

**MINUTES OF AUDIT AND STANDARDS COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD ON 4 JANUARY 2024**

Present: Councillors A Ali (Chair), G Coombes, K Gurney, M Hussain and S Owen
CFO A Hopkinson, Mr G Britten, Mr J Pekszyk, Mr T Warner, Mrs N Upton and Ms S Rowlett

23-24/ASC/28 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Versallion and Wenham.

The Assistant Chief Officer and Debbie Hanson of EY were unable to attend the meeting.

Councillor Owen expressed the view that, given the low level of attendance at the previous two meetings of the Committee, Members should be reminded of the importance of fulfilling their duties by attending meetings of Committee they have been appointed.

The Chair advised that he would request the Chair of the Authority to provide such a reminder to all Members at the next meeting of the Authority.

23-24/ASC/29 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Other Interests

There were no declarations of interests.

23-24/ASC/30 Minutes

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 17 October 2023 be confirmed as a true record.

23-24/ASC/31 Communications

Mrs S Rowlett presented RSM's analysis of emergency services risk registers 2023 for information. RSM had been collecting this information for the previous eight years. Many of the risks, including operational and workforce risks, remained the same, along with finance and ICT related risks.

It was important for Members, in noting these risks, to take a forward look at emerging risks and ensure that these were included in the Authority's Corporate Risk Register.

Councillor Owen requested that some analysis should be undertaken on communications submitted by RSM to the Committee by Officers so that how the communications related to local issues and the operation of Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service were highlighted for Members' consideration prior to the meeting.

In relation to a question from Councillor Coombes about the new public procurement legislation and the value of contracts held by the Service, the Chief Fire Officer reported that he would provide a written response confirming the anticipated timescales of the new Procurement Bill and detailing the value of the contracts held by the Service.

Councillor Hussain joined the meeting at 10:06am.

RESOLVED:

That the communications be received.

23-24/ASC/32 Public Participation

There were no members of the public present at the meeting.

Councillor Owen expressed concern about the lack of public engagement at meetings and suggested that consideration be given to how this could be improved.

Mr G Britten, the Authority's Monitoring Officer, advised that, following the governance review undertaken in March 2023, the section dealing with public participation in the Authority's Standing Orders had been expanded and, in his recollection, there had been a meeting within the previous year at which a member of the public submitted a question to the Authority.

The Chief Fire Officer added that one of the duties of the recently appointed Head of Communications and External Affairs was to increase engagement with the business community and other stakeholders and he would ask her to investigate how the Authority could improve its engagement with the general public.

Councillor M Hussain suggested that members of the public could be advised of their right to attend and ask questions at meetings of the Authority at the public events attended by the Service.

23-24/ASC/33 Internal Audit Progress Report

Mrs S Rowlett of RSM introduced a report on progress made against the internal audit plan for 2023/24.

Two audits were in their final stages and would be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee, these being strategic approach to partnership and collaboration and contaminants and staff health and safety.

In response to a question, Mrs Rowlett explained that the audits had been slightly delayed due to illness; however, she confirmed that the audit plan would be concluded as agreed by the end of the financial year.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

Councillor Gurney joined the meeting at 10:19am.

23-24/ASC/34 Internal Audit Actions Update

Mr J Pekszyk, Head of Strategic Support and Asset Management, presented the Committee with a summary of actions arising from internal audit reports over the last three fiscal years together with any exception report on those actions currently in progress, progress to date on current action plans, proposals to extend the original timing for completion and those that have been completed since the last meeting.

It was noted that extension requests had been received in relation to actions arising from the data management (actions covering the questionnaire and training needs analysis to identify training requirements) to 31 March 2024 and key financial controls (action covering debt chasing activity) to 30 April 2024.

In response to questions, the Committee was advised that the Head of ICT was the Head of Service responsible for the data management actions and that the draft roll-out plan would be updated and implemented following the completion of those actions.

RESOLVED:

1. That the progress made to date against action plans be acknowledged.
2. That the extension requests relating to data management actions 2 and 3 to 31 March 2024 and Key Financial Controls action 3 to 30 April 2024 be approved.

23-24/ASC/35 Review of the Effectiveness of the Fire & Rescue Authority's Internal Auditors

The Committee considered a report on the effectiveness of the effectiveness of its Internal Audit arrangements.

In reference to issues highlighted in paragraphs 5.5 and 5.6 of the report, the Head of Strategic Support and Asset Management reported that the area in need of improvement was not the effectiveness of the internal audit arrangements but the processes in which the Service prioritised the various action plans it was responsible for implementing. He confirmed that the Service was satisfied with the current internal audit arrangements.

The Chair requested that the review of effectiveness take place bi-annually, i.e every 2 years.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted and that the Committee's satisfaction with the level of internal audit provided by RSM be recorded.

23-24/ASC/36 Report on Registration of Interests and Gifts/Hospitality

Mr G Britten, the Monitoring Officer, presented the annual report on the registration of interests and gifts/hospitality by Members and Officers during the past year.

There had been no returns received from Members. The gifts/hospitality received by Officers were set out in an appendix to the report and a further narrative was circulated to Members at the meeting. Two of the items related to trips abroad. The reasons for these were set out in the report. No costs had been incurred by the Service.

In response to a question, the Chief Fire Officer reported that any request for participation in trips overseas had to be approved by him and that there was no requirement for this to be in writing.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of the report be noted.

23-24/ASC/37 Work Programme

The Committee received its work programme for 2023-24.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme for 2023-24 and the 'cyclical' Agenda Items for each meeting in 2023-24 be noted.

23-24/ASC/38 Corporate Risk Register

RESOLVED:

That, pursuant to Sections 100A(2) and 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the discussion of the following item on the grounds that the matters to be discussed involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act (as amended):

Item

Corporate Risk Register

The meeting ended at 11.30 am