



Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee
(previously known as the Audit Committee)
2016/17



Introduction

Councillor Liam Preece
Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee
(appointed May 2017)



The Audit and Risk Assurance Committee here at Sandwell, as across local government, is a key component of a council's corporate governance. It provides an independent and high-level focus on the audit, risk management, assurance and reporting arrangements that underpin good governance and financial standards.

The purpose of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee is to provide independent assurance to the council on the adequacy of the risk management framework and the internal control environment. It provides independent review of the governance, risk management and control frameworks and oversees the financial reporting and annual governance processes.

It also oversees the work of both the internal and external auditors, helping to ensure that efficient and effective assurance arrangements are in place. The key benefits of the Committee can be seen as:

- increasing public confidence in the objectivity and fairness of financial and other reporting;
- reinforcing the importance and independence of internal and external audit and similar review processes;
- providing additional assurance through a process of independent review; and
- raising awareness of the need for internal control and the implementation of audit recommendations.

It has been a particularly eventful year for the Committee as it has been at the forefront of how the council has faced the challenges arising from the publication of the Gowling WLG report. Also, alongside this report, the Committee has received and dealt with a number of other troubling matters brought to our attention through regular updates on allegations of fraud and misconduct. This has resulted in a number of referrals to both the council's Monitoring Officer and the West Midlands Police.

Taking all of this into account, I believe it has been another successful year for the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee and we look forward to building on this during 2017-2018.

Finally, as the new Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee I would like to thank all the Councillors who served on the Committee during the year, in particular the previous Chair, both our internal auditors and KPMG who as our external auditors have provided us with strong advice along the way, and all of the officers who have contributed towards its success.

The Committee's business

During the year the Committee conducted the following business:

Land Sales and Other Matters (including the Gowling WLG and QC reports)	Internal Audit Annual Report
Sale of Land and Buildings Protocol	Internal Audit Progress Reports
Questions to Councillor I Jones regarding issues arising from the Gowling WLG investigation	Internal Audit Charter
Council Updates on Allegations of Fraud and Misconduct	Internal Audit Plan
	Strategic Risk Register Updates
	Counter Fraud Updates
	Audit Committee – Terms of Reference
	Audit Committee – Self Assessment
Statement of Accounts	Audit Committee Annual Report
Report to those Charged with Governance (ISA 260)	CIPFA Audit Committee Updates
KPMG - Annual Audit Letter	Financial Regulations and Contract Procedure Rules
KPMG – Certificate of Grants and Returns	Local Government Ombudsman Report
KPMG – External Audit Plan	Whistleblowing Update
Annual Governance Statement and Action Plan Update	Work Programme

The Committee's work on Allegations of Fraud and Misconduct

As can be seen from the above, one of the main areas of work that the Committee played an active role in during the year was in helping the council deal with the issues arising from the publication of the Gowling WLG report (also known as the "Wragges report"). As part of this work, the Committee has:

- Received the findings of the Gowling WLG and the accompanying QC's advice
- Approved the procedural changes put in place to address the findings of the report
- Approved the new Sale of Land and Building Protocol for inclusion as an appendix to the Financial Regulations
- Considered if further improvements were required to the Financial Regulations and Contract Procedure Rules
- Invited to the Committee and questioned Councillor I Jones on the events contained in the Gowling WLG report and the subsequent QC advice in relation to land sales and other matters.

The Committee also received further reports on completed investigations relating to allegations of fraud and corruption, as follows:

- Land sales to Councillor Bawa and Councillor Hussain regarding Compulsory Purchase Orders on their homes
- Housing allocations to members of Councillor Hussain's family
- Councillor I Jones and Councillor Rouf's involvement in the disposal of a plot of land.
- The allocation of a council property to Councillor Frear

- Former Councillor Rowley's involvement in the disposal of a number of council owned containers to a member of the public
- Former Councillor Rowley's involvement in the hire of marquees
- The lease arrangements for the council offices at Roway Lane
- Wednesbury Celebrates
- Hill Top Community Development Association
- Concerns that two employees had landscaped their properties using Council materials
- Concerns that the council had paid for the removal of an electricity sub-station as part of the arrangements for the sale of a plot of land at Florence Road to a member of Councillor Rouf's family

From these reports, the Committee referred the following matters to the council's Monitoring Officer:

- Land sales to Councillor Bawa and Councillor Hussain regarding Compulsory Purchase Orders on their homes *
- Housing allocations to members of Councillor Hussain's family *
- Councillor I Jones' and Councillor Rouf's involvement in the disposal of a plot of land
- Hill Top Community Development Association

* The Committee noted that these matters had also been referred to the West Midlands Police.

The Conclusion of the Committee for 2016/17

While concerns were expressed regarding the issues raised in the Gowling WLG and associated reports, many of these were of an historic nature and it was noted that strong action was being taken to address the issues identified and therefore, the Committee were able to confirm:

- That the system of internal control, governance and risk management in the council was adequate in identifying risks and allowing the council to understand the appropriate management of these risks.
- That there were no areas of significant duplication or omission in the systems of internal control, governance and risk management that had come to the Committee's attention, that had not been adequately resolved.

Sources of assurance

The Committee also gained assurance in order to produce the above conclusion, from the following sources:

The work of Internal Audit

The Council's Internal Auditors gave the following opinion in their Annual Report:

"Based on the work undertaken during the year and the implementation by management of the recommendations made, Internal Audit can provide reasonable assurance that the council has adequate and effective governance, risk management and internal control processes".

The work of the External Auditors

During the year the external auditors (KPMG) reported back to what was the Audit Committee on a number of occasions as detailed in section 4 above. At the time of this report we were awaiting their final report and once received, it will feed into this document where appropriate.

The Annual Governance Statement

The Annual Governance Statement operated throughout the year ended 31 March 2017, and up to the date of the approval of the annual report and accounts. Based on the council's established risk management approach, the following issues were assessed as being significant for the purpose of the Annual Governance Statement. Over the coming year appropriate steps to address these matters and further enhance governance arrangements will be taken:

- Children's Services
- Children's Trust
- Resilience of the Medium Term Financial Strategy
- Land Sales and Other Matters
- Compliance with Contract Procedure Rules and Allocation of Grants
- Business Continuity

Risk Management

The Committee regularly receives and reviews the council's Strategic Risk Register, and assesses the assurance provided in order to demonstrate how risks are being mitigated. It may also, where required, call in individual risks for a more detailed review.

The Committee's main achievements

The Committee believes its key achievements during the year were:

- Helping the council deal with the issues arising from the publication of the Gowling WLG report and other associated areas, in particular making sure that the governance and control framework is improved.
- Maintaining a good working relationship with the council's internal and external auditors.
- Maintaining an awareness of the likely changes to the appointment of external auditors through the Local Audit and Accountability Act.
- Reviewing the Committee's terms of reference in order to ensure they remain fit for purpose.
- Providing additional assurance through a process of on-going independent review.
- Raising the profile of internal control issues across the council and of the need to ensure that audit recommendations are implemented.
- Regular consideration and review of the council's strategic risk register and accompanying assurance map.
- Maintaining a detailed focus on the actions being taken to combat fraud
- Building the skills and knowledge of Committee members through regular technical updates and the consideration of related guidance issued by CIPFA.
- The continued presence of an independent member as Vice-Chair in order to broaden the Committee's experience and independent view point. In 2017/18 an additional independent member will also be recruited onto the Committee.
- Reviewing the Internal Audit Charter in line with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards.