

Governance and Ethics Committee

Minutes - 10 December 2021

Attendance

Members of the Governance and Ethics Committee

Cllr John Reynolds (Chair)
Cllr Jonathan Crofts (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Dr Paul John Birch J.P.
Cllr Celia Hibbert
Cllr Milkinderpal Jaspal
Cllr Rita Potter (Virtually)
Cllr Sandra Samuels OBE
Cllr Wendy Thompson
Cllr Ellis Turrell (Substitute Member)

Employees

David Pattison	Chief Operating Officer
Jai Ghai (Virtually)	Head of ICT
Laura Noonan (Virtually)	Electoral Services Manager
Laura Gittos (Virtually)	Head of Governance
Jacob Stokes	Democratic Services Assistant

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 Apologies for absence**
Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Simon Bennett and Councillor Claire Darke.

Councillor Ellis Turrell attended the meeting as a substitute member for Councillor Bennett.
- 2 Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest.
- 3 Minutes of the previous meeting**
That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 22 October 2021 be approved as a correct record.

4 **Matters arising**

There were no matters arising.

5 **Update from the Monitoring Officer on Governance Matters**

David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer, provided an update on the work programme and other matters within the scope of the Governance and Ethics Committee's remit.

The Chief Operating Officer reported that preparations for the May 2022 election were already well underway, and a report would be brought to the next meeting. He noted that the overall canvass completion had increased, from 89% to 93.4% and an evaluation of the Annual Canvass would be brought to the next meeting.

The Chief Operating Officer noted that the final recommendations of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) would be published on 11 January 2022, and that the Council would be writing to the Secretary of State to request the fallow year be moved to 2024.

The Chief Operating Officer noted that proposed changes to the Constitution would be brought to the next meeting, and that the Council was working through two nominations for Freedom of the City.

The Chief Operating Officer noted that the Council was committed to a pragmatic approach in the face of rising COVID case numbers, but that formal meetings must take place in person following the expiration of the Coronavirus Act 2020 and subsequent court case. He reported that the government had not brought forward any proposals in relation to virtual meetings.

The Chief Operating Officer outlined several Code of Conduct matters that would be brought to the next meeting.

Councillor John Reynolds moved the recommendation within the report. Councillor Jonathan Crofts seconded the recommendation.

Responding to questions, the Chief Operating Officer confirmed that complaint hearings would take place shortly, and an update would be brought to the next meeting in relation to individual complaints.

The Chief Operating Officer confirmed that Code of Conduct training would be taking place in the New Year, following discussions with both parties.

Resolved:

1. That the update from the Monitoring Officer be noted.

6 **Freedom of the City**

David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer, noted that a Freedom of the City nomination had been brought forward. He noted that this was the highest award the city could bestow on an individual.

Councillor John Reynolds move the recommendation in the report. Councillor Jonathan Crofts seconded the recommendation.

The Committee expressed their support for the proposal and commended Lisa Potts for her bravery.

Resolved:

1. That Council be recommended to convene an extraordinary meeting to bestow the honour of Freedom of the City to Lisa Potts in recognition of her exceptional bravery in saving children in the City of Wolverhampton and charity work.

7 **Information presented to Independent Remuneration Panel**
David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer, presented the report on the information that would be presented to the Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP), following a request from the Governance and Ethics Committee at a previous meeting.

He noted that the current scheme for Councillor allowances expires in 2022, and therefore a new scheme needs to be implemented.

He reported that comparative data from other Local Authorities had been compiled and would be sent to the IRP, as would Councillor responses to a questionnaire on the current scheme. He noted that the current response rate was about 50%.

Councillor John Reynolds forwarded the recommendation in the report and noted that he had requested that data on Birmingham and Medway be excluded as these Local Authorities significantly skewed the comparative data. Councillor Jonathan Crofts seconded the recommendation.

The Committee discussed the information appended to the report.

After discussion, it was agreed that data from neighbouring County Councils and Birmingham would be included with any data sent to the IRP. It was agreed that further survey work on Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs) would be undertaken and included in any information sent to the IRP.

Councillor John Reynolds put forward a recommendation that the leadership of both parties be recommended to work together to ensure the IRP is provided with all the information it needs and that its outcome would be fair and equitable to both groups. Councillor Wendy Thompson seconded the recommendation.

