

Northchurch Parish Council

Internal Audit Report 2024-25

Sally King

***For and on behalf of
Auditing Solutions Ltd***

Background

All town and parish councils are required by statute to make arrangements for an independent internal audit examination of their accounting records and system of internal control and for the conclusions to be reported each year in the Annual Return.

This report sets out the work undertaken in relation to the 2024-25 financial year, during our visit on 16th April 2025.

Internal Audit Approach

In undertaking our review for the year, we have had regard to the materiality of transactions and their susceptibility to potential mis-recording or misrepresentation in the year-end Statement of Accounts/Annual Return. We have employed a combination of selective sampling techniques (where appropriate) and 100% detailed checks in several key areas to gain sufficient assurance that the Council's financial and regulatory systems and controls are appropriate and fit for the purposes intended.

Our programme of cover has been designed to afford appropriate assurance that the Council's financial systems are robust and operate in a manner to ensure effective probity of transactions and to afford a reasonable probability of identifying any material errors or possible abuse of the Council's own and the national statutory regulatory framework. The programme is also designed to facilitate our completion of the 'Annual Internal Audit Report' in the Council's Annual Return, which requires independent assurance over several internal control objectives.

Overall Conclusion

We have concluded that, based on the programme of work undertaken this year, the Council has again maintained more than adequate and effective internal control arrangements. We commend the Clerk for the excellent records kept by her and thank her for her assistance, which has ensured the smooth progress of our review process.

Consequently, we have completed and signed the 'Internal Audit Report' as part of the year's AGAR process having concluded that, in all significant respects, the internal control objectives set out in that report were achieved throughout the financial year to a standard adequate to meet the needs of the Council.

Detailed Report

Maintenance of Accounting Records & Bank Reconciliations

Our objective here is to ensure that the accounting records are being maintained accurately and currently and that no anomalous entries appear in cashbooks or financial ledgers. The Clerk continues to maintain the accounting records utilising the bespoke RBS Alpha software, reporting on a Receipts and Payments basis. The Council banks with Unity Trust Bank with savings held with NS & I. The Investment account previously held with St James Place has now been closed.

We have: -

- Verified the restated opening balances with the closing balances disclosed in the 2023-24 Statement of Accounts and Annual Return.
- Noted that the cost centre and expenditure coding structure is appropriate for the management needs of the Council in terms of controlling expenditure.
- Checked detail in the March 2025 current account cashbook, examining all transactions with reference to the supporting bank statement.
- Verified closing balances on 31st March 2025 to the final Alpha Trial Balance, with no issues arising.
- Reviewed the detail on bank reconciliations as of 31st March 2025 on all accounts to ensure that no long-standing cheques or other anomalous reconciling entries are apparent.
- Verified the year-end bank balances for all bank accounts, ensuring the accurate disclosure of the combined balance in the year-end Accounts & AGAR.
- Noted that the accounting system is backed up to drop box and one drive.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no matters have arisen in this area of our review process warranting formal comment or recommendation; we have ensured the accuracy of the year-end balances reported in the detailed Statement of Accounts and AGAR.

Review of Corporate Governance

Our objective here is to ensure that the Council has a robust regulatory framework in place; that Council meetings are conducted in accordance with the adopted Standing Orders and that, as far as we are able to ascertain, no actions of a potentially unlawful nature have been or are being considered for implementation.

We note that the Council's extant corporate governance documentation in the form of Standing Orders & Financial Regulations were re-affirmed at the Annual Council meeting held on 13th May 2024, minute refs. 15/24 (s) & (h) respectively.

Reviewed the external auditor's report, issued since our last visit, to confirm they are raising no matters regarding the Councils accounts and governance. Noting the comment regarding coding of grant income on the 2023-24 Agar. This has been "restated" in the Statement of Accounts return for this year.

We have also reviewed minutes of the Full Council for the year to 31st March 2025 to identify whether there are any salient financial or other issues that may affect the Council's future performance and financial stability, we are pleased to report that no such issues were identified.

We are pleased to note that payments listings are submitted to Council on a regular basis and that grants, and donations are approved by the Council.

Although The Clerk is qualified to Community Governance Level 6, it was noted at the meeting held on 2nd December 2024 the Parish Council does not qualify to exercise the General Power of Competence as it does not have a sufficient number of elected councillors minute ref. 77/24.

Conclusion

We are pleased to report that no significant issues have been identified in this area this year.

Review of Expenditure

Our aim here is to ensure that: -

- Council resources are released in accordance with the Council's approved procedures and budgets;
- Payments are supported by appropriate documentation, either in the form of an original trade invoice or other appropriate form of document confirming the payment as due and/or an acknowledgement of receipt, where no other form of invoice is available;
- All discounts due on goods and services supplied are identified and appropriate action taken to secure the discount;
- The correct expense codes have been applied to invoices when processed; and
- VAT has been appropriately identified and coded to the control account for periodic recovery.

