



MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE AUDIT COMMITTEE held on Wednesday, 22 November 2023 at Lecture Theatre - Training Centre, Sadler Road, Winsford, Cheshire CW7 2FQ at 1.00 pm

PRESENT:

Members:

Councillor Peter Wheeler (Chair)
Councillor Sherin Akhtar
Councillor Rachel Bailey
Suzanne Horrill, Independent Audit Committee Member

Auditors:

Charles Black, Merseyside Internal Audit Agency
Anne-Marie Harrop, Merseyside Internal Audit Agency
Liz Luddington, Grant Thornton

Officers:

Lee Shears, Deputy Chief Fire Officer
Andrew Leadbetter, Director of Governance
Paul Vaughan, Treasurer
Chris Astall, Risk and Projects Officer
Emilie Salkeld, Governance Officer

1A RECORDING OF MEETING

Members were reminded that the meeting would be audio recorded.

1B APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Brian Gallagher.

1C DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

There were no declarations of Members' interests.

1D MINUTES OF THE AUDIT COMMITTEE

A typographical error was pointed out on page 7. The Independent Audit Committee Member also requested that her observations relating to the risk register score and targeting be included within the minutes.

RESOLVED:

Subject to minor amendments, the minutes of the Audit Committee held on Tuesday 26 September 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

1E ACTION TRACKER OF THE AUDIT COMMITTEE

The Director of Governance and the Treasurer provided an update against each of the actions. The updates were to be included in the tracker for the next Audit Committee meeting unless the actions had been completed.

It was noted that the following actions could be closed:

26th September 2023:
Item 6 – HR/ Payroll Review

2 INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT

Anne-Marie Harrop, a representative from Merseyside Internal Audit Agency (MIAA), was in attendance to present the report which updated Members on the progress made against the Internal Audit Plan for 2023-24.

She advised that the report on Whistleblowing and Implementation of HMICFRS Values and Culture Recommendations was complete and was in the agenda pack. She also noted that the following reviews were in progress: Key Financial Transactional Processing Controls; IT Asset Management; and National Fraud Initiative data.

She advised that follow ups on previous recommendations and the National Fraud Initiative review would be reported at the next meeting of the Audit Committee. All projected timescales were expected to be met.

RESOLVED: That

[1] the Internal Audit Progress Report be noted.

3 WHISTLEBLOWING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF HMICFRS VALUE AND CULTURE RECOMMENDATIONS REVIEW ASSIGNMENT REPORT 2023-24

Charles Black, a representative from MIAA, was in attendance to present the report which evaluated the systems and processes in place for Whistleblowing within the Service and provide assurance that a suitable plan for implementation of HMICFRS's recommendations from the Values and Culture report was in place. He noted that moderate assurance was awarded.

He highlighted the areas of good practice within the Service and explained each of the recommendations contained within the report. All recommendations had been accepted by officers and suitable management responses had been received and were contained in the report. He acknowledged that there were limitations associated with the survey, i.e., the relatively small sample size and the inability to determine whether the responses within the survey related to personal grievances and/ or general concerns rather than Whistleblowing.

Members were concerned about the report. They noted that there was a strong

preference among staff to report issues to line managers. Members discussed whether best practice would be to identify a single officer to whom whistleblowing concerns might be directed. In the case of the Service, this could be the Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager. However, given the likelihood of line manager involvement it made sense to provide suitable training to ensure that there was sufficient awareness amongst those likely to be engaged in any whistleblowing matters.

Members recognised the importance of the whistleblowing policy and practices associated with whistleblowing. It was important that staff felt confident about the whistleblowing arrangements.

Members asked that an action be added to the Tracker with a view to a verbal update being provided at each Audit Committee meeting until all recommendations were complete.

RESOLVED: That

[1] the Whistleblowing and Implementation of HMICFRS Values and Culture Recommendations Review Assignment Report 2023-24 be noted.

[2] an action be added to the Tracker so that the Committee would receive a verbal update about progress with the recommendations at each meeting until they were completed.

4 AUDITOR'S INTERIM ANNUAL REPORT

Liz Luddington, a representative from Grant Thornton, introduced the report which focused on the Authority's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in its use of resources and the opinion on the Authority's statement of accounts. She explained that recommendations from the previous year were either completed or near complete and highlighted some recommendations for 2023-24 relating to the Audit Committee and Blue Light Collaboration.

She advised that as a result of delays in the valuation of the Authority's pension liability, which was a national issue, the report remained in draft and the audit opinion had not been finalised.

Members thanked the auditor for providing a comprehensive explanation. A Member queried whether any action could be taken to prevent the delay from occurring in future years. The Treasurer explained that as the delay was caused by factors outside the auditor's control, it was not clear what could be done.

Members were happy with the content of the report. It was agreed that the reasons for the delay in the completion of the report should be clearly explained in the report to the Fire Authority on 6th December 2023 when the Auditor's Interim Annual Report would be shared with all Members.

RESOLVED: That

[1] the Auditor's Interim Annual Report be noted.

Note:

The Treasurer provided an update to the Committee on progress with the tender process for securing internal audit services from when the current contract expires at the end of March 2024. The process was being run jointly with Cheshire Constabulary and would commence at the end of November 2023.