

Audit and Governance Committee Annual Report

2017-2018



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Statement from the Chairman of the Audit and Governance Committee

Effective corporate governance is a fundamental feature of any successful public sector organisation. The trend for strengthening governance arrangements has resulted in the joint Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) / Society of Local Authorities Chief Executives (SOLACE) good practice publication / guidance '*Delivering Good Governance in Local Government – 2016 Edition*'.

Being well managed and well governed are important attributes in helping the Council to improve performance and to reduce the risk of failing to achieve our objectives and providing good services to our community.

Audit Committees are widely recognised as a core component of effective governance, their key role is to independently oversee and assess the internal control environment, comprising governance, risk management and control and advise the Council on the adequacy and effectiveness of these arrangements.

In response to the above, the Council established an Audit and Governance Committee in line with CIPFA's guidance '*Audit Committees – Practical Guidance for Local Authorities and Police - 2013 Edition*'. The Committee's priorities are to maintain and improve our governance procedures and we are a major source of providing assurance on the Council's arrangements for managing risk, maintaining an effective control environment and reporting on internal and external audit functions and financial and non-financial performance. As Chairman, I also consider training a key priority for members in order for us to undertake our roles effectively.

The Committee undertakes a substantial range of activities and works closely with the Monitoring Officer, Chief Financial Officer (Section 151 Officer) and both internal and external auditors, in achieving our aims and objectives. We have developed and implemented a work plan for the year to enable key tasks to be considered, undertaken and delivered and to summarise, through our work plan we have:

- provided independent assurance on the adequacy of the governance, risk management framework and associated control environment;
- provided independent scrutiny of the Council's financial and non financial performance to the extent that it affects the Council's exposure to risk and weakens the control environment, and
- overseen the statutory financial reporting process.

In conclusion, the Committee has continued to make a positive contribution to the Council's overall governance and control arrangements, including risk management and is satisfied that the Council has maintained an adequate and effective internal control framework through the period covered by this report.

Councillor Andrew Gravells
Chairman of the Audit and Governance Committee

Background

Gloucester City Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards and that public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for and used economically, efficiently and effectively. In discharging this overall responsibility, the Council is responsible for putting in place the proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs.

A sound corporate governance framework involves accountability to service users, stakeholders and the wider community, within which the Council takes decisions and leads and controls its functions to achieve stated objectives and priorities. It thereby provides an opportunity to demonstrate the positive elements of the Council's business and to promote public confidence. Audit Committees are widely recognised as a core component of effective governance.

The Audit and Governance Committee is responsible for overseeing the Council's corporate governance, audit and risk management arrangements. The Committee is also responsible for approving the Statement of Accounts and the Annual Governance Statement. The Committee's specific powers and duties are set out in Council's Constitution.

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) issued guidance to local authorities to help ensure that Audit Committees are operating effectively¹. The guidance recommends that audit committees should report annually on how they have discharged their responsibilities. The key benefits to the Council of operating an effective Audit and Governance Committee are:

- Maintaining public confidence in the objectivity and fairness of financial and other reporting;
- Reinforcing the importance and independence of internal and external audit and any other similar review process;
- Providing a focus on financial reporting both during the year and at year end, leading to increased confidence in the objectivity and fairness of the financial governance arrangements operating within the Council;
- Assisting the co-ordination of sources of assurance and, in so doing, making management more accountable;
- Providing additional assurance through a process of independent and objective review, via the Internal Audit function;
- Raising awareness within the Council of the need for governance, including ethical governance, internal control and the implementation of audit recommendations; and
- Providing assurance on the adequacy of the Council's risk management arrangements, including the risk of fraud and irregularity.

¹ CIPFA – Practical Guidance for Local Authorities and Police, 2013

Membership and Meetings

The Committee has enjoyed the benefit of a reasonably settled membership over the last two years. This has helped to build and retain the expertise within the Committee, which has led to the Committee being able to demonstrate that they are operating within a best practice framework.