We have considered the Council's arrangements for the review, approval and authorisation of the release of funds in the year, noting that each online payment is subject to appropriate authorisation, scrutiny and approval by members at the monthly Council meetings.

To ensure compliance with the above criteria, we have examined a sample of 17 payments processed in the financial year. Our test sample provides a broad cross section of expenditure and traders' invoices totalling £130,539 and equates to 84% of total non-pay related expenditure.

We note that robust payment procedures are in place for the online banking; with the Clerk posting the payments online and 2 councillors releasing funds.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area warranting formal comment.

Assessment and Management of Risk

Our aim here is to ensure that the Council has put in place appropriate arrangements to identify all potential areas of risk of both a financial and health and safety nature, whilst also ensuring that appropriate arrangements exist to monitor and manage those risks to minimise the opportunity for their coming to fruition.

- We note that that the Council have reviewed the Risk Register and it was readopted at the Annual Council meeting held on 13th May 2024 minute ref. 15/24 (r).
- Examined the Council's current insurance policy with Gallaghers underwritten by Hiscox commencing 11th May 2024, Public Liability cover being provided at £10m and Employers Liability also at £10m. The Fidelity Guarantee stands at £350,000.
- An annual inspection of Council's play area at the Recreation Ground is undertaken by Play Inspection.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area warranting formal comment.

Review of Income

In this area of our review work, we aim to ensure that all income due to the Council is identified, invoiced (where applicable) and recovered at the appropriate rate and within a reasonable time scale.

The Council has additional income to the annual Precept, from grants, allotments, O2 mast wayleaves payment, investment interest and lease of part of the allotment site to Sunnyside Rural Trust.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area warranting formal comment.

Review of Salaries

In examining the Council's payroll function, we aim to confirm that extant legislation is being appropriately observed as regards adherence to the Employee Rights Act 1998 and the

requirements of HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) legislation as regards the deduction and payment over of income tax and NI contributions.

The clerk is the only employee.

Conclusions

We are pleased to record that no issues arise in this area.

Petty Cash Account

The Council does not operate a petty cash account: the clerk reclaiming any out-of-pocket expenses as and when they are incurred.

Precept Determination Budgetary Control and Reserves

We aim in this area of our work to ensure that the Council has appropriate procedures in place to determine its future financial requirements leading to the adoption of an approved budget and formal determination of the amount of the precept to be submitted to the parent Council and that effective arrangements are in place to monitor budgetary performance throughout the financial year and that the Council has identified and retains appropriate reserve funds to meet future spending plans.

Confirmed that the budget and precept was approved by Full Council at an extraordinary meeting held on 27th January, minute refs. EX31/24 (a & (b) respectively the latter being set at £46,106.

Finally, we note that, as of 31st March 2025 the Council held total reserves of 224,575. The level of the General Reserve on 31st March 2025 has been reported as £47,531 this is within the recommended guidelines of 3-9 months average expenditure.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area warranting formal comment.

Asset Registers

The Governance and Accountability Manual requires all councils to develop and maintain a register of assets identifying detail of all land, buildings, vehicles, furniture, and equipment owned by the Council.

We are pleased to note that the Clerk had prepared a detailed asset register which has been updated for 2024-25.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that there are no significant issues arising in this area of our review process warranting formal comment or recommendation. We have ensured the appropriate recording of these assets in the AGAR.

Investments and Loans

Our objectives here are to ensure that the Council is investing “surplus funds”, be they held temporarily or on a longer term basis, in appropriate banking and investment institutions, that an appropriate investment policy is in place, that the Council is obtaining the best rate of return on any such investments made, that interest earned is brought to account correctly and appropriately in the accounting records and that any loan repayments due to or payable by the Council are transacted in accordance with the relevant loan agreements.

We are pleased to note the Council has an investment policy in place which has been reviewed and adopted at the Annual Council meeting held on 13th May 2024 minute ref 15/24 (n).

The Council doesn't have any loans either repayable by, or to it.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area warranting formal comment.

Statement of Accounts and AGAR

The 1996 Accounts and Audit Regulations required all Councils to prepare annually a detailed Statement of Accounts, together with supporting statements identifying other aspects of the Council's financial affairs.

We have reviewed the Statement of Accounts and AGAR detail prepared, as generated from the accounting software and other third party documents with no obvious errors or anomalies in the detailed content.

Conclusions

No issues have been identified in relation to the verification of detail in the Statement of Accounts and AGAR this year.

Based on our detailed work during the year on the Council's systems of financial control and content of the detailed Statement of Accounts and that summarised detail set out in the AGAR, we have signed off the Internal Audit Report of the AGAR assigning positive assurances, in each relevant area.