

Audit and Governance Committee Annual Report 2023/24

Introduction

This is the Draft Annual Report of the Council's Audit and Governance Committee for the 2023/24 municipal year. It is prepared in accordance with recommended guidance and seeks to demonstrate the Council's commitment to operating the highest standards of governance.

This report describes the role of the Committee, its structure and membership, and how it has successfully fulfilled its terms of reference and made a valuable contribution to the Council's control, risk, and governance environments.

This report will be taken to Full Council in November 2024 and will be published on the Council's website.

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Foreword from the Chair

I am pleased to present this Annual Report which sets out the role of the Audit and Governance Committee and how it has discharged its terms of reference during 2023/24.

The Committee has an important role in helping the Council maintain its reputation for high standards of governance and financial management, and I would like to thank my Councillor colleagues and the independent members for their commitment, support, and input to the Committee to constructively challenge and influence the Council's governance arrangements.

It has been another very busy and full year. The Council, and local government generally continues to face pressure from many angles; constant pressure on financial resources and an exceptional demand for services. Alongside those pressures the Council continues to be forward looking and aspirational and effective governance plays an important part in that. The Council's Transformation and Digital Programme has been of particular focus for the Committee and the Glassworks development is a good example of the Council's ambition and success.

Of particular note and satisfaction is the recognition the Council received in winning both the Local Government Chronicle and Municipal Journal 'Council of the Year' awards in 2023. The Council has had a number of visiting parties seeking a reference point for good practice.

The Committee welcomes the raised profile afforded by the assurance and insight it receives regarding strategic risk management and its opportunity to hear the relevant Executive Directors explain in detail how they are managing the risks they are responsible for.

The financial and general economic climate the Council and local government faces is continuing and is likely to worsen. This in turn focusses all our attention to ensuring the Council has appropriate control, risk, and governance arrangements in place to help meet those demands.

I would like to thank the officers across the Council who have attended and supported the Committee to present reports and answer questions. The openness that is clearly displayed makes a significant contribution to the assurances the Committee receives.

I look forward to helping the Committee develop further in the new year.

Councillor Phil Lofts M.Ed, Ed D.

Role and Structure of the Audit and Governance Committee

The general remit of the Committee is:

1. To provide independent assurance of the adequacy of the risk management framework and the associated control environment.
2. To provide independent scrutiny of the authority's financial and non-financial performance to the extent that it affects the authority's exposure to risk and weakens the control environment.
3. To oversee the financial reporting process.
4. To promote the application of and compliance with effective governance arrangements across the Authority and its partner organisations.

The detailed terms of reference can be accessed via this link (page 24 of the Council's constitution document) [Audit and Governance Committee Terms of Reference](#)

The Committee meets six times during the municipal year. Meetings cover a range of areas with the Committee receiving various reports and presentations to provide information and assurance regarding the Council's control, risk, and governance arrangements. The broad areas cover:

- Internal Control and Governance Environment
- Anti-Fraud
- Corporate Risk Management
- Internal Audit
- External Audit
- Financial Reporting and Accounts
- Other Corporate Functions that contribute to the Council's Governance Framework

The Audit and Governance Committee comprises nine people in total, four elected councillors two Labour, one Conservative and one Liberal Democrat and five independent members (currently one post is vacant). The membership of the Committee is believed to be unique amongst local authorities in having a majority of independent members and shows the Council's commitment to effective challenge and transparency. The CIPFA guidance recommends that an audit committee has at least one independent member.

The Committee is chaired by Councillor Phillip Lofts. The vice-chair during the year was Mr. Gary Bandy, an independent member.

The other members of the Committee were:

Councillor Robert Barnard
Councillor Ken Richardson MSc
Councillor Chris Wray

Mrs Kathryn Armitage
Mr Paul Johnson
Dr Ruth Adams
Mr Steve Wragg

Members' Attendance

The municipal year runs from May to April and in the 2023/24 year the Committee had 6 meetings. Below is a table showing the attendance at the meetings:

Member	Possible Meetings	Meetings Attended	% of Meetings Attended
Councillor Phillip Lofts (Chair)	6	6	100%
Councillor Robert Barnard	6	6	100%
Councillor Ken Richardson MSc	6	6	100%
Councillor Chris Wray	6	1	17%
Mr. Gary Bandy (Vice Chair)	6	5	83%
Mrs. Kathryn Armitage	6	5	83%
Mr. Paul Johnson	6	6	100%
Mr Steve Wragg	6	5	83%
Dr Ruth Adams	6	5	83%

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The Work of the Audit and Governance Committee in 2023/24

The Committee's work across the areas of responsibility are summarised below.