There are eight Members of the Audit and Governance Committee namely:

- Councillor Andrew Gravells (Chair)
- Councillor Dawn Melvin (Vice-Chair)
- Councillor Kevin Stephens
- Councillor Steve Morgan
- Councillor Declan Wilson
- Councillor Hannah Norman
- Councillor Deborah Smith
- Councillor David Norman MBE (ex-Officio)

During the 2017/18 Civic Year, the Audit and Governance Committee has met on five occasions, in accordance with its Programme of Work:

- 19th June 2017
- 18th September 2017
- 20th November 2017
- 22nd January 2018
- 12th March 2018

The Committee is also supported by Council Officers, principally the Monitoring Officer, Chief Financial Officer (S151 Officer), Head of Audit Risk Assurance (Chief Internal Auditor) and the Council's External Auditors (KPMG).

Work Programme

During this period, the Committee has assessed the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's risk management arrangements, control environment and associated counter fraud arrangements through regular reports from officers, the internal auditors (Audit Risk Assurance) and the external auditors (KPMG).

The Committee has sought assurance that action has been taken, or is otherwise planned by management to address any risk related issues that have been identified by the Committee themselves and the auditors during this period. The Committee has also sought to ensure that effective relationships continue to be maintained between the internal and external auditors and between the auditors and management. The specific work undertaken by the Committee during 2017/2018 is set out below.

Internal Audit Activity

With effect from May 2016, the Internal Audit service is provided by Audit Risk Assurance under a shared service agreement. The Committee has continued to monitor the work of Internal Audit and has:

- considered the effectiveness of the Audit Risk Assurance Shared Service;
- contributed towards, received and approved the Internal Audit Plan for 2017/18, specifically requesting an audit of the Streetcare contract management arrangements. The plan ensures that internal audit resources are prioritised towards those systems, processes and areas which are considered to be deemed high risk, or which contribute most to the achievement of the Council's corporate objectives;
- monitored the delivery of the annual Internal Audit Plan through regular update reports presented by the Head of Audit Risk Assurance;
- received, considered and monitored the results of internal audits performed and high risk activity identified, in respect of specific areas i.e. Marketing Gloucester Ltd, Officers Code of Conduct, Project Solace and the Streetcare contract and monitored the progress made by management, during the period, to address identified control weaknesses;
- considered the Council's overall counter fraud arrangements and response in the light of national guidance Fighting Fraud and Corruption Locally – The Local Government Counter Fraud and Corruption Strategy 2016 – 2019 which is supported by CIPFA Counter Fraud Centre;
- received updates on the outcomes of special investigations undertaken by Internal Audit, along with progress made in the investigation of queries arising as a result of the National Fraud Initiative (NFI) data matching exercise; and
- considered the Internal Audit Annual Report of the Head of Audit Risk Assurance, which provided a satisfactory opinion on the effectiveness of the Council's internal control environment and summarised the internal audit activity upon which that opinion was based. The Committee can therefore take reasonable assurance that there is a generally sound system of internal control in place at the Council.

Activity relating to Treasury Management

During the year, the Audit and Governance Committee:

- approved the half yearly Treasury Management activity reports and received, considered and recommended to full Council for approval the Treasury Management Strategy, the Annual Investment Strategy and Minimum Revenue Provision Policy Statement 2017/18. These reports set the Council's prudential indicators for 2017/18 – 2019/20 and the treasury strategy for these periods. This is a key area for the Committee to monitor and they continue to consider and recommend to full Council for approval amendments to the investment strategy in response to constantly changing market conditions.

