow for the determination of s73 planning applications under delegated powers.

Meeting ended at 20:09