

Report to the Audit and Governance Committee



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Report reference:

Date of meeting: 15 July 2021

Portfolio: Leader of the Council

Subject: Audit and Governance Committee Annual Report for 2020/21

Responsible Officer: Sarah Marsh (01992 564446).

Democratic Services Officer: Laura Kirman (01992 564273)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That the Annual Report for the Audit and Governance Committee for 2020/21 be agreed and the report be referred to the Council.**

Executive Summary:

The Annual Report of the Audit and Governance Committee outlines the Committee's work and achievements over the year ending 31 March 2021. The Annual Report helps to demonstrate to residents and the Council's other stakeholders the vital role that is carried out by the Audit and Governance Committee and the contribution that it makes to the Council's overall governance arrangements.

It should be noted that Covid-19 did not disrupt the workings or business of the Audit and Governance Committee, despite it having to meet virtually throughout 2020/21.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

To present the Audit and Governance Committee Annual Report for 2020/21 and to recommend that the report be referred to the Council.

Other Options for Action:

None.

Report:

The Committee is invited to comment on the report, in particular, whether the remit of the Committee is adequately reflected in this report. It is suggested that if any substantive changes are required these are agreed with the Chairman prior to the submission of the report to Council.

Resource Implications:

These have been included in the individual reports to the Committee throughout the year.

Legal and Governance Implications:

The effective operation of the Audit and Governance Committee forms a key element of the Council's assurance framework. By fulfilling its responsibilities as detailed in its annual report the Audit Committee helps the Council to maintain a high standard of corporate governance. There is no legal or constitutional requirement for the Committee to report to the Council on its work, however, it is considered good practice to do so.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

No specific implications.

Consultation Undertaken:

Corporate Governance Group

Background Papers:

Minutes of the Audit and Governance Committee.

Equality Analysis:

The Equality Act 2010 requires that the Public Sector Equality Duty is actively applied in decision-making. This means that the equality information provided to accompany this report is essential reading for all members involved in the consideration of this report. The equality information is provided at Appendix 1 to the report.

Glossary:

AGS – Annual Governance Statement

CIPFA – Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy

SOLACE – Society of Local Authority Chief Executives

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

ANNUAL REPORT

OF THE

AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

2020/21

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Audit Committee is to:

- provide independent assurance to the Council in respect of the effectiveness of the Council's governance arrangements, risk management framework and the associated control environment; and
- 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.

Whilst there is no statutory obligation for a local authority to establish an audit committee, they are widely recognised internationally across the public and private sectors as a key component of effective governance. Similarly, it is considered good practice for the Committee to report annually to the Council on its work.

The key benefits of an effective audit committee are:

- increasing awareness regarding the effectiveness and continued development of the Council's governance arrangements;
- providing additional assurance on the robustness of the Council's governance arrangements through a process of independent and objective review;
- reducing the risks of illegal or improper acts;
- increasing public confidence in the objectivity and fairness of financial and other reporting;
- contributing to performance improvements in assurance levels and awareness of the need for strong internal control including the implementation of audit recommendations; and
- reinforcing the importance and independence of internal and external audit and similar review processes.

1. ASSURANCE ACTIVITY 2020/21

To help the Committee draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the Council's internal control framework, governance and risk management it gained assurances from the following sources:

Internal Audit

The Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2015 require the Council to maintain an adequate and effective internal audit which is discharged by the Section 151 Officer. Internal Audit is a key source of assurance for both Members and management on the effectiveness of the control framework. The Committee has a responsibility for ensuring that Internal Audit is effective in the provision of this assurance and has worked with the Chief Internal Auditor to ensure the agreed Audit Plan for 2020/21 was delivered.

The Committee considered and agreed reports regarding the Internal Audit Strategy, Internal Audit Charter and Annual Plan 2020/21, and progress by management in implementing audit recommendations. The annual plan was revised in June 2020 to take into account a change in the Council's risk profile due to Covid-19. It also received regular progress reports on the work and performance of Internal Audit. These reports have helped in ensuring that reported weaknesses have either been

addressed or the identified risks adequately mitigated by management and that there is an effective system of governance and internal control in place.

Assurance Framework / Annual Governance Statement

The Committee's terms of reference include advising on the effectiveness of the Council's assurance framework including the production of the Annual Governance Statement.

During the year, the Committee has received reports on the control framework and how the annual review and assurance process is undertaken. The Assurance Framework is compiled from various sources of assurance, for instance Directors and other key officers.

The Chief Internal Auditor provides an annual report and opinion regarding the Council's control framework. This opinion is considered by the Committee alongside other sources of assurance.

The Committee reviewed the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) for 2019/20 which identified governance issues requiring further ongoing improvement or oversight relating to:

- Risk Management and lessons learnt due to Covid-19
- Financial resilience
- Ensuring the health and safety of staff, partners and the public in the way it delivers its services with regards to Covid-19
- Qualis governance arrangements
- Project management
- procedures and guidance notes to support critical functions
- Mandatory training

The assurance framework remained unchanged during 2020/21. The Council's Code of Corporate Governance was reviewed by the committee in January 2021 to ensure it remains compliant with the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework - Delivering Good Governance in Local Government. Only minor changes were proposed (and agreed) to reflect the impact of Covid-19 on the Council's Code.

The Committee was able to satisfy themselves that there is a robust assurance framework in place to safeguard the Council's resources through reliance on the annual review of the Council's system of internal control and the Chief Internal Auditor's annual opinion.

Anti-Fraud and Corruption

Countering fraud and corruption is the responsibility of every Member and officer of the Council. The Committee's role in this area has been to monitor and support the actions taken by officers to counter fraud, particularly as the Council has its own in-house Corporate Fraud Team, who work in tandem with Internal Audit.

The Committee receives reports and presentations on such work undertaken in the Council and proactive fraud work, for example participation in the National Fraud Initiative (NFI).

The Council continues to send out a strong message that fraud will not be tolerated and that where fraud is proven the strongest possible actions of redress will be taken.

Based on the work to date, coupled with no major incidences of internal fraud and corruption being highlighted by management, the Corporate Fraud Team or Internal

Audit, the Committee concludes that there is a sound anti-fraud and corruption framework in place. The Council's anti-fraud and corruption strategy was approved by Council, following approval by the Audit and Governance Committee in January 2020.

Risk Management

The Committee receives and discusses reports relating to risk management. Work continues to enhance monitoring and reporting mechanisms to ensure there is adequate scrutiny and challenge of risk across the Council and aligning this with the service planning process. Committee members are routinely presented with the corporate strategic risk register.

Treasury Management

In accordance with its Terms of Reference, the Committee reviewed the Council's Treasury Management Strategy and considered the risks associated with the Council's treasury activity and how these are managed. The Committee also considered progress reports on the treasury management function and performance against prudential indicators.

Statement of Accounts and External Auditors

At its July 2020 meeting the Committee reviewed and approved the 2019/20 Annual Governance Statement.

The Committee has been kept abreast during the year on outstanding issues regarding the 2019/20 Accounts, seeking explanations for the delay from both the External Auditors (Deloitte) and the Council's Section 151 Officer.

At its September 2020 meeting the Committee was informed that the audit of the Statement of Accounts for 2019/20 was currently in progress and it was anticipated that the External Auditors would be able to issue their audit opinion by the statutory deadline of 30 November 2020.

The audited accounts for 2019/20 are still outstanding and the Committee has repeatedly expressed the need for these to be presented. The Committee have been informed that delays were initially due to the External Auditor's inability to meet the deadlines due to capacity issues and Covid-19 impact on the finance team. Later on there were a number of technical issues that needed to be worked through, but had been deprioritised, in part, to the Council's budget setting process.

The aim is for the 2019/20 accounts to be reported to the Committee in July 2021.

2. COMMITTEE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

The Committee has a rolling and flexible programme of work for its main areas of activity which is proactively reviewed and amended throughout the year to reflect changes in policies, priorities and risks. The Committee met six times in 2020/21 which due to the pandemic were held virtually, which members of the public had access to. The Committee considered items which are presented annually, such as audit results, the statement of accounts, the annual governance statement, and audit plans; as well as a number of other items including treasury management as this falls under the committee's remit.

The Committee's work plan is supplemented with periodic bespoke training which is open to all councillors. Risk management training was provided in January 2021.

Members of the Committee have a wide range of both experience and professional knowledge which, coupled with it having two co-opted persons, has continued to help demonstrate its independence. At the start of the year the two co-opted posts were vacant, however, following a successful recruitment campaign one was filled with the other going out to advert after the July 2021 meeting.

In November 2020 the Committee undertook its own effectiveness review and reviewed its Terms of Reference, the results of which concluded its Terms of Reference did not need updating and the Council was able to demonstrate compliance with recommended best practice for an effective Audit Committee.

The Committee has the benefit of being well supported by Council officers. This includes the Section 151 Officer, the Monitoring Officer, and the Chief Internal Auditor as well as the Council's external auditors.

There have been no reported major breakdowns in internal control, governance and risk management that have led to a significant loss in one form or another, nor any major weakness in the governance systems that has exposed, or continues to expose, the Council to an unacceptable level of risk. This includes the period to the end of March 2021 during which the government has introduced several full-scale lock down of the country due to Covid-19.

The purpose, strategy and work programme of the Committee mitigates against any major failure by the Council to obtain independent assurance in relation to the governance processes underpinning:

- An effective risk management framework and internal control environment including audit;
- The effectiveness of financial and non-financial performance (to the extent that it affects exposure to risk and poor internal control); and
- The compilation and consideration of the Annual Governance Statement.

Outcomes / Achievements

Through its work, the Committee's main outcome is in the additional assurance provided of the robustness of the Council's arrangements regarding corporate governance, risk management and internal controls.

The Committee has added value through its activity and in particular:

- it has continued with the importance placed upon governance issues, particularly risk management, anti-fraud and the assurances sought that key risks are being mitigated; and
- it has continued to raise the profile of internal control issues across the Council and to seek to ensure that audit recommendations are implemented.

Conclusions

The Committee's remit is achieved firstly through it being appropriately constituted, and secondly by the Committee being effective in ensuring internal accountability and the delivery of audit and a robust assurance framework. The Committee has received and challenged reports including those from internal and external audit.

The agreed work programme enables the Committee to provide independent assurance to the Council as to the adequacy of the risk management framework and the associated control environment.

The Committee has continued to have a real and positive contribution to the governance arrangements of the Council. The Committee's key achievement is in the

additional assurance provided of the robustness of the Council's arrangements regarding corporate governance, risk management and the control environment.

In order to build upon its achievements to date and to raise awareness of the work of the Committee during the coming year the Committee will focus on the following:

- Continue to review governance arrangements to ensure that the Council adopts best practice;
- Continue to support the work of audit and ensure that appropriate responses are provided to their recommendations;
- Continue to help the Council manage the risk of fraud and corruption;
- Provide effective challenge, particularly to officers, raising awareness of the importance of sound internal control arrangements and giving the appropriate assurances to the Council;
- Consider the effectiveness of the Council's risk management arrangements.
- Provide existing and new members to the Committee with relevant training, briefings etc. to help in discharging their responsibilities