

Cherwell District Council

Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee held at 39 Castle Quay, Banbury, OX16 5FD, on 18 March 2026 at 6.30 pm

Present:

Councillor Simon Lytton (Chair)
Councillor David Rogers (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Frank Ideh
Councillor Nicholas Mawer
Councillor Robert Parkinson
Councillor Dom Vaitkus
Nelly Lukwo, Independent Person, no voting rights
Sarah Thompson, Independent Person, no voting rights

Apologies for absence:

Councillor Besmira Brasha

Also Present:

Councillor Lesley McLean, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance, Property & Regeneration
Councillor Chris Brant, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services

Also Present Virtually:

Councillor Ian Middleton
Ed Lambert-Martin, Internal Audit - Veritau
Stuart Limb, Internal Audit - Veritau
Mark Bartlett, External Audit, Bishop Fleming

Officers:

Joanne Kaye, Head of Finance and Deputy S151 Officer
David Peckford, Assistant Director Planning
Jacey Scott, Head of Revenues and Benefits
Patrick Davis, Democratic and Elections Officer

Officers Attending Virtually:

Claire Cox, Assistant Director Human Resources
Ed Potter, Assistant Director Environmental Services
Celia Prado-Teeling, Performance Team Leader
Ruth Wooldridge, Health and Safety Manager
Mary Denedo, Strategic Finance Business Partner

72 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

73 **Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 14 January 2026 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

74 **Chair's Announcements**

There were no Chair's announcements.

75 **Requests to Address the Meeting**

There were no requests to address the meeting.

76 **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

77 **Health and Safety Report Quarter 3 2025/26**

The Assistant Director of Human Resources submitted a report to provide the Committee with an update on the Council's Health and Safety performance for Quarter 3 of the 2025/26 financial year.

In introducing the report, the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services explained that the majority of health and safety incidents involved Environmental Services as this was the highest risk area within the Council. To help mitigate, the Health and Safety Manager has been spending three days per week at the depots to support their safe operations.

In response to a question regarding the completion of mandatory online health and safer training across the council, the Assistant Director of Human Resources advised that managers were able to monitor their team's training progress and confirmed that staff were able to complete the training modules in work time.

The Committee was advised that in autumn 2025 a HSE Inspector had visited the Castle Quay offices to look at how asbestos was managed in council buildings. This is a UK wide initiative with HSE Inspectors visiting local authorities across the country as there is concern about the amount of asbestos present in public buildings.

In response to a question regarding the policy of reversing large recycling vehicles, the Assistant Director of Environmental Services explained that it was expected there would always be someone behind the lorry to help the driver to reverse. Any breach of this policy was taken extremely seriously and could lead to disciplinary action.

Resolved

- (1) That the Health and Safety Report Quarter 3 2025/26 be noted.

78 Risk Based Verification Policy

The Assistant Director Finance submitted a report to seek approval of the reviewed Risk Based Verification (RBV) Policy for 2025/26.

In introducing the report, the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Property and Regeneration outlined the Risk Based Verification process. The policy enabled low risk claims to be processed more quickly with minimal disruption and freed up resources to be targeted at the higher risk claims which aligned with best national practice.

In response to a request for comparative data with previous years it was agreed that this would be circulated to Committee members after the meeting.

Resolved

- (1) That the report be noted.
- (2) That the Risk Based Verification policy for the financial year 2026/27 be approved.

79 Risk Monitoring Report Quarter 3 2025-26

The Head of the Chief Executive's Office submitted a report to update the Committee on how well the Council was managing its strategic risks.

In introducing the report, the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services advised that there was one score change within the Leadership Risk Register and this related to risk L05 - Planning Applications for Major Development which had been increased from Medium to High.

In response to a question regarding the potential for incorporating additional performance metrics to monitor the performance of the Castle Quay shopping centre, the Committee was advised that any changes to the performance measures would need to be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as it was responsible for the monitoring, reviewing and scrutinising of council services. If agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee this would be included in its recommendations to Executive.

In response to a query regarding the risks associated with the Cherwell District Council's Local Plan (risk LA3), the Assistant Director of Planning explained that a recent interim report from the Oxford Growth Commission had highlighted potential additional housing requirements in the Oxford area that would possibly impact on the District's own Local Plan. Central government had not yet responded to the Commission's report.

In response to a question regarding the increase from medium to high for Planning Applications for Major Developments (risk L05), the Assistant Director of Planning explained that this was largely due to the fact that the data used to measure performance against the 10% threshold for applications overturned at appeal, came from the 2022-2024 period which contained a larger number of these type of decisions. The next reporting period was likely to provide a similar outcome as it would also include legacy data. The Assistant Director of Planning advised that transformation and improvement work was ongoing.

Resolved

- (1) That the Risk Monitoring Report for Quarter 3 2025-26 be noted.
- (2) That the proposal to add additional performance indicators relating to Castle Quay shopping centre, be referred to Overview and Scrutiny Committee for review and possible onward recommendation to Executive.

80 Draft Annual Report of the Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee 2025/26

The Assistant Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer) submitted the draft annual report of the Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee for the financial year 2025/26. It had been prepared to enable the Committee to demonstrate to Council how it had fulfilled its terms of reference.

In introducing the report, Ed Lambert-Martin, Audit Manager at Veritau, provided the Committee with details on how it had discharged its duties during the 2025/26 period through the reports it had reviewed. Members were advised that Veritau planned to carry out a self-assessment exercise in the next financial year to review the effectiveness of the Committee against the CIPFA position statement.

Resolved

- (1) That the draft annual report be finalised in preparation for the Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee Chair's presentation to Council.

81 **Internal Audit Progress Report 2025/26**

The Assistant Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer) submitted a report which provided an update on the delivery of the 2025/26 internal audit work programme up to the end of February 2026.

In introducing the report, Ed Lambert-Martin, Audit Manager at Veritau explained that three audits had been finalised since this was reported to the Committee at their meeting 19 November 2025. These were IT Asset Management, Cyber Security user awareness training and utilities management follow up.

In response to a question regarding the delayed implementation of the new card payment system, the Committee was advised that a new system had now been procured but it was still in the process of being installed. Veritau was waiting for an update on the revised timescale for this.

In response to a question regarding an action raised as part of the utilities management audit in particular an expected credit for utility payments relating to the Banbury Museum, the Audit Manager at Veritau explained that an external report commissioned by the Museum's Trust had been delayed. Follow up would continue until a conclusion was reached.

Resolved

- (1) That the progress made in delivering the 2025/26 internal audit work programme be noted.

82 **Internal Audit Work Programme 2026/27 and 2027/28**

The Assistant Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer) submitted a report which provided the Committee with the programme of internal audit work to be undertaken in 2026/27 along with an indicative work programme for 2027/28.

In introducing the report, Ed Lambert-Martin, Audit Manager at Veritau explained that due to the ongoing process of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), it was prudent to consider assurance requirements and priorities over the next two financial years rather than just the forthcoming period.

In response to a question regarding the impact of LGR on the internal audit work programme in particular the potential for priorities to change, the Audit Manager at Veritau advised that the focus may change but this was dependent on the outcome of the LGR decision.

Resolved

- (1) That the 2026/27 internal audit work programme be approved and the indicative 2027/28 internal audit work programme be noted.

83

Counter Fraud Progress Report

The Assistant Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer) submitted a report which provided an update on counter fraud work undertaken so far in 2025/26.

In introducing the report, Stuart Limb, Corporate Investigations Manager at Veritau highlighted that Veritau continued to provide fraud awareness training. In November, training had been presented to the Corporate Leadership Team and a further session was planned with the Executive Leadership team.

The Corporate Investigations Manager confirmed the volumes of referrals and investigations carried out was normal for the size of the council. In addition to its own referrals, Veritau shared fraud alerts from the National Anti-Fraud Network with relevant council departments.