External Audit Activity

The External Audit service is provided by KPMG. The Committee has monitored the work of the Council's external auditors and has:

- considered and approved the External Audit Plan 2016/17 which sets out external audit's work to be undertaken on the accounting statements and to provide a value for money opinion. It reported on risks they have identified which would receive attention during the audit, the results of interim work, which did not reveal any material weaknesses, and the dates for the completion of the audit;
- considered the External Audit Report 2016/2017 i.e. 'Report to those charged with Governance' in accordance with the requirements of International Standard on Auditing 260 (ISA) which summarises the key findings arising from their audit work in relation to the Council's financial statements and work to support the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources (Value for Money (VFM) conclusion). The audit concluded with an unqualified opinion on the financial statements and VFM conclusion;
- considered and approved the Statement of Accounts for 2016/17 of the Council and received KPMG's audit opinion. The S151 Officer together with the Chairman of the Committee signed a letter of representation on behalf of the Committee and Council to KPMG, to enable the 'unqualified' opinion to be issued;
- considered and accepted the Annual Audit Letter 2016/17. This letter summarises the outcome from audit work at the Council during this period;
- received and considered the Annual Report on grant claims and returns 2016/17. This report summarises the results of the work undertaken on the Council's 2016/2017 grant claims and returns; and
- received and considered regular external audit progress reports.

Risk Management Activity

During the year the Committee has:

- received regular risk management update reports (including the review of the strategic risk register), and being presented with the actions taken by the Council to identify and address strategic risks.

Corporate Governance

In relation to corporate governance the Committee:

- considered and approved the Council's 2016/2017 Annual Governance Statement and Local Code of Corporate Governance. The Committee also reviewed the progress made by management to address the significant issues identified in the 2016/17 Annual Governance Statement Improvement Plan;
- Considered the report of the Head of Policy and Resources concerning the annual review of the Council's Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (2000) (RIPA) Procedural Guide; and

- considered the standards issues during 2017/2018 relating to the Members Code of Conduct, Local Government Ombudsman decisions and the complaints procedures.

Other

In addition, the Committee considered:

- an update following the decision of the Information Commissioner's Office to issue the City Council with a Monetary Penalty Notice;
- the report of the Cabinet Member for Performance and Resources outlining the additional Discretionary Rate Relief Scheme;
- the report by the Head of Policy and Resources on the City Council's preparedness for the Introduction of Universal Credit;
- the verbal update by the Head of Policy and Resources on the governance arrangements on the property investment strategy; and
- the update provided on the review on the accuracy rate of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support assessments and the impact upon customers.

Training

The following training was made available to Members of the Audit and Governance Committee in 2017/18 to support the Committee in discharging its responsibilities:

- Chair and Vice Chair attendance at a TIAA (The Internal Audit Association) client event named 'Audit Committee Chairs Conference' covering Cyber Security, Whistleblowing, Effective Governance and Risk Management, on 8th February 2018;
- Code of Conduct refresher training for all Councillors scheduled for 29th March 2018, which will be of relevance in respect of the Committee's role in relation to ethics and behaviours; and
- 121 Officer briefings to Chair and Vice Chair of the Audit and Governance Committee as required throughout 2017/2018.

Future Work

During 2018/19, the Audit and Governance Committee will continue with the existing aim of being an important source of assurance about the organisation's arrangements for managing risk, maintaining an effective control environment, and reporting on financial and other performance.

In particular, they will continue to support the work of Internal and External Audit and ensure appropriate responses are given to their recommendations and continue to monitor any actions arising from the Annual Governance Statement action plan 2017/2018, to ensure the Council's governance arrangements are effective.

In addition, with risk management being a key contributor to good governance the Committee will be seeking independent assurance from internal audit that risk management continues to be embedded within the Council's key business processes.

Conclusion

The Audit and Governance Committee has had a successful year in providing the Council with assurances on the strength of its governance and stewardship arrangements and in challenging those arrangements.

The Committee's work programme is a dynamic programme and will continue to be reviewed to ensure the Committee maximises its contribution to the governance and control framework at the same time managing agendas to ensure that all meetings are focused on the key issues.

Details of all reports as noted within this report can be found at <http://democracy.gloucester.gov.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CId=487&Year=0>.