

Audit, Governance & Standards Committee

Annual Report

September 2023



Introduction by Chairman of Audit, Governance and Standards Committee

I became Chair of the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee in 2023, following my previous role as the Vice-Chair of the committee in 2022/23 and it is my pleasure to introduce the annual report. The report provides an overview of the Committee's activity during the Municipal Year 2022/23.

The Council continues to face challenges from the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and rising inflation brought on by the war in Ukraine. As a committee, we have maintained our focus on the issues facing the Council from a risk, control, and governance perspective. This report looks back and gives us opportunity to reflect on the activity and achievements of the Committee during the Municipal Year 2022/23.

The Committee has discharged its responsibility to provide independent assurance on the adequacy of the Council's risk management framework and the associated control environment. We have also provided robust scrutiny and challenge of the Authority's financial performance.

During 2022/23 the Committee met five times and I was pleased to note, among the highlights, consideration of the Council's risk management processes and a positive opinion on the Council's control and governance from our internal auditors.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Members and Officers that have supported the Committee over the last year. Their professionalism, integrity, and openness have helped us to discuss, challenge and debate key issues and agree solutions and improvements where appropriate to do so.



Councillor Martin Cox – Audit, Governance and Standards Committee Chairman

Purpose of the Committee

The Audit, Governance and Standards Committee operates in accordance with the [Audit Committees, Practical Guidance for Local Authorities](#). This guidance (updated in 2022) sets out the purpose of an Audit Committee and is published by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance (CIPFA). The guidance states:

Audit Committees are a key component of an authority's governance framework. Their purpose is to provide an independent and high-level focus on the adequacy of governance, risk and control arrangements. The committee's role in ensuring that there is sufficient assurance over governance risk and control gives greater confidence to all those charged with governance that arrangements are effective.

The committee has oversight of both internal and external audit together with the financial and governance reports, helping to ensure that there are adequate arrangements in place for both internal challenge and public accountability.

At Maidstone, the role of the Committee extends further than this. In 2015 the Committee was expanded to incorporate some functions previously undertaken by the Standards Committee. Specifically, this expanded role means that the Committee also consider Member conduct and complaints. The Committee's stated purpose is:

The promotion and maintenance of high standards of Councillor and Officer conduct within the Council, adoption and reviewing the Council's Annual Governance Statement; independent assurance of the adequacy of the financial and risk management framework and the associated control environment, independent review 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, and to oversee the financial reporting process.

The Committee is independent from management and other Committees, this is important as it ensures that duties can be discharged in line with the agreed Terms of Reference (attached as an appendix to this report). This includes rights of access and reporting lines direct to statutory officers, the Head of Audit Partnership and appointed external auditors where appropriate.

The Committee is not a substitute for the management function of internal audit, risk management, governance, or any other sources of assurance. The role of the Committee is to examine these functions and to offer views and recommendations on the way in which these functions are managed and conducted.

The purpose of this report is to outline where the Committee has gained assurance during the year, particularly over areas of governance, risk management, Standards, and internal control.

Membership & Meetings

During 2022/23 the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee was comprised of nine Members (plus two non-voting Parish Councillors appointed by the Council for a three-year term of office) and met five times.

The Committee is supported throughout the year by senior officers and managers of the Council who are regularly present. In addition, the Council's External Auditors (Grant Thornton) regularly attend meetings of the Committee.

The following table outlines Member and Officer attendance at 2022/23 Audit, Governance and Standards Committee meetings.

Member	Role	Audit, Governance and Standards Committee Meeting Date				
		26-July-22	27-Sep-22	14-Nov-22	16-Jan-23	13-Mar-23
Cllr Alan Bartlett	Member	Present	Present	Present	Present	Apologies
Cllr Martin Cox	Member	Apologies	Present	Present	Present	Present
Cllr Dinesh Khadka	Member	Apologies	Present	Absent	Present	Apologies
Cllr Heidi Bryant	Member	Apologies	Apologies	Apologies	Absent	n/a
Cllr Stanley Forecast	Member	Apologies	Present	Present	Apologies	Present
Cllr John Perry	Member	Present	n/a	n/a	n/a	In attendance
Cllr Stuart Jeffery	Member	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present
Cllr Ziggy Trzebinski	Member	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present
Cllr Sandra Knatchbull	Member	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present
Cllr Dan Wilkinson	Member	Present	Present	Apologies	Present	Apologies
Peter Coulling	Parish Representative	Present	Apologies	Present	Present	Present
Peter Titchener	Parish Representative	Apologies	Present	Present	Present	Absent
Cllr Anne Brindle	Substitute Member	Present				
Cllr Clive English	Substitute Member	Present				
Cllr Fay Gooch	Substitute Member	Present				
Cllr Bob Hinder	Substitute Member	Present				
Cllr Patrik Garten	Substitute Member		Present			Present* (Member)
Cllr Maureen Cleator	Substitute Member			Present		Present

