

**Much Hadham Parish Council and
Burial Authority**

Internal Audit Report 2023-24

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*For and on behalf of
Auditing Solutions Ltd*

Background

Statute requires all town and parish councils to arrange 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 Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR).

This report sets out the work undertaken in relation to the 2023-24 financial year, which was concluded at our office on 3rd May 2024. We have again undertaken our review for the year remotely: we wish to thank the Clerk for assisting in the process, providing all necessary documentation in electronic format to facilitate completion of our review for the year and sign off the Internal Audit Certificate in the year's AGAR.

Internal Audit Approach

In undertaking the review for the year, we have again had regard to the materiality of transactions and their susceptibility to potential misrecording or misrepresentation in the year-end Statement of Accounts and Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR). Our programme of cover is designed to afford appropriate assurance that the Council has appropriate and robust financial systems in place that 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 'Internal Audit Report' in the Council's AGAR process which requires independent assurance over several internal control objectives.

Overall Conclusion

We have concluded that, based on the satisfactory completion of our programme of work undertaken during our visit, the Council has again maintained more than adequate and effective internal control arrangements. We are pleased to acknowledge the continued quality of records maintained by the Clerk and thank her for her assistance, which has ensured the smooth progress of our review process. We are pleased to report that there are no issues arising this year warranting formal comment or recommendation.

We have completed and signed the 'Internal Audit Report' having concluded that, in all significant respects, the control objectives set out in that Report were being achieved throughout the 2023-24 financial year to a standard adequate to meet the needs of the Council.

Detailed Report

Maintenance of Accounting Records & Bank reconciliations

Our objective has been to ensure that the accounting records are being maintained accurately and currently and that no anomalous entries appear in cashbooks or financial ledgers.

We are pleased to note that the Clerk has prepared a detailed spreadsheet to maintain the accounting records for the year under review. The Council now holds its current account with Unity Trust. A second account with a small balance remains in place at Barclays Bank which is now surplus to requirements.

We have: -

- Checked and agreed the opening bank account balance with the 2023-24 closing Statement of Accounts and certified Annual Return detail.
- Checked and agreed a sample of the transactions in the spreadsheet cashbook to Unity Trust bank account for the financial year.
- Checked that bank reconciliations are prepared on a regular basis.
- Verified the accuracy of detail in the bank reconciliation as of 31st March 2024 ensuring that no long-standing uncleared cheques or other anomalous entries exist.
- Ensured the accurate disclosure of the bank balances in the year's detailed Statement of Accounts and Annual Return.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that there are no issues arising in this area of our review process warranting formal comment or recommendation. We have verified the accurate disclosure of the combined bank balances in the year's detailed Statement of Accounts and AGAR.

Review of Corporate Governance

Our objective is to ensure that the Council has robust corporate governance documentation and processes in place, and that, as far as we may reasonably be expected to ascertain (as we do not attend Council or Committee meetings) all meetings are conducted in accordance with the adopted Standing Orders and no actions of a potentially unlawful nature have been or are being considered for implementation. We have:-

- Noted that Standing Orders were reviewed and readopted at the meeting held on 3rd August 2021 (minute ref. 21/140).
- Further noted that Financial Regulations were revised at the meeting held on 6th December 2022, to allow operation of the bank account by a nominated Councillor, should the Clerk be unavailable or incapacitated (minute ref 22/198).

- Examined the minutes of meetings of the Council for the year to date to identify whether any issues exist that may have an adverse effect on the Council's future financial stability.

Conclusion

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area of our review process warranting formal comment or recommendation.

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;
- Members have met their fiduciary duties approving release of each payment in accordance with extant legislation;
- All discounts due on goods and services supplied are identified and appropriate action taken to secure the discount;
- The correct expense analysis has been applied to invoices when processed; and
- VAT has been appropriately identified.

To ensure compliance with the above criteria, we have examined a sample of payments processed in the financial year. Our test sample provides a cross section of expenditure and traders' invoices with no issues arising.

We are pleased to note that a schedule of payments is presented to Council at each meeting for approval.

Finally in this area we note that The Clerk has provided a detailed schedule of Vat to be reclaimed for the financial year totalling £1,734.10.

Conclusion

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area of our review process warranting formal comment or recommendation.

