

Audit Committee

14 April 2025

Part 1 - Public

Recommendation to Council



Report Author

Cllr Robert Cannon

Annual Report of the Chairman of the Audit Committee

1 Summary and Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report is produced to inform Council on how the Audit Committee has provided 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. It is recommended that the Audit Committee agree that this report is presented to Council to support this assurance.

2 Corporate Strategy Priority Area

- 2.1 Efficient services for all our residents, maintaining an effective council.
- 2.2 This report provides a commentary on how the Audit Committee contribute towards ensuring an effective council.

3 Recommendations

- 3.1 Members of the Audit Committee are **REQUESTED** to:
- 1) **CONSIDER** this report, making any amendments as necessary; and
 - 2) **RECOMMEND** that it is presented to Full Council to provide 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.

4 Introduction and Background

- 4.1 The Accounts & Audit (England) Regulations impose a responsibility on a local authority "for ensuring that the financial management of the body is adequate and effective and that the body has a sound system of internal control which facilitates the effective exercise of that body's functions and which includes arrangements for the management of risk."

- 4.2 The Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy (CIPFA) sets out the role of Audit Committees in their Practical Guidance for Local Authorities 2018. This states that "the purpose of the Audit Committee is to provide to 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."
- 4.3 The Audit Committee comprises seven Members and is politically balanced. The Terms of Reference for the Committee are set out in Part 3 of the Constitution – Responsibilities (Responsibility for Council Functions).
- 4.4 The Committee has four planned meetings each year at which reports submitted by Officers and the External Auditor are considered. By consideration of these reports and matters raised within them it is considered that the Audit Committee fulfils the core functions of an Audit Committee as set out in the CIPFA Guidance and is able to give independent assurance to the Council to meet the requirements of the Accounts & Audit (England) Regulations.
- 4.5 The core functions of the Audit Committee are dealt with in the following paragraphs.

5 Assurance Statements

- 5.1 In April 2024 the Committee considered and endorsed management responses to Informing the Audit Risk Assessment 2023/24 in respect of the audit of the financial statements.
- 5.2 In July 2024 the Committee endorsed the revised Local Code of Corporate Governance that sets out how the Council will comply with the principles of the 2016 CIPFA/SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives) "Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework 2016". Members noted that there were no substantive changes proposed to the Code, however it had been revised to reflect a small number of minor updates within the past year including the following:
- The Procurement Partnership Agreement entered into by the Council on 1 May 2024
 - The inclusion of reference to the Statutory Officers' Meetings
 - The Climate Change Action Plan for 2023 – 2024
 - A review of the arrangements for dealing with Members Code of Conduct complaints (agreed by Council in October 2023)
- 5.3 During discussion of the Local Code of Corporate Governance, Members of the Committee suggested that consideration be given to Grant Thornton undertaking

a review of the Committee's effectiveness to provide additional assurance of the effectiveness of the Committee.

- 5.4 The Committee is required to consider and approve the contents of the Annual Governance Statement (AGS), and this also took place in July 2024. The AGS (which accompanies the Statement of Accounts but is not part of the Accounts) explains how the Council complies with the Local Code of Corporate Governance and the Accounts & Audit Regulations, assessing and demonstrating that there is a sound system of corporate governance throughout the organisation.
- 5.5 The AGS is supported by signed Assurance Statements provided by members of the core Management Team and the three statutory officers and is prepared by way of a self-assessment questionnaire and supporting evidence. No significant concerns were raised as a result of this exercise. The Statement was signed by the most senior Member and officer of the Council on 31 May 2024.

