

TITLE OF REPORT: Annual Report of the Audit and Standards Committee 2014/15

**REPORT OF: Darren Collins, Strategic Director, Corporate Resources
Mike Barker, Strategic Director, Corporate Services and Governance**

Purpose of the Report

1. Cabinet is asked to consider the Audit and Standards Committee Annual Report for 2014/15 and agree that this report is submitted to Council.

Background

2. In line with best practice the Audit and Standards Committee is required to report to Cabinet and Council on the Committee's activity each year. The report for 2014/15 was agreed by the Audit and Standards Committee on 27 July 2015.

Proposal

3. Cabinet is asked to consider the Audit and Standards Committee's annual report at Appendix 2 and agree to submit it to Council. The report provides an overview on the work of the Audit and Standards Committee during 2014/15, and describes how it has had a positive impact on governance, financial reporting and audit issues across the Council, as well as providing challenge and independent assurance on the risk management framework and associated internal control environment.

Recommendations

4. It is recommended that Cabinet endorse the annual report of the Audit and Standards Committee for 2014/15 and agree that it is submitted to Council.

For the following reason:

To strengthen the Council's arrangements for oversight by councillors of governance, audit, risk management, the internal control framework, value for money and efficiency.

APPENDIX 1

Policy Context

1. The proposal supports the vision for Gateshead as outlined in the Sustainable Communities Strategy, Vision 2030 and the Council Plan. In particular, it supports the priority to ensure a sustainable Gateshead by building capacity across the Council and ensuring the best use of resources.

Background

2. In line with best practice, the Audit and Standards Committee is required to submit an annual report to Cabinet and Council, and also any further reports and recommendations as it sees fit. The areas of activity of the Audit and Standards Committee during 2014/15 are set out in the Annual Report.

Contents of the Report

3. Appendix 2 outlines the activity which the Audit and Standards Committee has covered over the last year.
4. The Audit and Standards Committee has received reports in the following areas:
 - Internal Audit planning, performance and activity
 - Annual Internal Audit benchmarking results
 - Internal Audit recommendations
 - Internal Audit external assessment against compliance with Public Sector Internal Audit Standards
 - External Audit planning, performance and activity
 - Corporate Risk Management and Resilience activity
 - The Annual Governance Statement and supporting evidence
 - Treasury Management Policy and mid-year update.
 - Local Code of Governance update
5. There were no reports in year which were specific to Standards issues. No complaints have been received under the Member's Code of Conduct, that required investigation, nor was there any guidance or best practice issued during the year that warranted a report. The Monitoring Officer is responsible for maintaining and promoting high standards within the Council and he and his staff have contributed to the Audit work on good governance particularly those matters relating to the Corporate Risk Management activity and the Annual Governance Statement.
6. Based on the evidence presented during the year and at the meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee on 22 June 2015 it was concluded that the Council's system of internal control and governance framework is effective.

Consultation

7. The Audit and Standards Committee considered and agreed the contents of this report at their meeting of 27 July 2015.

Alternative Options

8. There are no alternative options.

Implications of Recommended Option

9. Resources:

- a) **Financial Implications** - The Strategic Director, Corporate Resources confirms that there are no financial implications arising from this report.

- b) **Human Resources Implications** – None.

- c) **Property Implications** – None.

10. **Risk Management Implications** - The Audit and Standards Committee receives quarterly reports on risk management and has been instrumental in championing risk awareness training for councillors.

11. **Equality and Diversity Implications** – None.

12. **Crime and Disorder Implications** - None.

13. **Health Implications** – None.

14. **Sustainability Implications** – None.

15. **Human Rights Implications** - None.

16. **Area and Ward Implications** – None.

17. **Background Information** – Report and minutes of the Audit and Standards Committee meeting on 27 July 2015.

Contents of the Report to Cabinet and Council – 2014/15

The Audit and Standards Committee has considered the following areas of activity during 2014/15:

Internal Audit planning, performance and activity

As at 31 March 2015 101% of the Internal Audit Plan was completed. This resulted in 81 audit reports. Of these reports 69 (85%) found systems to be operating well or satisfactory, with 12 (15%) systems having significant weaknesses, of which 4 of these instances were schools.

All significant weakness reports are being followed up as part of the Internal Audit process and the Audit and Standards Committee will monitor the outcomes.

Based on this evidence arising from internal audit activity during 2014/15, the Council's internal control systems and governance and risk management arrangements are considered to be effective.

The Internal Audit Service has also co-ordinated the Council's National Fraud Initiative (NFI) work and has supported Council managers with irregularity, e-mail, internet and other disciplinary investigations on an ongoing basis during 2014/15 with quarterly updates to Audit and Standards Committee.

Other reports received during 2014/15 and relating to Internal Audit included the CIPFA Benchmarking Results for 2013/14 and a report on the outcome of external assessment against Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) The Audit and Standards Committee also approved the Audit Strategy and Plan and the approach to follow up of recommendations

The Audit and Standards Committee will continue to monitor Internal Audit's progress on a quarterly basis against the 2015/16 Audit Plan.

External Audit planning, performance and activity

The following external audit reports have been reviewed over the year:

Quarterly Audit Progress Reports – these reports included annual audit fee levels for 2014/15, certification of grant claims and returns and the Audit Strategy for 2014/15. Updates have also been provided on national publications in areas relevant for the Committee. This included a Fraud Briefing based on the Protecting the Public Purse Annual Fraud and Corruption survey results.