Review of Income

In this area of our review, we aim to ensure that income due to the Council is identified, invoiced (where applicable) and recovered at the appropriate rate and within a reasonable time scale; also that it is now banked promptly in accordance with the Council's Financial Regulations.

The major sources of income for the Council and Burial Authority are the precept, grants, and pavilion hire, together with burial and associated fee income.

Conclusions

We are pleased to record that no issues arise in this area of our review process warranting formal comment or recommendation.

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 have: -

- Noted that a comprehensive risk assessment has been undertaken during the year and that this risk assessment was formally approved by Council at its meeting on 5th March 2024 (minute ref. 24/42).
- Examined the Council's new insurance policy with Ansvar, with cover being provided to 31st March 2024, to ensure that appropriate cover is in place, noting that both Public and Employer Liability cover stands at £10m, and Fidelity Guarantee at £250k all of which appears appropriate for the Council's current needs.
- Noted that quarterly inspections are conducted at the Council Play Area by Broadmead Leisure Ltd and reports are submitted to the Council. An annual inspection is also carried out by RoSPA approved contractor.

Conclusions

We are pleased to record that no issues arise in this area of our review process warranting formal comment or recommendation.

Budgetary Control and Reserves

Our objective here is to ensure that the Council has a robust procedure in place for identifying and approving its future budgetary requirements and level of precept to be drawn down from the District Council: also, that an effective reporting and monitoring process is in place. We also aim to ensure that the Council retains appropriate funds in general and earmarked reserves to finance its ongoing spending plans, whilst retaining appropriate sums to cover any unplanned expenditure that might arise. We have:

- Noted from our review of the minutes that members are provided with regular management accounting information.
- Noted that a detailed budget exercise was undertaken, commencing December 2023, (minute ref. 23/182 (iii)) which was concluded in the January 2024 meeting.
- Further noted that the precept has was set by Council at its meeting of 9th January 2024 at £44,000 this is an increase of £1,000 on the previous financial year (minute ref. 24/25 (iii)).

The Council's total reserves on 31st March 2023 stood at £101,472 of which the £61,579 are General Reserves.

We further note that a Reserves Policy was adopted at the meeting held on 10th January 2023.

Conclusions

We are pleased to record that no issues arise in this area of our review process warranting formal comment or recommendation.

Petty Cash Account/Clerk's Expenses

The Council does not operate a petty cash account. Any out-of-pocket expenses incurred by the clerk in connection with her work for the Council being claimed through expenses.

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 requirements of HM Revenue and Customs (HMR&C) with regard to the deduction and payment over of income tax and NI contributions, together with meeting the requirements of the local government pension scheme (where applicable).

We note that the Clerk prepares a schedule showing the total hours to be worked for the year to 31st March 2024. This has been averaged out over the total period to calculate a standard amount to be paid by standing order each month.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area of our review process warranting formal comment or recommendation.

Asset Registers

The Governance and Accountability Manual requires that all Councils 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 a formal asset register is in place on an excel spreadsheet. There were no additions or disposals during the 2023-24 financial year.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area of our review process warranting formal comment or recommendation. We have verified that the asset value as shown in the Register as mentioned above has been reflected in the AGAR.

Investments and Loans

Our objectives here are, where applicable, to ensure that the Council is “investing” surplus funds, be they held temporarily or on a longer term basis in appropriate banking and investment accounts; 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 appropriate loan agreements.

The Council has two PWLB loans. We have tested repayments of PWLB loans as recorded in the Council’s accounts to independent PWLB statements; also verifying the accurate disclosure of the residual year-end loan liability in the year’s AGAR.

Conclusions

We are pleased to record that no issues have currently been identified in this area and have verified the accurate disclosure of the residual year end loan liability in the AGAR.

Statement of Accounts and Annual Return

The Accounts and Audit Regulations 1996 (as amended periodically) required councils to prepare a formal Statement of Accounts and supplementary Supporting Notes. With effect from March 2011, the AGAR now forms the only statutory Accounts of the Council that are subject to external audit review and certification.

We have reviewed and verified the accuracy of detail contained in the above documentation by reference to the financial information provided by the Clerk and other third party documents.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area of our review process warranting formal comment or recommendation and, on the basis of our review work, we have completed the Annual Internal Audit Report of the year’s AGAR assigning positive assurances in each relevant area and would ask that we be provided with detail of the completed Sections 1 & 2 once they have been adopted by Council and been signed off by the Chairman and Clerk/RFO.