6 Internal Audit Function

- 6.1 The Audit Committee has a role in relation to the Council's Internal Audit function to: -
- Oversee its independence, objectivity, performance and professionalism.
 - Support the effectiveness of the Internal Audit process.
 - Promote the effective use of Internal Audit within the assurance framework.
- 6.2 As Members are aware, the Internal Audit function is carried out by Kent County Council under a delegation arrangement. This arrangement gives the function greater resilience and access to a broader range of skills and expertise. It was pleasing to hear that the Internal Audit and Counter Fraud team won the "Excellence in Public Sector Audit" at the Public Sector Finance Awards.
- 6.3 The Audit Committee received a number of reports to oversee the role of the Internal Audit function.
- 6.4 The professional standards for Internal Audit require the Chief Audit Executive to establish a risk-based plan to determine the priorities of the internal audit activity, consistent with the organisation's goals.
- 6.5 The Annual Internal Audit and Fraud Plan for 2024/25 was presented to the Audit Committee in April 2024 and Members were able to consider the content prior to recommending approval.
- 6.6 In July 2024 the Audit Committee was presented with a report from the Chief Audit Executive as a summary of supporting evidence to the AGS. This report gave the Chief Audit Executive's opinion that the Council had maintained an adequate and effective internal control environment. The CAE stated that "*Substantial*

Assurance can be assigned in relation to the Council's corporate governance, risk management and internal control arrangements".

- 6.7 The Audit Committee is required to consider the effectiveness of Internal Audit on an annual basis. This review was based upon evidence produced and the view of Management Team. A report was submitted to the Audit Committee in July 2024 which reported that Management Team opinion on the effectiveness of Internal Audit was "Good". Members considered the findings of this review and endorsed the opinion that the effectiveness of Internal Audit was "Good".
- 6.8 As part of the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS), Internal Audit is required to maintain a Quality Assurance and Improvement Programme (QAIP), which is overseen by the Audit Committee. The QAIP summarises all of the measures in place to enable an evaluation of the internal audit activity's conformance with the PSIAS. The programme also assesses the efficiency and effectiveness of the internal audit activity and identifies opportunities for improvement and learning for the team.
- 6.9 The PSIAS require an independent external quality assessment (EQA) to be undertaken at least every five years. The most recent independent EQA was undertaken in February to March 2021 and an improvement plan developed in response to the recommendations raised in the assessment.
- 6.10 The Internal Audit Charter, which is reviewed against professional standards, is a key document in the delivery of Internal Audit setting out the purpose, authority and responsibilities of the service which was subject to review at the April 2024 meeting of the Audit Committee.
- 6.11 The Internal Audit Charter gives the Audit and Assurance Manager (on behalf of the Chief Audit Executive) the right to raise issues directly with the Chair of the Audit Committee if considered necessary. This would only occur in circumstances where the Audit and Assurance Manager considered that the Chair of the Audit Committee needed to be made aware of significant assurance concerns. There have not been any instances where this has been considered necessary.
- 6.12 Throughout the year the Audit Committee received a number of reports updating Members of the progress of work carried out by Internal Audit and Fraud against the Annual Plan. These reports informed the Audit Committee of Internal Audit's opinion on the audits undertaken and gave additional information where a limited or no assurance was given.

7 Audit Committee Responsibilities

- 7.1 The responsibilities of the Audit Committee are set out in the Constitution of the Council.

8 Risk Management Arrangements and Control Environment

- 8.1 The Audit Committee is required to consider the effectiveness of the Council's risk management arrangements and the control environment. The Members are required to review the risk profile for the Council and seek assurances that action is being taken on risk-related issues, including partnerships with other organisations.
- 8.2 The Chair of the Audit Committee was appointed the Member Risk Champion following a decision by Cabinet in November 2024. A list of the responsibilities of the Member Risk Champion has been shared with the Committee.
- 8.3 The risk profile for the Council is undertaken as part of the audit needs assessment to identify those areas where Internal Audit is most effective.
- 8.4 The Risk Management Strategy is the framework for setting out the responsibilities for ensuring that a sound risk management process is in place. The strategy is reviewed by the Audit Committee on an annual basis and this review last took place in January 2024.
- 8.5 When considering the risk report in January 2025 it was noted that, following the appointment of Risk Champions at both Member and officer levels, an officer Risk Management Group was established with the objective of spreading the workload, and word, on the importance of risk management throughout the authority.
- 8.6 The Group will be undertaking a review of the Strategy in the forthcoming months and will look to provide an updated strategy to the September 2025 meeting of the Audit Committee.
- 8.7 The Risk Management Strategy requires Management Team to escalate any relevant risks to the Strategic Risk Register (SRR) for reporting to this Committee with changes highlighted. The SRR is considered to be a 'live' document and is updated, as often as is required, by the Management Team. An update of the current strategic risks and how they are being managed is reported to each meeting of the Committee.
- 8.8 The strategy states that Audit Committee Members will receive risk management training during their term of office. Member training was delivered by Zurich Municipal (the Council's Insurers) prior to the January 2024 meeting and during the formal meeting in January 2024 a report from Zurich Risk Management in respect of a Risk Management Health Check was received and considered. A number of recommendations were made, and the Committee endorsed a management action plan to address these. Progress against these actions has been reported to the Committee.
- 8.9 The Insurance Officer maintains a record of all claims made against the Council which are reported to the Audit Committee half-yearly. These reports also inform Members of the steps being taken to minimise similar claims being made.

