

Cherwell District Council

Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee held at Bodicote House, Bodicote, Banbury, Oxon OX15 4AA, on 29 May 2024 at 7.30 pm

Present:

Councillor Nick Cotter (Chairman)
Councillor David Rogers (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Jean Conway
Councillor Ian Middleton
Councillor Alisa Russell
Councillor Dom Vaitkus
Harry Lawson (Independent Person, no voting rights)
Sarah Thompson (Independent Person, no voting rights)

Substitute Members:

Councillor Barry Wood (In place of Councillor Nicholas Mawer)

Apologies for absence:

Councillor Nicholas Mawer
Councillor Sean Woodcock

Also Present:

Councillor Lesley McLean, Portfolio Holder for Finance and Performance
Connor Munro, External Audit, Bishop Fleming

Also Present Virtually:

Mark Bartlett, External Audit Manager, Bishop Fleming

Officers:

Michael Furness, Assistant Director Finance & S151 Officer
Joanne Kaye, Head of Finance and Deputy Section 151 Officer
Shahin Ismail, Interim Head of Legal Services & Deputy Monitoring Officer
Jacey Scott, Head of Revenues and Benefits
Sandra Ganpot, Benefits Services and Performance Manager
Natasha Clark, Governance and Elections Manager

Officers Attending Virtually:

Mona Walsh, Assistant Director - Property
Sarah Cox, Chief Internal Auditor

Katherine Kitashima, Audit Manager (Internal Audit)
Alex Rycroft, Strategic Finance Business Partner

3 **Welcome and Introductions**

The Chairman welcomed Members and officers to the first meeting of the Committee of the 2024/25 municipal year and invited all attendees to introduce themselves.

4 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

5 **Petitions and Requests to Address the Meeting**

There were no petitions or requests to address the meeting.

6 **Minutes**

The Minutes of the meetings of the Committee held on 20 March 2024 and 22 May 2024 were agreed as correct records and signed by the Chairman.

7 **Chairman's Announcements**

There were no Chairman's announcements.

8 **Annual Report of the Chief Internal Auditor 2023/24**

The Chief Internal Auditor submitted a report which presented the annual report of the Chief Internal Auditor, summarising the outcome of the Internal Audit work in 2023/24, and providing an opinion on the Council's System of Internal Control.

With regards the rating of "satisfactory", the Chief Internal Auditor explained that it was very rare to the top rating to be awarded. The response to reports was considered more important than the rating and the Internal Audit team had received strong Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer and response to reports and recommendations.

In response to Members' comments regarding the Utilities Management 23/24 audit, the Assistant Director Property confirmed that work was underway and on target to meet the actions arising from the audit.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman thanked the Chief Internal Auditor and her team for their hard work and excellent service to Cherwell District Council.

Resolved

- (1) That, having given due consideration, the Annual Report of the Chief Internal Auditor 2023/24 be endorsed.

9 **Internal Audit Work Programme 2024/25**

The Assistant Director Finance submitted a report to present the programme of internal audit work to be undertaken in 2024/25, and sought the Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee's approval of this programme.

The report also presented the council's proposed internal audit charter, which sets out the internal audit service's purpose, mandate, and position within the organisation, and sought approval of the charter.

In response to a question regarding the valuation of Castle Quay, the Assistant Director undertook to provide a response in due course.

Resolved

- (1) That the 2024/25 internal audit work programme be approved.
- (2) That the proposed internal audit charter be approved.

10 **Housing Benefit Subsidy Audit 2020/2021**

The Assistant Director Finance submitted a report to provide the final position of the Housing Benefit subsidy claim audit for the financial year 2020/21.

Resolved

- (1) That the report be noted.

11 **Treasury Management Report - Annual Performance Report 2023/24**

The Assistant Director Finance submitted a report to present information on treasury management performance and compliance with treasury management policy for 2023-24 as required by the Treasury Management Code of Practice. The report also demonstrated that all treasury management activities undertaken during the financial year 2023-24 complied with the CIPFA Code of Practice, the council's approved Treasury Management Strategy and that all Prudential Indicators were met during the reporting period.

Resolved

- (1) That the Treasury Management Annual Performance Report be noted.
- (2) That the report be recommended to Council to note.

12 **Annual Governance Statement 2023-24**

The Assistant Director Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer submitted a report which set out the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) for the Council for 2023-24 for approval. The AGS summarised the key governance issues for the Council and the actions required to address these. The AGS was required to be approved by those charged with governance, the Accounts Audit & Risk Committee, under the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015.

Resolved

- (1) That the Annual Governance Statement 2023-24 be approved.
- (2) That the Leader of the Council in 2023-24 and the Chief Executive be authorised to sign the Annual Governance Statement on behalf of Cherwell District Council.

13 **Audit Completion Certificates 2020/21 and 2021/22**

The Assistant Director Finance submitted a report which presented the audit completion certificates for the years 2020/21 and 2021/22.

Resolved

- (1) That the formal completion of the audits for the years ended 31 March 2021 and 31 March 2022 and the associated audit completion certificates be noted.

14 **External Audit Plan 2023/24 - Bishop Fleming**

The Assistant Director Finance submitted a report to present the External Audit Plan for 2023/24 from the Council's external auditors, Bishop Fleming LLP.

In response to Members' questions regarding the change of external auditor, the Assistant Director Finance explained that Bishop Fleming had been appointed as the Council's external auditor by Public Sector Audit Appointments for 2023/24 – 2027/28 replacing Ernst Young.

In introducing the plan, the External Audit Team Manager explained that that the timeline may slip due to the announcement last week that the General Election would take place on 4 July.

In response to Members' questions regarding the external audit fee, the External Audit Team Manager explained that this would be submitted to a future Committee meeting following discussions with the Assistant Director Finance and Head of Finance.

Resolved

- (1) That the External Audit Plan for 2023/24 be noted.

15 **Work Programme**

The Head of Finance updated the Committee on the work programme and confirmed that Treasury Management training would take place following the meeting on 17 July.

Resolved

- (1) That the work programme update be noted.

16 **Urgent Business - Whistleblowing Policy**

The Chairman advised that there was one item of urgent business, Whistleblowing Policy.

The Assistant Director Law and Governance submitted a report which sought approval of a Whistleblowing Policy and the mechanisms by which the policy and any complaints made under the policy would be managed and reported on.

In introducing the report, the Interim Head of Legal Services explained that it was proposed that the policy should sit with the Monitoring Officer, with reporting on numbers of complaints and any actions taken, to sit with the Accounts Audit and Risk Committee, as part of its overall remit for governance assurance.

In response to Members' questions regarding differences between the current and revised policies, the Interim Head of Legal Services explained that, as the law had not changed, there were no significant changes rather it had been made clearer.

Resolved

- (1) That the Whistleblowing Policy be approved.
- (2) That the ownership of the policy through the Monitoring Officer be approved.

- (3) That the publication of the policy on the intranet, with appropriate staff communications to raise awareness, be approved.
- (4) That the Monitoring Officer be requested to provide anonymised reports of any whistleblowing complaints once concluded and actions taken to resolve them to the Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee.

The meeting ended at 9.20 pm

Chairman:

Date: