

Cheltenham Borough Council Audit, Compliance and Governance Committee Minutes

Meeting date: 9 July 2025

Meeting time: 6.00 pm - 6.40 pm

In attendance:

Councillors:

Adrian Bamford (Chair), Chris Day, Dr Cathal Lynch, Ben Orme (Vice-Chair) and Dr David Willingham

Independent Member: Duncan Chittenden

Also in attendance:

Paul Jones (Deputy Chief Executive (Section 151 Officer)), Lucy Cater and Victoria Bishop (Head of Governance, Risk and Assurance)

1 Apologies

There were no apologies.

2 Declarations of interest

There were none.

3 Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 May 2025 were approved as a true record.

4 Internal Audit Annual Opinion 2024-25

Lucy Cater, Assistant Director SWAP (LC) introduced her report, which is a summary of work conducted throughout the year; an opinion has to be submitted to the council to feed into the Annual Governance Statement and subsequently into the Annual Statement of Accounts. She directed Members to Page 18, where an overview of

work undertaken is presented, saying that CBC's record is good compared with other councils, and giving an overall reasonable assurance on controls and frameworks in place.

In response to Members' questions, LC and the Deputy Chief Executive confirmed that:

- the overall opinion is reasonable, even though one or two of the individual audits may be low reasonable;
- agreed actions are shared with Members on a quarterly basis, and although a monthly list is circulated internally to senior officers, allowing them to keep track of outstanding actions and chase if necessary, there is often no movement, and circulating the list to Members on a more frequent basis could be confusing;
- of the four agreed actions from 2023-24 which remain open, two relate to grant income – a follow-up audit has been conducted and a draft report will be issued soon. One related to work around an old CBH audit (service charges at James Donavan Court) - more evidence was required to close the audit and now this has been received, the policy is being reviewed and issued soon, closing off the action; the other concerns ICT business continuity plans, and a follow-up meeting with Publica/ICT is planned;
- some of the agreed actions are part complete, part not, and in these cases, the usual practice is to close off the old agreed action, open a new one with the matters that remain open, and bring that to the next committee;
- there are more Priority 1 and 2s this year than in 2023-4 – this came out of the voids process audit presented at the last meeting. An officer has been tasked with looking at the voids process, going back to the very beginning; he will discuss this with an auditor next month to see how work is progressing, and hopes to create a spreadsheet with all the voids and where they are at the moment. This work can be shared at the next meeting.

No vote was required on this item. The Chair thanked the Accounts Payable team for an excellent result.

5 Information Requests Annual Report 2024-25

The Governance, Risk and Assurance Manager introduced her report, focussing on the highlights and CBC's performance, and advising of a typographical error at Paragraph 5.1 – the number of requests is 847, not 4.847.

In response to Members' questions, she confirmed that:

- there is a process whereby FOI requests can be rejected if they will take too long to fulfil; she couldn't say how many requests are rejected but feels that this is an area where the council could be more robust. It currently uses exemptions where necessary, and has refused some requests in addition to pushing back on any requests which just ask questions rather than ask for recorded information, but a governance and assurance officer has just been appointed who will assist with FOIs and support a more rigorous process;
- the poor response record for the clean and green team can partly be attributed to staff in that area spending much of their working day out and

about, but a process for quarterly reporting is being set up, and the new officer can help here too, with closer monitoring and following up with officers; progress on this can be reported at the next meeting;

- in addition, a new software system is being introduced which sends automated reminders, after which a personalised email is sent and the matter can be escalated if no response is received;
- some responses not provided within the deadline could be just a couple of days overdue; this can be taken on board in next year's report;
- there is no specific documentation of FOIs sent directly to councillors, rather than to the public authority, although elements of an FOI could be concerned with internal communications. With the new system, it will be quick and easy to push back on FOIs that don't concern information we hold – such as ones which need to go to the county rather than the borough.

No vote was required.

6 Annual Governance Statement and Local Code of Corporate Governance

The Governance, Risk and Assurance Manager said the council is responsible for ensuring that business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and has a statutory duty to prepare an Annual Governance Statement as part of the statement of accounts. In preparing the statement, the council has to assess itself against the Local Code of Corporate Governance. This report recommends approval of the draft 2024-25 Annual Governance Statement and 2024-25 Local Code of Corporate Governance. The report has been written by the Monitoring Officer, and the amendments to the Code and Statement are minor.

A Member raised the issue of safeguarding, suggesting that everyone's understanding of this and a multi-agency safeguarding regime should be increased, maybe by conditioning safeguarding training for third parties as part of a licence application. He was concerned that lack of understanding could result in the criminal and sexual exploitation of children and vulnerable adults, the repercussions of which could be significant, and without going into specifics, felt that CBC is an important cog in some situations, especially around licensing and housing.

He said the licensing policy is currently under review, and it would be good to learn what has gone wrong elsewhere, and what we can do to improve safeguarding, including challenging partners at the county and the police to engage more fully with the council. The Governance, Risk and Assurance Manager confirmed that new safeguarding policies are a key area of focus in the licensing policy review, and said she was happy to discuss this further.

The Member felt that the policy could be improved with a good data sharing agreement, to ensure information is shared in a timely and transparent way. It was agreed that the outcome of the licensing policy review and Members' thoughts about it would be noted.

Regarding the Local Code of Corporate Governance, a Member felt that in view of its importance, it would be helpful if it could be explained on the website through some sort of comms strategy, perhaps a short, simple video highlighting five things every

resident should know and directing them where to go to find out more. He suggested that it would be useful if communications intentions were included in future reports.

The Governance, Risk and Assurance Manager said she would discuss this further with the Monitoring Officer, agreeing that transparency and good communication with the public aligns well with other work the council does.

The draft 2024-25 Annual Governance Statement and the 2025 Local Code of Corporate Governance were approved.

7 Work Programme

The Chair confirmed that the annual report would be ready for the next meeting, and that although the agenda looks busy, a lot of the items relate to external audit so it should be quite manageable.

8 Any other item the chairman determines to be urgent and requires a decision

There was no other business.

9 Date of next meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for 22 October 2025.