

Cllr Liz Wardlaw

Audit and Governance 30/09/24

#### Agenda Item 6

The Audit and Governance Committee is recommended to

1. Note the use of the Council's whistleblowing arrangements during 2023/24.
2. Endorse the proposals for reviewing and refreshing the Whistleblowing Policy.

In light of last weeks' press report in the Congleton Chronicle, of the launch of a police investigation into accusations of misconduct in public office by senior leaders at Cheshire East Council I welcome this timely report detailing the need for review and refresh of the whistleblowing policy. I wonder when this committee last received such a report?

I would remind this committee of my previous visit, asking for officers to expedite the reinstatement of a Staffing Committee with HR oversight to interrogate absence figures, exit interview statements and brighter futures concerns. No such action has yet been taken. Had this been in place there may have been an opportunity to intervene pre-emptively, if and when, red flags were presented.

I have been contacted very recently by someone asking for my help with a serious complaint. They have been intimidated and silenced within the current whistleblowing process and because of this I wonder if paragraph 28 on page 25 assumes greater significance.

Paragraph 28 states; Unless employees have confidence in the Council's whistleblowing arrangements, they are likely to stay silent. Such silence denies the organisation the opportunity to deal with a potentially serious problem before it causes real damage. The costs of such a missed opportunity can be great in terms of fines, compensation, higher insurance premiums, fraudulent cases and poor value for money.

Is it a lack of trust in our policy and systems that's brought Cheshire East Council to this point of police investigation and potential bankruptcy? Will this refreshing of policy adequately address the fears of the whistleblower and how will this committee ensure that it does?? Do those complaints listed in the table at paragraph 11 page 28 require fresh eyes and a second opinion as to what relevance they bare when the benefit of hindsight is applied. As this committee is uniquely empowered to take that retrospective review, I ask that you look forensically at those complaints and reassure Members that all appropriate actions were taken in a timely manner. You can see how this would dovetail with a staffing committee brief if there were such a thing.

I ask this committee not just to

"1. Note the use of the Council's whistleblowing arrangements during 2023/24.",

But to interrogate the table at paragraph 11, page 28 and establish who over the last 5 years, was complaining about what, and were there any running themes which did not meet the criteria for investigation at the time but may now.

Who knows, hindsight may add significance to reports that was not readily apparent at the time.

And whilst endorsing the need to refresh the policy be explicit in the need for the new policy to offer the best encouragement and safety for those who had need to use it.