

Audit and Standards Committee

Thursday 18 July 2024

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

John Bridgeman (Chair)
Councillor John Cooke
Councillor Bhagwant Singh Pandher
Councillor Ian Shenton
Robert Zara
Councillor Barbara Brown

Officers

Amy Bridgewater-Carnall, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Purnima Kandula, Director of Finance
Paul Clarke, Internal Audit Manager
Sarah Duxbury, Director of Strategy, Planning and Governance
Rob Powell, Executive Director for Resources

1. General

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting including Purnima Kandula, Director of Finance.

(1) Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Jo Barker and Bill Gifford.

Councillor Barbara Brown substituted for Councillor Feeney.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

There were none.

(3) Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 May 2024 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

2. Internal Audit Annual Report 2023-24

The Committee received a report summarising the results of internal audit work undertaken in the twelve months ending 31 March 2024.

Paul Clarke, Internal Audit Manager, introduced the report and highlighted the change in assurance level compared to last year's report, from substantial to moderate. He reminded Members that the Council was operating in a different environment financially.

Paul Clarke advised that the annual report brought together a summary of last year's work, based on the audit plan agreed at the start of the year. The plan had been agreed following discussions with management and officers about the risks being identified, a review of the risk registers and gave an opinion on overall governance of risk management.

The report gave an independent view through a series of internal audit assurance pieces of work. Paul Clarke explained that the Internal Audit team also provided advisory work in a number of areas including the implementation of new systems, certification work and grant claims submitted. This helped to give a broad overview of the controls in place to oversee work taking place in the Council. In addition, the report brought together opinions from recent inspections including Ofsted and HMICFRS.

In response to a query, Paul Clarke advised that 'limited assurance' would reflect a negative view of the control of an area, 'moderate assurance' implied that areas for improvement had been identified to management and 'substantial' assurance indicated that the area was performing well overall with strong controls. However, recommendations could still be proposed.

The Committee were signposted to the comparative opinions from 2022/2023 and 2023/24 within the report and the differing proportions were discussed. It was concluded that the changes illustrated the environment the Council were operating in, with difficult financial decisions having to be made. The Annual Governance Statement had also reflected the difficulty in not only producing a balanced budget but maintaining it. The trend in opinions from 2019 onwards was also illustrated on page 22 of the report and Members noted that this was often due to the different areas being audited year on year.

The Chair asked how officers could give assurance that they were being sufficiently critical and not influenced. Paul Clarke explained that his team provided an independent opinion and worked to professional standards. The auditors did not repeatedly work on the same areas to enable the relevant service to be viewed independently. In addition, the recent external assessment of internal audit was very good.

In response to a query from Robert Zara relating to the chart on page 16, Paul Clarke advised that the data relating to opinions was not weighted by the individual service's budget and was a snapshot of information at the time of auditing.

Councillor Ian Shenton noted that the audits undertaken each year differed, so caution was needed when interpreting the charts. However, this led him to query if more detail should be requested. Paul Clarke reiterated that the services audited covered a broad spectrum and gave assurance that actions were identified and taken to address any issues. He was comfortable that the level of assurance was appropriate for the size of organisation.

The process involved when agreeing action plans with managers was discussed, including the timescales and how outstanding issues remained on the audit system until completed. The Chair

suggested that if there was information indicating that the number of outstanding recommendations was increasing, this could be included in the annual report.

Councillor Barbara Brown asked for an opinion as to how impactful a change of government may be on these internal processes in local government. Paul Clarke explained that emerging issues, both international and national, were included in planning reports as these had the potential to be impactful. Although still in the early stages, officers would be monitoring any emerging changes over the next few months.

The Chair reiterated that the Internal Audit services worked to external standards and underwent rigorous evaluation by independent assessment. He hoped that this gave Members and the public assurance that the Council's internal audit processes were regulated robustly by an external body.

In conclusion, the Chair recognised that whilst the trends and opinions would fluctuate in local government, the Committee could be comforted that the Internal Audit team continued to do a good job. He asked Paul Clarke to pass the Committee's appreciation to the team and hope they reflected positively on the past year's work.

Resolved

That the Audit and Standards Committee considers and comments upon the results of internal audit work completed during 2023/2024.

3. Work Programme and Future Meeting Dates

The Committee considered the work programme attached and noted the future meeting dates as laid out.

4. Any Other Business

There was none.

5. Reports Containing Exempt or Confidential Information

It was resolved that members of the public be excluded from the remainder of the meeting as it would involve the disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

6. Internal Audit Update Report

Paul Clarke, Internal Audit Manager outlined the exempt report.

Resolved

That the recommendation be agreed as laid out.

7. Exempt Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The exempt minutes of the meeting held on 23 May 2024 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

The meeting rose at 10.45am

.....
Chair