The recommendation was carried.

Responding to questions, the Chief Operating Officer confirmed that the data on Birmingham and County Councils would be included in the information sent to the IRP. He noted that the deadline for Councillor responses to the questionnaire would be 31 December 2021, to prepare the information in advance of the meeting of the IRP.

The Chief Operating Officer noted that he was happy to include the suggestion that allowances be tied to yearly staff pay increases in the information sent to the IRP.

The Chief Operating Officer noted it was a sensible idea to provide further information on SRAs to the IRP but that it would be difficult to gain comparative data from other Local Authorities.

Resolved:

1. That the information to be presented to the Independent Remuneration Panel be noted.
2. That data on Member Allowances for County Councils and Birmingham City Council be included in the information sent to the Independent Remuneration Panel.
3. That additional details on Special Responsibility Allowances be provided to the Independent Remuneration Panel.

8 **Electoral Services - Outcomes from Association of Electoral Administrators health check and postal vote audit**

David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer, provided an update on the outcome of the external review of Electoral Services carried out by the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA).

The Chief Operating Officer noted that the AEA recognised that Wolverhampton had a strong Election Board but had made some recommendations. He noted that work on implementing these recommendations was already underway.

The Chief Operating Officer reported that an internal audit had also taken place to review the postal vote opening of the last election. He reported that the outcomes of the audit were positive and that actions had been identified to further strengthen processes. He noted that work was already underway to address these actions.

Laura Noonan, Electoral Services Manager, noted that the Electoral Services team had been constantly working on its improvement plan following the last election. She noted that the number of staff would be increased at the next election and training would be given to increase efficiency.

The Electoral Services Manager noted that a report on preparations for the May 2022 elections would be brought to the next meeting.

Councillor John Reynolds moved the recommendation in the report. Councillor Jonathan Crofts seconded the recommendation.

The Committee expressed thanks to the Electoral Services team for their hard work.

Responding to questions, the Chief Operating Officer reported that the review did not look at electronic voting as it was not covered by current legislation. He noted that there was a slight increase in turnout at the last election, and that the Council had contacted other Local Authorities to learn from their best practice and improve efficiency.

The Chief Operating Officer noted that postal voting redirections would be reviewed moving forward but stressed that fraud remained a tiny issue.

Resolved:

1. That the outcome of the external and internal review of Electoral Services functions be noted.

9 **Annual report on Code of Conduct matters**

This item was deferred to the next meeting.

10 **Councillor Enquiries - Update including ICT and Digital Developments Roadmap**

David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer, introduced a presentation on the Councillor Enquiries Unit (CEU) to highlight how issues identified at the last meeting would be tackled. He noted that Councillors would be involved heavily in any improvements made.

Laura Gittos, Head of Governance, updated Councillors on some key statistics from the CEU. She noted that 8% of enquiries were overdue and that a yearly review would be undertaken in future to gather data that would inform future decisions. She also noted that work had been undertaken with Wolverhampton Homes to reduce the number of overdue enquiries in that service.

The Head of Governance provided Councillors with an overview of the key actions taken. She noted that work was being done on the dashboard to ensure items are closed as quickly as possible and that all service standards would be reviewed in the New Year.

Jai Ghai, Head of Digital & IT, provided an update on the Digital Development of the CEU. He outlined short-, medium- and long-term actions to ensure the continued effectiveness and improvement of the CEU and the Councillor dashboard.

The Head of Digital & IT provided the Committee with some of the key achievements to date. He noted that a new directory was in the process of being configured and an update would be brought to a future meeting.

The Committee provided feedback on the CEU and offered suggestions on how the service could be improved.

The Chief Operating Officer noted that all feedback would be addressed. He assured Councillors that the CEU team was working hard to iron out any issues and speed up the process. He noted that data on enquiries by ward could be shared with Councillors.

The Head of Digital & IT informed the Committee that the team was happy to address any further training needs.

Councillor John Reynolds moved the recommendation. Councillor Jonathan Crofts seconded the recommendation.

Resolved:

1. That the presentation on the ICT and Digital Developments Roadmap of Councillor Enquiries be noted.