

Audit Committee

Annual Report

Report of the Work of the Audit
Committee during 2023-24

Introduction

As the Chair of the Audit Committee I am very pleased to present this annual report which sets out the role of the Audit Committee and summarises the work and achievements we have undertaken as a Committee, during the financial year 2023/24.

Once again, and in common with the last few years, ongoing and regular assurance has been critical in the period and members of the committee and myself have received relevant and proportionate updates on key issues throughout the year as well as through the traditional audit committee cycle.

A positive development in the period was the appointment of a co-opted member or non executive member of the committee following a recruitment exercise. This has broadened the depth of knowledge and helped to supplement those skills already in place by members.

I hope that this Annual Report helps to demonstrate to Stockport residents and the Council's other stakeholders, that despite the continued challenges of the past twelve months, the vital role that is carried out by the Audit Committee and the contribution that it makes to the Council's overall governance arrangements is still evident. In addition, all meetings are webcast and are open to members of the public and other stakeholders to observe.

I would also like to express my thanks to those officers and members who have supported the work of this Committee by presenting, discussing, challenging and debating solutions to the ongoing risk, control and governance environment of the Council. Training and ongoing workshops that have been delivered in the year by Internal Audit and Finance services have been considered excellent by the attendees and I confirm the desire to have continuing training sessions in the future. This adds value to both new and established members.

The committee has been well attended this year and there has been constructive questioning by members throughout. Despite the challenges and ongoing pressures there have been limited areas of concern for the committee to note or report back on which is reassuring for the Council.

To conclude, during the 2023/24 financial year the council and its partners experienced ongoing and considerable changes to how they are governed and structured to deliver both ongoing and new services. This has presented significant challenges in governance, control and risk management processes to the Council, its members and its officers. The Audit Committee will continue with its aim of supporting the organisation to deliver services to all of our community.

COUNCILLOR Sue Glithero
Chair, Audit Committee

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Role of the Audit Committee

The Audit Committee operates in accordance with the “Audit Committees, Practical Guidance for Local Authorities” produced by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) in 2018. The Guidance defines the purpose of an Audit Committee as follows:

1. Audit Committees are a key component of an authority’s governance framework. Their function is to provide an independent and high-level resource to support good governance and strong public financial management.
2. The purpose of an Audit Committee is to provide those charged with governance, independent assurance on the adequacy of the risk management framework, the internal control environment and the integrity of the financial reporting and annual governance processes. By overseeing internal and external audit it makes an important contribution to ensuring that effective assurance arrangements are in place.

The role and responsibilities of the Audit Committee are set out in written terms of reference which are reviewed regularly by the Committee considering relevant legislation and recommended good practice. The terms of reference are published on the Council’s website, along with all agendas and supporting papers.

<http://democracy.stockport.gov.uk/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=147>

The Committee’s responsibilities include, but are not limited to, the following matters with a view to bringing any relevant issues to the attention of the Council:

- Oversight of the integrity of the Council’s financial statements
- Oversight of governance, risk management and internal control arrangements
- Oversight of the external auditors’ performance, objectivity, and independence
- Oversight of the performance of the internal audit function.

In order to help the Committee meets its oversight responsibilities, each year, management organise training sessions for the Committee on subject areas within their remit. A plan of workshop areas will be delivered 2024/25 which will benefit both established and newer audit committee members and other members. This includes the high risk area of Cyber Risk. Training on the preparation of the annual accounts was delivered along with regular updates on current issues to committee members by the Head of Internal Audit.

Meetings and Membership

During 2023/24, the Audit Committee comprised of six members and a co-opted (non-executive member).

The Committee met three times during the 2023/24 financial year. All meetings were face to face. Meetings were held in July, November and March. The meeting scheduled for September was cancelled as the annual statement of accounts were not ready at this point to sign off.

The Council have satisfied themselves that the current members of the Audit Committee are competent and have recent and relevant experience. Other regular attendees at Committee meetings were the Deputy Chief Executive (and Section 151 Officer), Assistant Director for Finance (Interim S151 Officer), Head of Internal Audit, Risk and Insurance, Director of STAR, Democratic Service managers and external auditors. In addition members of the audit and risk services team attended to observe.