Internal Control and Governance Environment

The Committee has reviewed and approved the Local Code of Corporate Governance. The Annual Governance Review process was considered followed by the draft and final Annual Governance Statements for 2022/23. The Committee has also received regular updates regarding the Annual Governance Statement action plan.

The consideration of the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) is an important element of the Committee's responsibilities.

Anti-Fraud

The Committee considered the Annual Fraud Report along with the Anti-Fraud Plan and Strategy. During the various meetings, Committee members sought assurances on the work undertaken regarding the prevention of fraud and how issues regarding fraud were communicated. The Committee acknowledged the positive impact of the activities undertaken in the Fraud Awareness Week.

Corporate Risk Management

The Committee received reports and deep dives into specific strategic risks at each meeting where the responsible Executive Directors attend the meeting and provide an update of the risk and mitigating actions being taken to address the risk.

These sessions have been received very positively by the Committee in enabling a deeper insight into the risk management process, but also and particularly, the detail of the main strategic / corporate risks being managed by the Council's Senior Management Team. The continued development of the approach to risk management and how this is presented to the Committee has been welcomed. The attendance of the relevant Executive Directors at every meeting continues to raise the profile of the Committee.

Corporate Assurance (Internal Audit)

The Committee received regular reports from the Head of Corporate Assurance (this was Head of Internal Audit, Anti-Fraud and Assurance until 31st December 2023) via quarterly progress reports, the assurance planning process and final assurance plan, and the Head of Corporate Assurance's annual opinion report.

The Committee regularly sought information and assurances regarding the delivery of the assurance plan and management's implementation of agreed actions.

External Audit (Grant Thornton)

The Committee received regular updates and reports from Grant Thornton, the Council's appointed external auditor. A representative from Grant Thornton attended all committee meetings either virtually or in person to give updates and reports and was present especially for discussions around the external audit plan and presentation of their statutory reports.

Members raised questions in relation to the delivery of the audit plan given the pressures on the external audit firms to meet statutory deadlines, and in turn concern about any reputational damage to the Council should those deadlines be missed.

The External Audit ISA 260 Report and the Report on 2022/23 Value for Money Arrangements were considered by the Committee. The committee commended the External Auditors for the conclusion and delivery of these reviews within locally agreed timescales, acknowledging that Barnsley had not experienced some of the issues with access to timely External Audit input being experienced by other authorities across the country.

The Committee was assured however of the positive relationship with the Council's Section 151 Officer and the Finance Team in the preparation of high-quality statutory accounts.

Financial Reporting and Accounts

The Committee received the statutory Statement of Accounts for 2022/23 (draft and final versions) and sought assurances on the processes in place to prepare the accounts and meet the necessary and complex accounting standards. The Committee also received reports covering Treasury Management.

The Corporate Finance and Performance reports have been shared with the Committee to provide assurances regarding the financial management arrangements in place.

The Committee was particularly interested in and challenging around various aspects of corporate financial management utilising particularly the experience and expertise of the independent members.

Other Corporate Functions

Over the course of the meetings various Service Directors and Heads of Services presented assurance reports on other aspects of the Council's governance framework.

These covered:

- The Glassworks
- Transformation and Digital Programme
- Information Governance and Cyber Security
- Data Protection Officer updates
- Human Resources

- Health and Safety Resilience
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- People Strategy
- SEND
- Confidential Reporting (Whistleblowing) Annual Report

These reports and presentations provided the Committee with a broader understanding, perspective, and assurance on the wider governance framework of the Council.

Training and Awareness Sessions

To support the Committee in enhancing their knowledge and understanding a number of training and awareness sessions were held. These were delivered by Service Directors, Head of Services, and officers from within the Council. The subjects and themes for these training sessions are suggested by members of the committee.

Themes over the time period of this report include:

- Cyber Security Threats
- SEND Safety Valve Programme
- Transformation and Digital Programme
- VFM
- Corporate Assurance

Committee Effectiveness

As well as seeking assurances from management regarding the effectiveness of the Council's control, risk and governance arrangements, the Committee undertook its own review of effectiveness.

Each Committee member completed a questionnaire seeking views on if/ how the Committee could be improved and the areas where individually and collectively additional training was required.

The key issues and areas for improvement resulting from the self-assessment were:

- Links between the Committee and Cabinet
- Ensure the training and awareness needs of members of the Committee are constantly reviewed
- Formalise meetings with External Audit and/or the Head of Corporate Assurance.

Conclusion

The Committee delivered high quality challenge to senior management across the full range of its responsibilities. Officers have welcomed this professional and constructive challenge to help maintain and improve where needed, effective controls, risk management and governance. The Committee is highly respected for its role and expertise, and important place in the Council's overall governance framework.