- 8.10 All reports to Council require a risk assessment of the issues involved to be reported as part of the consideration of the report.

9 Assurance Framework and Planning

- 9.1 The assurance framework is the overall process that provides evidence to support the AGS. The Audit Committee has a responsibility to understand what assurance is available to support the AGS.
- 9.2 The AGS was presented to Members at the meeting of July 2024. The supporting evidence to the AGS consisted of a document setting out the areas of the assurance framework to be considered with an explanation of evidence that supported the conclusions of the AGS.

10 Value for Money and Best Value

- 10.1 One specific area for the Audit Committee should be consideration of the external auditor opinion on value for money as set out in the codes of audit practice. In addition, the Audit Committee should consider what other assurances are available in relation to identified value for money risks and highlight areas for improvement. (CIPFA Audit Committee Guidance).
- 10.2 The Auditor's Annual Report for the year ended 31 March 2024 on the Authority's overall arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources was presented to the Audit Committee at the meeting in January 2025. Previously, two significant weaknesses had been identified in relation to performance management and procurement by Grant Thornton. The Committee has tracked progress in addressing these weaknesses.
- 10.3 In relation to performance management, pleasingly, the Auditor's annual audit report recognises the good progress that has been achieved and the report concluded that the significant weakness highlighted has now been addressed. In relation to procurement, good progress has also been made in addressing this weakness, with the commencement of the procurement partnership in May 2024 and the recent approval by Cabinet of the Procurement Strategy at its December 2024 meeting. However, because much of the progress fell outside of the financial year being audited, the External Auditor (although recognising the progress) found it necessary to indicate that the weakness still existed in 2023/24.
- 10.4 As part of the embedded system for achieving value for money, all Council reports contain a section where value for money is considered.

11 Countering Fraud, Bribery and Corruption

- 11.1 The Audit Committee role is defined as having an oversight of the strategy to counter fraud and to assess whether or not it meets recommended practice and standards.

- 11.2 The Audit Committee is responsible for the review of the policies relating to countering fraud, bribery and corruption and anti-money laundering. In January 2025 it reviewed the Whistleblowing Policy and the Anti-Fraud, Bribery and Corruption Policy.
- 11.3 The Audit Committee also receives updates on the progress of the National Fraud Initiative results and other work undertaken by the Fraud Team as part of the audit and fraud updates to every meeting. The work of the Fraud Team reported to the Committee in 2024/25 include amounts to be recovered and increased annual liability due to fraud and error.
- 11.4 The Whistleblowing Policy requires the Audit Committee to be informed of the outcome of any investigations arising from concerns raised under it. No such matters have been drawn to the attention of the Committee in the period covered by the report.

12 External Audit

- 12.1 The Audit Committee should receive all reports from the external auditor and monitor action to be taken that arises from them.
- 12.2 The Audit Committee has received copies of all external auditor reports during the year and has been able to consider the content. The external auditor provides a representative to all Audit Committee meetings where the Audit Committee is able to raise questions regarding the content of reports.