Officer	Audit, Governance and Standards Committee Meeting Date				
	26-July-22	27-Sep-22	14-Nov-22	16-Jan-23	13-Mar-23
Head of Policy, Communications and Governance	Present	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Director of Strategy, Insight and Governance	n/a	n/a	n/a	Present	n/a
Team Leader – Contentious and Corporate Governance	Present	n/a	n/a	Present	Present
Senior Legal Advisor – Corporate Governance	n/a	Present	n/a	n/a	n/a
Head of Audit Partnership	n/a	n/a	n/a	Present	Present
Interim Head of Internal Audit	Present	Present	Present	n/a	n/a
Interim Deputy Head of Audit Partnership	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	Present
Director of Finance, Resources and Business Improvement	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present
Head of Finance	n/a	n/a	n/a	Present	n/a
Senior Finance Manager	Present	Present	n/a	n/a	n/a
Finance Manager	Present	n/a	n/a	Present	n/a
External Auditor – Grant Thornton	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present
Interim Head of Mid Kent Revenues and Benefits Partnership	Present				
Corporate Insight, Communities and Governance Manager	n/a	n/a	Present	n/a	n/a
Senior Information Governance Officer	n/a	n/a	Present	n/a	n/a

All Committee agendas, papers and minutes are available on the [Council's website](#).

Activity

Over the course of the year the Committee considered, examined and made decisions on the following areas within its Terms of Reference:

July 2022	September 2022	November 2022	January 2023	March 2023
Update on the Committee on Standards in Public Life recommendations	Complaints Received Under the Members Code of Conduct	Information Governance Report 2021/22	External Auditor's Progress Report and Sector Update	Complaints Received Under the Members Code of Conduct
Annual Governance Statement and Local Code of Corporate Governance 21/22	External Auditor's Audit Progress Report	Interim Internal Audit and Assurance Report 21/22	Treasury Management, Investment and Capital Strategies 23/24	External Auditor's Progress Report and Sector Update
Annual Internal Audit Report and Opinion 21/22	Budget Strategy – Risk Assessment Update	External Audit Progress report	External Audit Annual Report 2020/21	Risk Management Annual Report 22/23
Model Code of Conduct	Audit, Governance & Standards Committee Annual Report 21/22	Budget Strategy – Risk Assessment Update	Budget Strategy – Risk Assessment Update	Internal Audit and Assurance Plan 23/24
Housing Benefit Subsidy Claim 2020/21	External Audit Plan 2021/22		Update on Kent Model Code of Conduct	Budget Strategy – Risk Assessment Update
Fraud and Compliance Team Update 2020/21 and 2021/22			Annual Governance Statement – Mid Year update	
External Audit 2020/21			Treasury Management Mid-Year review	
Draft Annual Accounts 2021/22				
Treasury Management Annual Review 21/22				
Budget Strategy – Risk Assessment Update				

Key

Internal Audit Activity

External Audit Activity

Finance Activity

Standards Activity

Governance Activity

Sources of Assurance

The Audit, Governance and Standards Committee have drawn on a variety of sources of assurance to fulfil their responsibilities. During 2022/23 assurance from the following sources was considered:

Finance Activity

The Committee reviewed and provided challenge on the annual accounts.

The Committee considered and reviewed the Treasury Management and Budget strategies.

Internal Audit Activity

The Council received an unqualified Annual Opinion from the Head of Internal Audit. This opinion considers the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the authority's framework of governance, risk management and control arrangements.

Both the updated 2022/23 and the 2023/24 audit plans included detail of audit assurance work for the year. The Committee were given the opportunity to comment on the work of internal audit prior to endorsing the plan for delivery.

Governance Activity

The Committee reviewed the Annual Governance Statement which supported the overall conclusion of the Head of Internal Audit Opinion. The Committee specifically gained assurance from this document as it explains the processes and procedures in place to enable the Council to carry out its functions effectively.

The Committee provided independent review of the Data Protection action plan in conjunction with proposed changes in Data Protection legislation.

The annual risk management report provided an overview of the effectiveness of the Council's risk management framework and the controls in place to manage corporate and operational risks.

External Audit Activity

The Committee provided effective challenge to the External Auditors and gained assurance from the reports and updates provided by Grant Thornton during the year.

Standards Activity

The Committee reviewed complaints received under the Members' Code of Conduct and provided challenge around a revised Code.

