



Minutes of a meeting of Audit and Governance Committee held on Thursday, 21 November 2024

Members present:

Nigel Robbins	Patrick Coleman	
Jeremy Theyer	Michael Vann	Christopher Bass (Independent Member)
Chris Twells	Len Wilkins	John Chesshire (Independent Member)

Officers present:

David Stanley, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer	Angela Claridge, Director of Governance and Development (Monitoring Officer)
Andrew Brown, Democratic Services Business Manager	Cheryl Sloan, Business Manager - Business Continuity, Governance and Risk
Ana Prelici, Governance Officer	

Observers: Councillor Mike Evely and Joe Harris

299 Apologies

The Chair opened the meeting and thanked Ana Prelici, Governance Officer, who was supporting her last meeting at Cotswold District Council.

Apologies were noted from Councillor Mansilla and Councillor Twells.

300 Substitute Members

There were no substitute members.

The Chair confirmed that the meeting was quorate.

301 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

302 Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting were considered and the following amendments requested:

- Christopher Bass had been in attendance at the previous meeting, not John Chesshire as stated.
- The word satisfied at the bottom of page 7 should read dissatisfied.
- Under item 293 the Committee had requested that the scoping should begin for the no purchase order no payment approach.

The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 24 October 2024 subject to the above revisions

303 Public Questions

There were no public questions.

304 Member Questions

There were no Member questions.

305 Strategic Risk Register

The Business Manager for Continuity, Governance and Risk introduced the Strategic Risk Register.

The Business Manager highlighted the risk around vacancies in key posts (e.g. Director of Place and Communities, Head of Planning).

The Cyber risk had been reduced but this followed an increase when the Council had been on high alert following a cyber attack at another authority.

In response to a question, the Business Manager confirmed that the risk related to the Publica transition was stable. As a consequence of the transition, there were gaps in the organisational structure and this was reflected in the resourcing risk.

The Deputy Chief Executive provided assurance around oversight of the contract with Freedom Leisure.

The Committee noted that risk around health and safety had been mitigated down to an amber rating and questioned whether there were opportunities to reduce this risk further. The Business Manager explained that there was a health and safety board which met quarterly and lots of mitigation was taking place. There were very few accidents at work. Aggressive behaviour towards Customer Services staff was a concern

which was being addressed through training. Health and safety would always need to be managed.

The Audit and Governance Committee resolved to note the report.

CLlr Wilkins arrived during consideration of this item.

306 Customer Complaints Policy and Procedure

The Business Manager for Continuity, Governance and Risk introduced the Customer Complaints Policy and Procedure.

Following a consultation the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman had encouraged councils to adopt a new Complaint Handling Code by April 2026. The Council was looking to embed this Code which would involve moving from a 3-stage complaint process to a 2-stage process. Customers would need to exhaust the 2-stage process before escalating their complaint to the Ombudsman. Staff were being made aware of the new process.

The Committee questioned how the process would work. The Business Manager explained that at stage 1 the service area would respond. The customer could then decide whether to escalate their complaint. The second stage went to a complaints team who are independent in considering whether complaints have been dealt with satisfactorily at stage 1.

The Committee queried whether financial remedy should be included in the list of remedies. The Deputy Chief Executive Officer confirmed that any financial remedy would need to be fair and proportionate. The Business Manager confirmed that the list of remedies had been provided by the Ombudsman and that financial remedies were very rare. The Council wouldn't pay the costs of any third parties engaged to act on a complainant's behalf and the Committee suggested that this could be clarified in the Policy and Procedure.

The Committee suggested that Members should be offered a briefing on the new process and that a summary of how people could complain about elected members should be included in the Policy and Procedure document.

In response to a question, the Business Manager confirmed that any complaint about an individual senior officer would most likely be a matter for HR to investigate rather than a matter for the complaints process.

The Chair drew attention to a typographical error at the bottom of page 32.

The Business Manager explained that the Ombudsman recommended that councils adopt an Unreasonable Behaviour Policy (Annex B). The Council would hold a central register with restricted access which would be controlled and monitored by an officer governance group. Information and advice would be made available to officers who were visiting addresses on the list.

The Committee noted that Members would benefit from knowing about specific issues within their wards and suggested that Members should be briefed in confidence on any such issues. The Director of Governance and Development suggested that the Council engages with the police on the safety of elected Members and election candidates more generally.

The Committee questioned whether people would be entitled to know whether they were on the list. The Business Manager confirmed that people would be notified if they were on the list with reasons and details of the appeals process.

The Audit and Governance Committee resolved to:

1. Approve the implementation of the new Customer Complaints Policy and Procedure, subject to the revisions noted above.
2. Note the revised Staff Personal Safety Policy / Unreasonable Behaviour.

307 Statement of Accounts and Audit Opinion

The Deputy Chief Executive Officer introduced the report on the Statement of Accounts and Audit Opinion. There had been steady but relatively slow progress on the development of the audit opinion for 2023/24. The audit opinion was expected to be produced in good time before the backstop date of 28 February 2025. The report sought a delegation to receive and sign off the audit opinion, subject to the papers being circulated to all Members of the Audit and Governance Committee at least a week prior to the delegation being exercised.

In response to a question about Bishop Fleming being the Council's new auditor and new to the public sector, the Deputy Chief Executive stated that each external auditor would take their own approach based on the risks that they identify. While they would have due regard to the approach and findings previous auditors, they would make their own assessment.

The Committee questioned what would happen if the backstop date was missed. The Deputy Chief Executive replied that there would be reputational damage but no financial penalty.

The Audit and Governance Committee resolved to:

1. Note the progress of the audit and the update provided on the receiving the audit findings and opinion.

2. Delegate authority to the Deputy Chief Executive & Section 151 Officer and the Chair of Audit and Governance Committee to receive and sign the audit opinion (subject to a copy of the audit finding report and audit statement of accounts being circulated to all members of the Committee for comment and endorsement).

308 Treasury Management Mid-Year Report

The Deputy Chief Executive Officer introduced the Treasury Management Mid-Year Report and compared the position with the equivalent report from a year ago. Inflation was now lower but was forecast to be above the Bank of England's target of 2% for most of 2025. The average rate of return on the Council's investments was 4.68% compared to 4.78% last year on a broadly similar level of investments. Treasury returns were projected to be above the budgeted level by c. £376,000 on the expectation that the Bank of England's Base Rate would remain unchanged until at least February 2025. The statutory override on unrealised capital losses was due to end on 31 March 2025 and, if it is not renewed by the government, the Council would have to ensure it had adequate reserves and balances in order to finance capital losses whether they were realised or unrealised. The economic forecast in Annex A had been prepared before the recent US election.

The Committee questioned whether returns were being maximised and requested an overview of Treasury Management from the Council's advisors Arlingclose. The Deputy Chief Executive said that the Council had a diversified portfolio of investments and that security and liquidity rather than yield were the primary considerations.

That the Audit and Governance Committee resolved to:

1. Note the Council's Treasury Management performance for the period 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024 and the Quarter 2 Prudential Indicators
2. Recommend the Treasury Management Mid-Year Report to Council for approval.

309 Work Plan

The Chair commented that the work plan looked to be manageable and noted that there would be a lot of interest in the Cyber Security Update.

The Audit and Governance Committee resolved to note the work plan.

The Meeting commenced at 4.00 pm and closed at 5.33 pm

Chair

(END)