13 Financial Reporting

- 13.1 Local Authority accounts are produced in line with guidance set out by CIPFA. The role of the Audit Committee with regard to these financial statements is not one of detailed knowledge of this guidance but is more aligned to focus on financial reporting and financial governance rather than on the wider issues of spending and performance.
- 13.2 The CIPFA Guidance identifies areas that the Audit Committee should be concerned with as follows: -
- reviewing the narrative report to ensure consistency with the statements and the financial challenges and risks facing the Council in the future
 - reviewing whether the narrative report is readable and understandable by a lay person
 - identifying the key messages from each of the financial statements and evaluating what that means for the Council in future years
 - monitoring trends and reviewing for consistency with what is known about financial performance over the course of the year

- reviewing the suitability of accounting policies and treatments
- seeking explanations for changes in accounting policies and treatments
- reviewing major judgemental areas, e.g. provisions
- seeking assurances that preparations are in place to facilitate the external audit.

13.3 The Audit Committee received the unaudited set of Accounts for 2023/24 at its meeting of July 2024. Members were advised that due to the 'backlog' issues nationally, the Audit of the 2023/24 accounts was unlikely to commence until October 2024 with conclusion of the Audit in December 2024.

13.4 The audited set of Accounts 2023/24 was duly presented to the meeting of the Committee in January 2025. This report gave the Audit Committee assurance that the accounts were presented in compliance with required legislation and best practice guidance. Following consideration of the accounts and a detailed report giving evidence of how compliance is achieved, the Audit Committee agreed to endorse the Statement of Accounts and supporting documents. This was accompanied by the Audit Findings Report from the external auditor on the outcome of the audit of the accounts who subsequently issued an unqualified audit opinion on the financial statements.

13.5 At the same meeting in January 2025, the Committee received the Auditor's Annual Report on the Authority's overall arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. As stated earlier the Auditor felt that, during 2023/24, one significant weakness in arrangements remained – although acknowledged that significant progress in addressing this had been carried out in 2024/25. In addition, a few improvement recommendations were made.

14 Partnership Governance

14.1 The latest CIPFA Guidance identifies that the Audit Committee should review assurances over partnerships to ensure that arrangements are satisfactorily established and are operating effectively.

14.2 The arrangements for significant partnerships are covered as part of the audit planning process and covered within individual audits as appropriate.

15 Treasury Management

15.1 Although it is not included as a core objective of the Audit Committee, the CIPFA Guidance recognises that Treasury Management scrutiny may be a function of some Audit Committees to meet the requirements of the CIPFA Treasury Management Code of Practice.

- 15.2 The Committee receive regular updates on Treasury Management including the treasury management mid-year review and annual report. The Committee has received presentations from one of the Council's property fund managers and has had the opportunity to ask questions directly of the fund manager.
- 15.3 At the meeting of January 2025 Members of the Audit Committee reviewed the Treasury Management and Annual Investment Strategy for 2025/26 and recommended to Cabinet it be adopted by Full Council.

16 Training

- 16.1 The Chair and Members of the Audit Committee receive in-house and or external training at varying intervals to assist with the understanding of the issues considered.
- 16.2 Training on the Statement of Accounts, Risk Management and Treasury Management was provided following the May 2023 Local Elections. Further training needs are addressed as and when required.

17 Conclusion

- 17.1 The evidence in the preceding paragraphs explains how the Audit Committee has overseen the core functions of an Audit Committee as defined in the CIPFA Guidance.
- 17.2 The CIPFA Guidance identifies that the purpose of the Audit Committee '**is to provide to 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.**' This report acts to provide that independent assurance to Council.

18 Other Options

- 18.1 If Members of the Committee have additional points they wish to contribute to this report, this can be done at the meeting in order that the report can be presented to Full Council.

19 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 19.1 The Audit Committee has a role considering the external opinion on value for money. This has been undertaken as outlined in this report.

20 Risk Assessment

- 20.1 The Audit Committee consideration of risk assessment is covered in this report.

21 Legal Implications

21.1 The Audit Committee role is based upon the CIPFA Guidance and meets the requirements of the Accounts & Audit (England) Regulations

22 Consultation and Communications

22.1 This report will be presented to Full Council and be available to the public.

23 Implementation

23.1 This report will be presented to Full Council by the Chair of the Committee.

24 Cross Cutting Issues

24.1 Climate Change and Biodiversity

24.1.1 Adaptation and resilience have not been considered.

24.1.2 Climate change advice has not been sought in the preparation of the options and recommendations in this report.

24.2 Equalities and Diversity

24.2.1 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

Background Papers	None