Dealing with complaints about Council Members

It is a requirement under the Localism Act 2011 that all Councils adopt a Code of Conduct and that the Code adopted must be based upon the Nolan Principles of Conduct in Public Life. The current Members' Code of Conduct ("the Code") for Maidstone Borough Council is set out in the Constitution.

The Localism Act 2011 requirement to adopt a Code of Conduct also applied to all Parish Councils. Most Parish Councils in the Maidstone area have adopted a similar Code of Conduct to the Borough Council, based on a Kent wide model. A few Parish Councils have adopted their own Code.

Under the Localism Act 2011 Maidstone Borough Council is responsible for dealing with any complaints made under the various Codes of Conduct throughout the Maidstone area.

The Constitution stipulates that oversight of Code of Conduct complaints is part of the remit of the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee.

During the year ending 31 March 2023, 5 new Member complaints were received. All of the complaints related to a Parish / Town Councillor. Two of these complaints were investigated and no breach of the Code was established, and the remaining three were being considered by the Monitoring Officer.

Conclusion

The Audit, Governance and Standards Committee has worked in partnership with the Council's Internal and External Auditors and received support from Officers. This has provided robust and effective independent assurance to the Council on a wide range of risk, governance and internal control issues.

The Audit Committee can demonstrate that it has appropriately and effectively fulfilled its duties during 2022/23 as set out in the respective minutes.

Appendix I – Terms of Reference & Responsibilities

Audit Activity

- a) To consider the Head of Internal Audit Partnership's annual report and opinion, and a summary of Internal Audit activity (actual and proposed) and the level of assurance it can give over the Council's corporate governance arrangements.
- b) To consider reports dealing with the management and performance of Internal Audit Services, including consideration and endorsement of the Strategic Internal Audit Plan and any report on agreed recommendations not implemented within a reasonable timescale; and the Internal Audit Charter.
- c) To consider the External Auditor's Annual Audit Letter, relevant reports, and any other report or recommendation to those charged with governance; and ensure that the Council has satisfactorily addressed all issues raised. To comment on the scope and depth of external audit work and to ensure it gives value for money.
- d) To review and approve 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 Policy and Resources Committee or Council.
- e) Consider and review the effectiveness of the Treasury Management Strategy, Investment Strategy, Medium Term Financial Strategy, Annual Report and Mid-Year review and make recommendations to the Policy and Resources Committee and Council.
- f) Recommend and monitor the effectiveness of the Council's Counter-Fraud and Corruption Strategy.

Governance

- a) To maintain a financial overview of the operation of Council's Constitution in respect of contract procedure rules, financial regulations and codes of conduct and behaviour.
- b) In conjunction with Policy and Resources Committee to monitor the effective development and operation of risk management and corporate governance in the Council to ensure that strategically the risk management and corporate governance arrangements protect the Council.
- c) To monitor Council policies on 'Raising Concerns at Work' (Whistleblowing') and the 'Anti-fraud and corruption' strategy.
- d) To oversee the production of the authority's Annual Governance Statement and to agree its adoption.
- e) The Council's arrangements for corporate governance and agreeing necessary actions to ensure compliance with best practice and high standards of ethics and probity. This Committee will receive the annual review of the Local Code of Corporate Governance and may make recommendations to Policy and Resources Committee for proposed amendments, as necessary.
- f) To consider whether safeguards are in place to secure the Council's compliance with its own and other published standards and controls.

Standards

- a) The promotion and maintenance of high standards of conduct within the Council.
- b) To advise the Council on the adoption or revision of its Codes of Conduct.
- c) To monitor and advise the Council about the operation of its Codes of Conduct in the light of best practice, and changes in the law, including in relation to gifts and hospitality and the declaration of interests.
- d) Assistance to Councillors, Parish Councillors and co-opted members of the authority to observe the Code of Conduct.
- e) To ensure that all Councillors have access to training in Governance, Audit and the Councillor Code of Conduct; that this training is actively promoted; and that Councillors are aware of the standards expected under the Councils Codes and Protocols.
- f) To deal with complaints that Councillors of the Borough Council and Parish Councils may have broken the Councillor Code of Conduct.
- g) Following a formal investigation and where the Monitoring Officer's investigation concludes that there has been a breach of the Code of Conduct a hearing into the matter will be undertaken. See the procedure at 4.2 of the Constitution for dealing with complaints that a Councillor has breached the Code of Conduct.
- h) Advice on the effectiveness of the above procedures and any proposed changes.
- i) Grant of dispensations to Councillors with disclosable pecuniary interests and other significant interests, in accordance with the provisions of the Localism Act 2011.