Throughout the year, the Committee members periodically met without others present and also held separate private sessions with the Deputy Chief Executive (and Section 151 Officer) and the Head of Internal Audit, Risk and Insurance, allowing the Committee to discuss any issues in more detail directly.

How the Committee has discharged its responsibilities

Key Audit Committee activities	July 2023	Sept 2023	Nov 2023	Mar 2024
Financial Reporting				
Considered accounting policies 2023/24		-		•
Approved 2021/22 Annual Statement of Accounts		-	•	
2021/22 Annual Statement of Accounts Update Report	•	-	•	
2022/23 Annual Statement of Accounts Update Report			•	
Considered management letter of representation		-		
Considered report on debt write offs		-		
Update on CIPFA Financial Management Code (FM) compliance		-		
External Auditors				
Plan for year-end audit (Audit Strategy Memorandum)		-		
Review of External Audit findings in relation to statement of accounts (Audit Completion Report)		-	•	
Consider information from External Auditor in relation to enquiries of management and those charged with governance		-		
Review of External Audit progress reports and technical updates	•	-	•	•
Consider Annual Audit Report		-		•
Internal Audit				
Progress Report	•	-	•	•
Review of 2022/23 Anti-Fraud, Bribery & Corruption Report	•	-		
Review of internal audit reports and monitor progress in-year	•	-		
Review of Internal Audit performance indicators	•	-		
Approved 2024/25 Internal Audit Plans Audit Charter and resources		-		•
Review of PSIAS and Quality Improvement Programme		-		•
Summary of School findings from 2023/24 school audits	•	-		
Governance, Risk Management and Counter Fraud		-		

Key Audit Committee activities	July 2023	Sept 2023	Nov 2023	Mar 2024
Review of 2022/23 Head of Internal Audit Opinion & Annual Audit Report	•	-		
Review of Annual Report of the Chair of the Audit Committee 2022/23	•	-		
Updates on corporate risks and effectiveness of internal control systems (Risk Register Updates)	•	-	•	•
Approved 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement (AGS)	•	-		
Updates on progress against the 2022/23 AGS Action Plan	•	-	•	•
Arrangements for Completing the AGS 2023/24		-		•
Assurance Map 2024/25		-		•
Other matters – AC Members Skills Self Assessment	•	-		
Local Audit Update		-		
PSAA Appointment of External Auditor		-		
STAR Procurement Annual Update Report		-	•	
Local Audit Framework – Government Response		-		

Financial Reporting

The Committee is responsible for monitoring the integrity of the financial statements and reviewing the financial reporting judgements contained therein. The financial statements are prepared by a finance team with the appropriate qualifications and expertise.

In respect of the year to 31st March 2024, the Committee reviewed the 2021/22 financial statements. In carrying out these reviews, the Committee:

- Reviewed the appropriateness of the Council's accounting policies and monitored changes to and compliance with accounting standards.
- Discussed a report from the external auditors at that meeting identifying the significant accounting and judgemental issues that arose in the course of the audit.
- Considered the letter from the external auditors concerning enquiries of management and those charged with governance.

Councillors commended officers for preparing the Financial Statements to a high standard and for their presentation to the Council's External Auditors meaning that the Council had met the statutory financial closedown deadline for authorities for both 2021/22 and 2022/23 accounts.

External Auditors

The Audit Committee has responsibility for overseeing the Council's relationship with the external auditor including reviewing the quality and effectiveness of their performance, their external audit plan and process, their appointment and their audit fee proposals.

During the year the Council's external auditors, completed the audit during June and July and whilst they identified presentational and disclosure adjustments to the financial statements, and raised recommendations for management, these did not result in any changes to the draft financial statements. An unqualified audit opinion on the financial statements and value for money conclusion was given.

During 2023/24, Mazars have attended the Audit Committee meetings presenting progress reports and technical updates at each meeting.

