

Report to the Audit and Governance Committee



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Report reference: AGC-008- 2016/17
Date of meeting: 19 September 2016

Portfolio: Finance

Subject: Statutory Statement of Accounts 2015/16

Responsible Officer: Bob Palmer (01992 564279)

Democratic Services: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

(1) That a report be submitted to the Council recommending that the Statutory Statement of Accounts for 2015/16 be adopted.

Executive Summary:

One of the key roles of this Committee is scrutinising the annual Statutory Statement of Accounts. All Members of the Council will have the opportunity to debate the Accounts at Full Council and part of that debate will be to consider the recommendation of this Committee.

It is anticipated that the audit will be completed shortly and that the Statutory Statement of Accounts will be presented to Council on 27 September. There is a separate report elsewhere on the agenda that sets out the key findings of the audit.

There have been no substantial changes to the annual Statutory Statement of Accounts for 2015/16. The format of the accounts and the disclosure notes within them are very similar to those for 2014/15. Also, following the significant changes to the system of local authority finance in 2013/14, 2015/16 has been a year of consolidation with no other significant changes.

To assist Members with their consideration of the Accounts a report follows together with the Accounts themselves.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

It is important that this Committee scrutinises the annual Statutory Statement of Accounts so that residents and other Members can have confidence in the Accounts.

Officers have exercised their professional judgement and liaised closely with external experts and the External Auditor to produce the Statutory Statement of Accounts. If Members are satisfied with the content of this report and the verbal responses to any questions raised, they are requested to recommend the Statutory Statement of Accounts for adoption by Full Council on 27 September.

Other Options for Action:

The Committee could decide that the accounts should be amended or expanded prior to them being presented to Full Council.

Report:

1. The Accounts and Audit Regulations require Full Council or an Executive Committee to adopt the Council's Statement of Accounts before the end of September. The Council's constitution reserves the adoption of the Accounts to Full Council only. However, prior to Council considering the accounts it is important that they have been subject to Member scrutiny. This Committee has scrutinised the Statement of Accounts for several years.
2. The consideration of the Statement of Accounts is contained in the Terms of Reference of this Committee, the relevant parts being:

(p) To review the annual statement of accounts. Specifically to consider whether appropriate accounting policies have been followed and whether there are concerns arising from the financial statements or from the audit that need to be brought to the attention of the Council.

3. This review is performed through a consideration of key aspects of the accounts including:
 - (i) critical accounting policies and practices, and any changes to them;
 - (ii) decisions requiring a major element of judgement;
 - (iii) the extent to which the financial statements are affected by any unusual transactions in the year and how they are disclosed;
 - (iv) significant adjustments resulting from the audit; and
 - (v) any material weakness in internal control reported by the Internal or External Auditor.

Critical accounting policies and practices, and any changes to them

4. There have been no significant changes in accounting policies and practices during the year. The accounting policies are set out on pages 10 to 16 of the Accounts.

Decisions requiring a major element of judgement

5. In preparing a set of accounts at a point in time it is inevitable that some of the information required will not yet be available. If an actual amount is uncertain an estimate is used. The estimate will be based on the assessment of information available at the time the accounts are closed. When the actual figures are determined any difference is usually accounted for in the following year. If the estimate was wrong by a material amount it would be necessary to consider re-stating the figures, this is extremely rare.
6. Two of the notes required by International Financial Reporting Standards are relevant here, Note 3 "Critical judgements in applying accounting policies" and Note 4 "Assumptions made about the future and other major sources of estimation uncertainty". The key critical judgement highlighted in Note 3 is that the Council does not currently need to close facilities or significantly reduce levels of service provision. If this were not the case it would be necessary to consider any assets that would be affected and any consequent impairment of their values.
7. This year only one area is included under Note 4, the Council's pension liability. The substantial annual fluctuations in the pension liability make clear the element of judgement exercised by the actuary in establishing the pension figures. The largest creditor on the Balance Sheet is the Council's liability to the pension fund. The Balance Sheet shows that the pension liability for the Council has decreased in the year from £69.929 million to £66.981 million. This reduced deficit is due to a £1.570 million increase in the value of the scheme assets and a reduction of £1.378 million in the projected liabilities.

8. The key to calculating the value of the projected liabilities is the discount rate, and as this rises the size of the liability decreases. The increase in the discount rate from 3.2% to 3.5% reflects the slight increase in yields in the corporate bond market, which actuaries are required to base discount rates on.
9. The figures shown in the table below illustrate how the overall deficit has changed over time. Further fluctuations are likely in subsequent years as it becomes clear how members of the pension scheme are responding to the change from a final salary scheme to a career average based scheme.