The Committee were also asked to consider how they exercise oversight of certain key management processes in relation to some specific areas of

governance, with a potential to impact upon the financial statements, during 2014/15. This was a requirement to satisfy the external auditors that such oversight was in place in order to comply with International Auditing Standards. The Committee agreed that an effective level of oversight was in place.

Corporate Risk Management and Resilience activity

The Committee receives quarterly reports on the assurance derived from risk management. These reports make Councillors aware of the arrangements that exist within the Council for managing risk, the impact that these have had and the plans for further development of risk management arrangements. A member of the Audit and Standards Committee during 2014/15, Councillor John Hamilton, is the Councillor Champion for Risk Management.

The Annual Governance Statement and supporting evidence

The Annual Governance Statement for 2014/15 concluded that the Council's system of internal control, risk management and governance framework is effective.

The Audit and Standards Committee approved the Annual Governance Statement for 2014/15 following a review of the evidence, detailed below, and evidence seen by the Committee during the year.

Cabinet Members

Assurance was sought from Members of the Cabinet on the effectiveness they felt could be placed on the Council's corporate governance arrangements. They concluded that effective governance arrangements are in place.

Senior Managers

Service Directors completed self-assessment assurance statements detailing the level of assurance obtained from their key control processes. The conclusion of this exercise found that senior managers agreed that effective control systems were in place overall. These areas will be examined as part of the 2015/16 Audit Plan and the outcomes reported to the Audit and Standards Committee in October 2015.

Internal Audit

The Internal Audit Service has undertaken audit work throughout the year based on the risk based audit plan. In addition the Council has a framework of assurance available to satisfy it that risks have been properly identified and are being managed by controls that are adequately designed and effective in operation. This includes assurance from a variety of sources other than the Internal Audit Service. These other audit systems have been assessed as part of the Audit Plan.

Based on this audit activity the overall opinion of the Chief Internal Auditor for the year 2014/15 was that internal control systems and risk management and governance arrangements are effective.

A review of the effectiveness of Internal Audit has also been undertaken for 2014/15 in line with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2011. This review focused upon compliance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards and the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Head of Internal Audit, reliance placed by the external auditor on Internal Audit's work, an assessment of the effectiveness of the Audit and Standards Committee and relevant local performance information. Based on the review the Council's system of Internal Audit was considered to be operating effectively.

Risk Management

Risk management is embedded in the Council through a Corporate Risk Management Policy which includes the requirement to identify strategic and operational risks, assess those risks for likelihood and impact, identify mitigating controls and allocate responsibility for those controls. The Council maintains and reviews a register of its business risks, linking them to strategic business objectives and assigning ownership for each risk. Risk management awareness is an integral part of the Council's employee competency framework and a comprehensive training programme has been developed for employees at all levels.

The Strategic Director, Corporate Resources reported that risk management arrangements during the year were effective.

Performance Management and Data Quality

The Council has a Corporate Performance Management Framework which helps it deliver the priorities within the Council Plan. The monitoring of performance takes place at key performance points as identified in the framework including quarterly performance reported to Group Management Teams and Corporate Senior Officer meetings.

In addition performance is also monitored, measured, challenged and scrutinised on a six monthly basis at Cabinet and respective Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

Based on evidence arising from the performance management process for 2014/15 effective controls are in place.

Views of the External Auditor and other External Inspectors

Mazars, the Council's external auditor, issued an Annual Audit Letter covering the financial year 2013/14. This comprised of two elements: the audit of the Council's financial statements and an assessment of the Council's arrangements to achieve value for money in its use of resources. An unqualified opinion was given in both of these areas for 2013/14.

Other external inspectorates' reports have been issued from time to time on management and governance arrangements to the Council. In one instance, an inadequate OFSTED report was issued for a junior school which will be followed up as part of the 2015/16 audit plan.

The Legal and Regulatory Framework

Assurance has been obtained from the Strategic Director, Corporate Services and Governance as the Monitoring Officer who has a legal duty to ensure the lawfulness and fairness of decision-making within the Council. The Council has a Constitution in place and compliance with established policies, procedures, laws and regulations is ensured by the requirement to give the Strategic Director, Corporate Services and Governance the opportunity to comment on every report submitted to a decision-making body.

Financial Controls

Assurance has been obtained from the Strategic Director, Corporate Resources, who is designated as the responsible officer for the administration of the Council's financial affairs under section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972, that financial controls are effective. Systems in place include Financial Regulations, the opportunity to comment on the financial implications of committee reports, monitoring meetings and evidence from internal and external audit.

Partnerships

Service Directors review partnerships within their service plans on an annual basis. As partners are key to the delivery of the Council's objectives assurance of their control and governance systems is required. Service Directors have also been required to provide assurance on governance arrangements through their self-assessment statements and all Services are required to identify, through their business plans, where delivery of activity could impact on partnership working.

During 2014/15 updated corporate guidance on the management of partnerships was issued including a Partnership Toolkit.

Based on evidence arising from partnerships for 2014/15 effective controls are in place.

Other Reports

Treasury Management Policy & Strategy & Six Monthly Update

In line with CIPFA's Code of Practice on Treasury Management the Annual Treasury Policy and Strategy are reviewed by the Audit and Standards Committee prior to being reported to Cabinet and Council. A six monthly position is also reported through the Audit and Standards Committee to highlight progress on investment performance and borrowing.

Local Code of Governance Update

The Council has a local code of governance which was originally presented to the Audit Committee in April 2007. In line with good practice the document should be reviewed regularly and the Audit Committee were asked to consider a revised version on 16 March 2015 which they agreed.