Internal Audit

The Audit Committee reviewed and agreed the annual risk based internal audit plan which the Committee believes is appropriate to the scope and nature of the Council.

The Committee reviewed progress reports from the Head of Internal Audit at each meeting. These reports enable the Committee to monitor the progress of the internal audit plan, to discuss key findings and the plan to address them in addition to status updates of previous key findings.

The Audit Committee also discussed risk and control issues around high-risk activities including the MTFP, cost of living crisis and the Integrated Care System with professionals in Internal Audit, Finance and service areas.

The Committee considered the Internal Auditor's opinion on the adequacy and effectiveness of the control environment and reviewed the effectiveness of Internal Audit. The committee was satisfied that the internal audit function is working effectively, improves risk management throughout the Council and that the internal audit function is sufficiently resourced in addition to having the adequate level of experience and expertise.

Governance, Risk Management and Counter Fraud

The Audit Committee is responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of the Council's system of control which facilitates the effective exercise of the Council's functions and which includes arrangements for the management of risk.

The Audit Committee considered the effectiveness of the Council's risk management arrangements, the control environment, and associated anti-fraud and anti-corruption arrangements, through the review and approval of internal audit reports which focus on the areas of greatest risk to the Council, and the external audit reports, as part of both the year-end audit, all of which highlight the key areas of control weakness in the Council. Key weaknesses identified by either Internal Audit or External Audit are reported

in summary reports to the Audit Committee who sought assurance that action is being taken on risk related issues.

The Audit Committee monitored the effective development and operation of risk management strategies and policies, reviewing and challenging the content of the corporate risk register, associated arrangements and action plans.

The Committee oversaw the production of the Council's Annual Governance Statement (AGS) and continued to receive updates regarding progress on the AGS action plan, which is also reported to the Corporate Governance Group.

In addition, the Committee discussed the contents of the Annual Anti-Fraud, Bribery and Corruption Report and discussed early issues around governance arrangements in relation to restructuring of Adult Social Care and Children Social Care & Education and risks around the MTFP.

Plans for 2024/25

During 2023/24 the Audit Committee has consolidated the progress that has been made in previous years and going forward will look to develop further and become the recognised champion of good governance for the Council, helping to address many of the reported issues in what promises to be a very challenging and difficult environment. This is more important than ever given the systemic changes to the control and risk environment last year and into the future. Our priorities for 2024/25 are to continue to meet our duties as specified in the Constitution by developing and building on our current status as well as responding to and implementing any requirements arising from the Public Sector Internal Auditing Standards and the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. For 2024/25 we will:

- Continue to develop the Stockport Council Audit Committee to review all governance issues identified particularly as the council develops new ways to deliver services to meet its objectives in the MTFP.
- Develop the proactive nature of the Committee to facilitate actions by officers to ensure that risks are identified earlier in the process and remedial actions taken in a more timely fashion in response.
- Attend and contribute to risk workshops on specific projects that the committee feel they want further detail on.
- Continue to drive up standards and meet the demanding requirements of the external inspection and assessment regimes.
- Continue to review all governance arrangements to ensure the Council adopts the very latest best practice.
- Continue to support the work of Internal and External Audit and ensure appropriate responses are given to their recommendations.

- Ensure continued compliance with national Public Sector Internal Auditing Standards.
- Continue to help the Council to manage the risk of fraud and corruption by seeking assurances around staffing and resource numbers.
- Continue to develop the Stockport Council Audit Committee to review risk and partnership issues and safeguard public sector interests.
- Oversee the development of audit plans to evaluate and test controls in operation over complex project areas in Place and regeneration projects, Adult Social Care and Children Social Care and partnership working.
- Equip existing and any new Members (and co-opted members) to fulfil our responsibilities by providing more detailed and effective training on all key areas of responsibility including financial arrangements and risk management, governance and audit planning.
- Review and where agreed, implement best practice guidance identified in CIPFA's Position Statement on Audit Committees in Local Authorities and Police.

COUNCILLOR Sue Glithero

Chair, Audit Committee 2023/24