	2015/16 £'m	2014/15 £'m	2013/14 £'m	2012/13 £'m	2011/12 £'m
Liabilities	(183.6)	(185.0)	(159.5)	(170.4)	(150.8)
Assets	116.7	115.1	101.7	95.0	85.2
Deficit	(66.9)	(69.9)	(57.8)	(75.4)	(65.6)

10. The inclusion of this amount in the Balance Sheet shows the extent of the authority's liability if the pension fund was to close on 31 March 2016. It does not mean that this full liability will have to be paid over to the pension fund in the near future.
11. There are two other areas in the Statement of Accounts to bring to Member's attention as having required a major element of judgement. The first of these is asset valuations, Property, Plant and Equipment, dominates the Balance Sheet with a value of just under £700 million and Investment Properties are the next largest asset with a value of £63 million. Assets are revalued periodically to ensure their valuations are correct and up to date.
12. This year has seen an increase on revaluation of more than £101 million on Property, Plant and Equipment, of which more than £99 million relates to Council Dwellings and Garages. As in previous years, the valuation of the Council's Dwellings and Garages was undertaken by the District Valuer. Investment Properties were revalued by Deloitte LLP and this resulted in an increase of £9 million in the value of industrial estates and £11m in the value of commercial properties. The auditors have carefully considered all of the revaluations and are satisfied that the asset values are not materially misstated.
13. The other area is the provision for business rate appeals. Historically the values for non-domestic property have been updated every five years. If an occupier is unhappy with the valuation set by the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) they can appeal. Throughout the recession the number of appeals increased and the VOA was unable to keep up with the workload and process the appeals on a timely basis. This meant that when local retention came in there were a very large number of appeals outstanding, most of which related to the 2010 list but some went back to the 2005 list. Even though the appeals arose before the start of the new system, and central government had received the income from the bills being challenged, the liability for settling the outstanding appeals was given to local authorities.
14. The Collection Fund includes a Provision for Appeals of £3.57 million, up from £3.26 million last year. This provision was calculated with the help of an external firm of rating experts who analysed each outstanding appeal and gave a projected value for settlement. The Valuation Office Agency has made some progress during the year in settling appeals but we still have over 400 outstanding. To date the appeals that have been settled are similar in total to the provisions that were held against them and it appears the provision is not materially misstated. Although it is important to include a note of caution here as there are still appeals outstanding on some of the largest non-domestic premises in the district, including one with a rateable value of £5.83 million.
15. Where it has been necessary to exercise judgement in the interpretation of the Code of Practice advice has been sought from CIPFA and staff have liaised closely with both the External Audit Manager and other Essex authorities.

The extent to which the financial statements are affected by any unusual transactions in the year and how they are disclosed

16. It is unusual to show figures for three years on the Balance Sheet so it is appropriate to draw the Committee's attention to Note 11 which provides a detailed explanation. As the accounting arrangements are changing for highways assets it was necessary to review some of the asset categories that were included in the Balance Sheet. The review highlighted that some of the assets held under the headings of infrastructure, community assets, and assets under construction were either transport related, and therefore the expenditure had been incurred on assets that should be accounted for by the County Council, or were related to the former waste disposal site at Bobbingworth which is now a park and so were not part of the value of that asset.
17. As it was evident that these assets should not be included in the accounts going forward but that their inclusion was an historical issue it was necessary to make a retrospective restatement of the Balance Sheet as at 1 April 2014. The restatement involves a reduction of £8.421 million in Property, Plant and Equipment and a corresponding adjustment to the Capital Adjustment Account, which is shown on the Balance Sheet as part of Unusable Reserves. This restatement has no impact on the Council's Usable Reserves and so will not influence any subsequent decisions on financing or the level of Council Tax.

Significant adjustments resulting from the audit

18. No significant adjustments have arisen from the audit. Although, some minor items have been corrected during the course of the audit. The audit is still to be concluded and any significant adjustments will be reported to this Committee.

Any material weakness in internal control reported by the Internal or External Auditor

19. Neither the Internal nor External Auditor has reported any material weakness in internal controls. If any arise before the conclusion of the audit they will be reported to this Committee.

Resource Implications:

The Accounts set out the resource implications of the Authorities activities for 2015/16. The recommendation of the Accounts to Full Council does not in itself have any resource implications.

Legal and Governance Implications:

Full Council must approve the Accounts before the end of September and as part of the overall governance framework the Accounts should be subject to Member scrutiny prior to their approval.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

There are no environmental implications.

Consultation Undertaken:

None.

Background Papers:

Reports on the revenue and capital outturns to the Finance & Performance Management Cabinet Committee on 16 June 2016.

Impact Assessments:

There are no equalities or risk management impacts.