Resolved

(1) That the update on the counter fraud progress report 2025/26 be noted.

84

Counter Fraud Plan Report

The Assistant Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer) submitted a report to update the Committee on the counter fraud plan for 2026/27.

In introducing the report, Stuart Limb, Corporate Investigations Manager at Veritau provided an overview of the plan, which was largely informed by the CIPFA Code of Practice on Managing the Risk of Fraud and Corruption that identified the main areas of risk.

In response to a question regarding the level of reactive investigations in relation to proactive ones, the Corporate Investigations Manager at Veritau explained that it was important that referrals from officers were followed up in a timely manner. They were treated as a priority to ensure that staff were motivated to continue making appropriate referrals.

In response to a question about the use of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning to detect fraud the Committee was advised that at present appropriate software was not yet available but technology continued to develop.

Resolved

(1) That the 2026/27 Counter Fraud Plan be approved.

85

2024/25 Final Statement of Accounts

The Assistant Director of Finance (S151 Officer) submitted a report to ask the Committee to note the final audit results and annual report of the council's external auditors in relation to the 2024/25 statement of accounts

In introducing the report, the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Property and Regeneration confirmed that the 2024/25 statement of accounts had been published by the statutory deadline of the 28 February 2026 with a disclaimer opinion. There had been one further change from the draft accounts that had been presented on the 19 November 2025, which related to the Council's loan to Crown House Banbury Limited.

In response to a query regarding the timeframe for moving to an Unqualified opinion on the financial statements, the Director at Bishop Fleming advised that the roadmap was in place and was on schedule for the 2026/27 final accounts.

Resolved

- (1) That the final 2024/25 Statement of Accounts and the associated changes between the draft and final versions be noted.
- (2) That the final letter of representation for 2024/25 be noted.
- (3) That the final Auditor's Annual Report and Audit Completion Report from the council's external auditors, Bishop Fleming, be noted.

86

External Audit Plan 2025/26

The Assistant Director Finance (S151 Officer) submitted a report outlining the External Audit Plan for 2025/26 from the Council's external auditors, Bishop Fleming LLP

Mark Bartlett, Director at Bishop Fleming explained that whilst the audit plan was largely similar to previous years, a change had been introduced relating to the frequency of the valuation of land and buildings following instructions from HMRC. The Committee was also updated on the process of moving to an Unqualified opinion by 2026/27.

Resolved

- (1) That the External Audit Plan for 2025/26 be noted.

87

Treasury Management Report - Q3 2025/26 (Dec 2025)

The Assistant Director Finance (S151 Officer) submitted a report which provided information on treasury management performance and treasury management policy for Quarter 3 2025-26 as required by the Treasury

Management Code of Practice. The report set out that the Council had operated within the Treasury and Prudential indicators as set out in the Treasury Management Strategy Statement 2025-26.

In response to a question regarding the reduction in the capital expenditure forecast due to the re-profiling of the spend, the Head of Finance explained that this had included the removal of the proposed new depot at Bicester from the programme to pipeline. The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Property and Regeneration confirmed that the reprofiling was not due to potential changes stemming from Local Government Reorganisation but was a result of the auditing of the capital programme to ensure that items included in the programme were deliverable.

In response to a request for the current interest rate percentage to be included in the borrowing table, the Head of Finance agreed that this would be added to future reports.

Resolved

- (1) That the Treasury Management Q3 2025/26 report be noted.

88

2025/26 Accounting Policies

The Assistant Director Finance (S151 Officer) submitted a report which asked the Committee to review and approve the Accounting Policies for inclusion in the 2025/26 Statement of Accounts which were due to be published by 30 June 2026.

In introducing the report, the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Property and Regeneration explained that the main change related to the methodology used for the valuation of the non-investment operational assets that had been introduced to ensure that asset values were kept materially accurate.

Resolved

- (1) That the accounting policies as recommended by the Chief Finance Officer be approved.

The meeting ended at 9.00 pm

Chair:

Date: