

Classification	Item No.
Open	

Meeting:	Audit Committee
Meeting date:	31 st July 2023
Title of report:	Internal Audit Annual Report 2022/23
Report by:	Sam Evans Executive Director of Finance (S151 Officer)
Decision Type:	Council
Ward(s) to which report relates	All

Executive Summary:

This report summarises the results of internal audit work during 2022/23 and, as required by the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015, gives an overall opinion of the Authority's control environment.

The conclusions drawn from the report are:

The Council is going through a period of transformation, which includes changes to governance processes as well as revisions to staffing structures. Whilst going through a period of change there is a knock-on effect which results in significant change to planned priorities and a requirement to focus resources on those critical activities essential to the pandemic recovery, and to areas where more risks are perceived to be.

The internal audit programme was reduced in 2022/23, due to responding to an unprecedented amount of whistleblowing allegations during the year, and the reduced staffing level following a member of staff leaving and another securing a position in another part of finance. The work of internal audit is intended only to provide reasonable assurance on controls.

Based upon the results of audit work undertaken during the year my opinion is that the Authority's control environment provides moderate assurance that the significant risks facing the Authority are addressed.

Recommendation(s)

That:

- Members note the contents of this report.

Key Considerations

Background information to this report is contained in the context section of the main report. There are no decisions required for this report.

Community impact/ Contribution to the Bury 2030 Strategy

Ensuring compliance with Financial Procedures and Policies

Equality Impact and considerations:

24. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to -

- (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- (b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- (c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

25. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services.
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Assessment of Risk:

The following risks apply to the decision:

Risk / opportunity	Mitigation
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Risks are highlighted in Audit Plans and in the terms of reference for each Audit review.	Internal Controls are reviewed in each audit to mitigate identified risks. Actions are reported to managers and progress is monitored and reported on a regular basis.
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Consultation:

N/a

Legal Implications:

The Council must have a sound system of internal control which facilitates the effective exercise of its functions, including risk management. This is both a legal requirement and a requirement of the Financial Regulations set out in the Council's Constitution. This report provides information on the work of the Council's Internal Audit Service, in ensuring compliance.

Financial Implications:

There are no financial implications arising from this report. The work of the Internal Audit Service supports the governance framework.

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Background papers:

Internal Audit Plan 2022/23
 Internal Audit Progress reports 2022/23

Please include a glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.

Term	Meaning
NNDR	National Non-Domestic Rates
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations

Internal Audit Annual Report

2022/23

“Providing assurance on the management of risks”



Internal Audit Annual Report 2022/23

“Providing assurance on the management of risks”

This document summarises the results of internal audit work during 2022/23 and, as required by the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015, gives an overall opinion of the Authority’s control environment.

Opinion

Based upon the results of audit work undertaken during the year my opinion is that the Authority’s control environment provides moderate assurance that the significant risks facing the Authority are addressed.

Context

This report outlines the work undertaken by Internal Audit between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023.

Management is responsible for establishing and maintaining appropriate risk management processes, control systems, accounting records and governance arrangements i.e. the control environment. Internal Audit plays a vital role in reviewing whether these arrangements are in place and operating properly and providing advice to managers and assurance to the organisation, Chief Executive, Executive Directors, S151 Officer, the Audit Committee and ultimately the taxpayers that the Council maintains an effective control environment that enables it to manage its significant business risks. On behalf of the Council, Internal Audit review, appraise and report on the efficiency, effectiveness and economy of these arrangements. The assurance work culminates in an annual opinion on the adequacy of the Authority’s control environment which feeds into the Annual Governance Statement.

Internal Audit is required by professional standards to deliver an annual audit opinion and report to those charged with governance timed to support the Annual Governance Statement. The annual internal audit opinion must conclude on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the organisation's framework of governance, risk management and control. The annual report must incorporate:

- the opinion;
- a summary of the work that supports the opinion; and
- a statement on conformance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards

The impact of Covid19 on public services since the middle of March 2020 has been considerable. It has resulted in significant change to planned priorities and a requirement to focus resources on those critical activities essential to the pandemic response and recovery. The Internal Audit Team have embraced the Council's hybrid working arrangements and adapted their approach to internal auditing in response.

During 2022/23, the audit service had a significant number of investigations to undertake, following the receipt of unprecedented number of whistleblowing concerns during the year. Also, as part of the Finance restructure, a vacancy was created in the Audit Team in the last quarter of the year, when a team member was successful in securing a role in the Accountancy service of the Council. The impact of these two incidents interrupted the delivery of the audit plan. Additionally, some audits proved to take longer than was originally anticipated, the auditors found they had to do extended sampling and have improved their levels of challenge during reviews, and this also has impacted on delivery of the full plan.

The audit service is now returning to business as usual; vacancies have been filled and a full audit team has been in place from 5th June 2023.

Internal audit work during 2022/23

The underlying principle to the 2022/23 plan was risk and accordingly audits were only completed in areas that represent an 'in year risk'.

The methodology adopted in preparing the plan, and the plan itself, was presented to the Audit Committee on 25th July 2022.

Since the original plan was presented to Audit Committee, several planned audits were not undertaken. This was due to a variety of reasons which include: -

- Audit reviews undertaken taking more time than anticipated, with wider scopes being introduced for reviews and a deeper level management

review process. However, this has produced higher quality reports which add more value to the service and aid improvement of governance processes within the organisation.

- Planned audit time to complete outstanding work from 2022/23 was underestimated.
- Contingency days for fraud / investigation / management requests was underestimated.

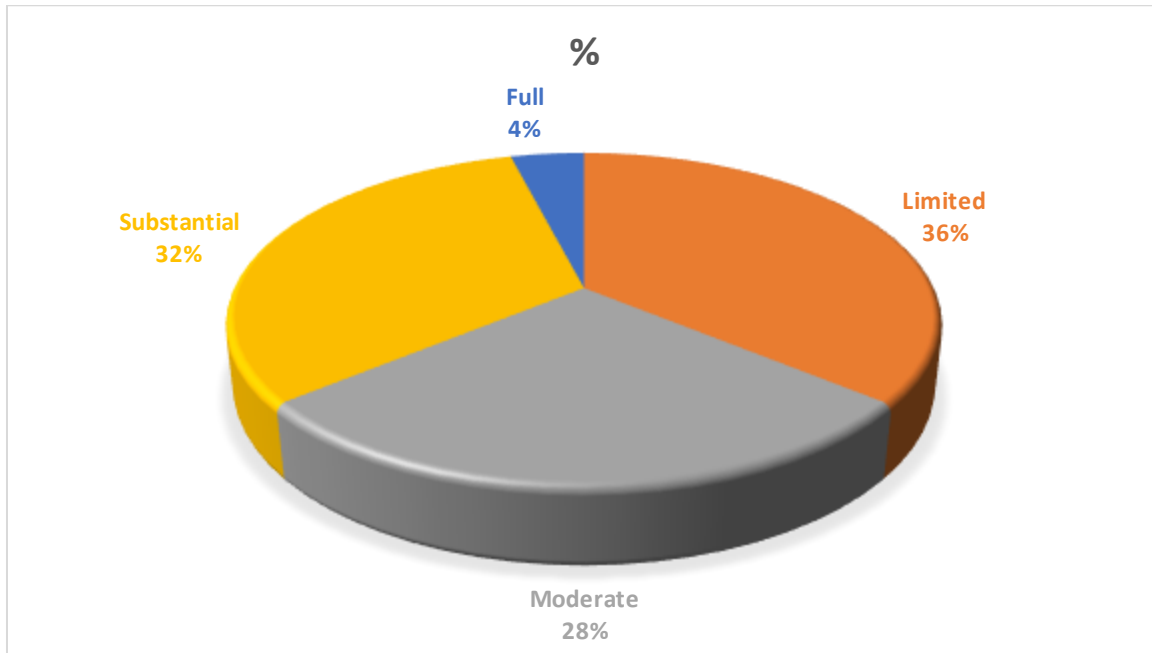
In addition, the Audit Team have been operating at a reduced capacity due to staffing changes.

Variations to the plan during the year are inevitable if the plan is to adequately reflect changing circumstances and the changing organisation. The net effect is that although the work undertaken during the year was different to that anticipated 12 months ago, some of the agreed audits have been completed, or are substantially complete and in the process of being finalised. This work will be carried forward and completed in the 2023/24 annual audit plan.

Summary of assurance work

The key outcome of each audit is an overall opinion on the level of assurance provided by the controls within the area audited. Audits will be given one of four levels depending on the strength of controls and the operation of those controls. The four categories ranging from the lowest to highest are Limited, Moderate, Substantial and Full. The opinion reflects both the design of the control environment and the operation of controls. The Audit Committee has received regular reports during the year summarising audits undertaken.

As shown in the following chart the outcome of 36% of audits (9 reviews), completed in 2022/23 are positive having provided a substantial or full level of assurance to the areas examined. There are however a proportion of audits, 28% (7 reviews), where controls were considered to be moderate. Most of these relate to specific areas rather than represent an across-the-board breakdown in controls but there are some topics which may have a wider impact. There were 9 reviews, (36%), which were considered to give a limited level of assurance. A positive management response was received to all reports to indicate the recommendations would be addressed. To provide some assurance going forward, additional time has been added into the 2023/24 audit plan to carry out follow up audits and to evidence that recommendations have been actioned. The key issues arising from all audits have been reported to the Audit Committee throughout the year.



A full list of the assurance work completed during the year is given in Appendix A.

The Council, and local government generally, continues to face significant challenges, including the ongoing financial challenges and the need to deliver savings, in addition to the impact on service delivery in terms of both increased costs and lost income. The Council has continued in 2022/23 to go through restructuring and it is important that controls and governance remain in place and that there is an understanding of responsibilities and accountabilities. Regularly updated forecasts of income and expenditure pressures against the available funding were provided internally through the Council's monitoring framework. The Council has prepared its 2021/22 Statement of Accounts, however they have not yet been signed off due to a technical issue which impacts on all Greater Manchester Authorities. However, the external auditors have not raised any other concerns, this creates a significant level of assurance. The draft statement of accounts for 2022/23 and the draft annual governance statement for 2022/23 have also been prepared and published on the Bury Council website. It is expected that the accounts will be audited by the external auditors from the beginning of August 2023.

Recommendations are categorised according to the risks they are intended to mitigate. Categorising recommendations also assists managers in prioritising improvement actions. The current categories used, in increasing order of importance are Merits attention, Significant and Fundamental.

During the year 170 recommendations were made to address weaknesses in control which would not have been identified if the audit had not been undertaken. All the recommendations made were accepted by management and positive responses were received to indicate that they would be implemented.

Recommendations are followed up to ensure that they are implemented, and details of all follow-up reviews undertaken are provided to Audit Committee. Those recommendations showing as “Outstanding” are therefore subject to scrutiny by Audit Committee Members who may call in managers to explain delayed progress where appropriate.

Follow up exercises for reports with limited assurance should be undertaken within 3 months of the final report being issued to client. Follow up exercises for all other reports should be undertaken within six months after the final reports have been issued to the client. However, due to staff vacancies and the requirement of the team to respond and undertake whistleblowing investigations, the follow up targets were not met during 2022/23. It is anticipated that follow up exercises will be brought up to date in 2023/24, when the service restructure has been completed and the team is fully established.

Details of audits which were followed up during 2022/23 are provided at Appendix B.

The existing follow up process only involves 1 follow up in respect of outstanding actions and no subsequent tracking if these have not been undertaken. Further work is required to strengthen this area and this will be developed in 2023/24.

Schools

Individual school reviews were not undertaken in 2022/23. A new approach was introduced in 2020/21, with a thematic approach being adopted to look at topics within schools. This approach was continued throughout 2022/23. Arrangements are in place to undertake a full audit at a school if requested by the Director of Childrens Services, or the Executive Director of Finance. A School Assurance Board has been established, and this is attended by a representative from the Internal Audit Team, and therefore advice and support can be provided as it is requested.

In previous years the annual accounts for a small number of School Voluntary funds and Out of School Care Clubs were examined, as requested by the schools. A small fee was collected for these pieces of work. A decision was taken to withdraw this service for 2022/23, as the time taken in several cases was outweighing the income being collected, and due to audit resources being needed to focus on the services within the Council.

Summary of non-assurance work

Special investigations

The size and complexity of the Council means that some irregularities are inevitable and therefore, in addition to planned assurance work, a number of special investigations were needed during the year. Internal Audit assisted with / advised Human Resources regarding disciplinary issues as well as providing advice to Departments regarding suspected irregularities.

In 2022/23, information regarding 7 special investigations was submitted to Audit Committee. All the investigations have been completed.

Suspected frauds can be reported to our dedicated whistleblowing hotline 0161 253 6446 or by email to Whistleblowing@bury.gov.uk

Advice

Internal audit is most efficient when its advice is utilised to ensure that appropriate controls are incorporated at an early stage in the planning of policy or systems development. This work reduces the issues that will be raised in future audits and contributes to a stronger control environment. During the year advice was requested for a small number of issues

Examples of audit advice and support given include: -

- advice and support to the HR and Payroll teams as they develop the use of the i-trent system;
- Advice to schools to address enquiries regarding petty cash, how to deposit income to the Council bank account, retention of records and pecuniary interest.
- Advice to the Bereavement service regarding the review being undertaken of the income collection system.

Work is continuously undertaken to ensure that Departments are aware that they should approach Internal Audit as a consultancy resource and a contingency has been built into the annual audit plan for 2023/24 so that resources are available to meet any consultancy requests.

Certification

Audit can be required to certify grant claims. Seven grant claims were examined and approved by Internal audit during 2022/23. These were:

- Bus Diversity Net Gain Grant
- Bus Operators Grant
- Pothole Grant

- Public Sector Decarbonisation Grant
- Supporting Families Grant
- Track and Trace Support Payment Grant
- Universal Drugs Treatment Grant

Effectiveness

This section of the report sets out information on the effectiveness of the service and focuses on compliance with the Public Sector Internal Auditing Standards (PSIAS) and customer feedback.

A full externally conducted quality assessment of the service was conducted during 2016. The report of that assessment concluded that the audit service “partially conformed to the expectations of the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards.” Work since then has been undertaken to address the recommendations made. The review is due to be undertaken again in 2023/24, a date has yet to be agreed.

To assist with planning for the 2023/24 review and to guide the development of the Internal Audit Service, a high-level review of internal audit was commissioned in 2020/21. This report noted that it had identified that the Internal Audit Team are keen to deliver an effective compliant service within the Council, however, there are a number of historical, operational and cultural factors within both the team and the wider Council that inhibit the effectiveness of the team. The report included a series of recommendations and action has been taken to address these throughout 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23. Internal audit reports have been refreshed, and audit processes have been reviewed and changes have been made, particularly with the internal review process and challenge to the findings in reports, and with client engagement. As the new processes are embedding, there has been a slower turnaround of audit reports, and reviews have taken longer than the original target time provided for in the annual plan, however the quality of the resulting reports has improved. The audit plan for 2023/24 includes a time resource to ensure that developments continue to be made within the service, which include undertaking a self- assessment before the next external review takes place.

In accordance with best practice there is a rigorous internal review of all work undertaken by senior staff and the results feed into the staff appraisal process.

Following most audits a “post audit questionnaire” is issued to the relevant managers asking for their views on the conduct of the audit. The questionnaire includes a range of questions covering the audit approach, reporting format, etc. A key feature of the audit role is the need to sometimes be critical of existing or proposed arrangements. There is therefore an inherent tension that can make it difficult to interpret surveys. Post audit

questionnaires are not issued when an investigation is undertaken or if the audit is undertaken by an external partner.

In previous years the post audit questionnaire responses returned continued to evaluate the audit process and value of reports as excellent / good. All feedback received was positive and no negative feedback or comments had been received. For 2022/23, whilst allowing the new working style of audit to embed, audit questionnaires were not issued. These are to be reinstated for 2023/2024.

It is clearly important for any audit service to keep abreast of best professional practice. The internal audit service is fortunate in having strong links with colleagues both within Greater Manchester and nationally. The Service has a membership to the Institute of Internal Auditors providing its staff with technical and professional support. At a regional level there are networking opportunities for auditors specialising in schools, ICT, contracts and fraud. As well as good opportunities for continuing professional development and sharing best practice these activities provide advance information on new developments which can be reflected in the audit plan.

The Authority can be confident that a good quality Internal Audit service continues to be provided.

Opinion

The Council is going through a period of transformation, which includes changes to governance processes as well as revisions to staffing structures. Whilst going through a period of change there is a knock-on effect which results in significant change to planned priorities and a requirement to focus resources on those critical activities essential to the pandemic recovery, and to areas where more risks are perceived to be.

The internal audit programme has been reduced in 2022/23, due to responding to an unprecedented amount of whistleblowing allegations during the year, and the reduced staffing level following a member of staff leaving and another securing a position in another part of finance. It is the responsibility of the Council to develop and maintain the internal control framework. In undertaking its work, Internal Audit has a responsibility under PSIAS to provide an annual internal audit opinion on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the organisation's governance, risk and control framework (i.e. the control environment) and a summary of the audit work from which the opinion is derived.

No system of control can provide absolute assurance against material misstatement / loss or eliminate risk, nor can Internal Audit give that assurance. The work of internal audit is intended only to provide -reasonable assurance on controls. In assessing the level of assurance to be given, I have taken into account:

- Audit plan and other audit and assurance and advisory work completed in 2022/23; and audit work from prior years where systems or processes have not been subject to change.
- audits which are in draft and where a management response is awaited.
- any follow-up action taken in respect of audits from previous periods.
- any fundamental recommendations not accepted by management and the consequent risks (this is not applicable in 2022/23 as management accepted all recommendations).
- the effect of non-assurance work undertaken during the year; and
- the effect of any significant changes in the Authority's systems; and matters arising from previous reports to members.

Some significant issues have arisen during the year, with fundamental recommendations being made and limited assurance reports being issued, However, action plans have been agreed with the relevant managers to address the weaknesses identified. Where weaknesses have been identified, they have tended to relate to specific parts of the organisation rather than an across-the-board breakdown in controls. Those audits involving major control weaknesses are in the minority and in general terms, controls are sufficient to prevent or detect serious breakdowns in systems and procedures. However, it is clearly important that issues identified during the year are addressed.

For 2023/24 the Internal Audit Plan confirms resumption of planned audit work in key risk areas, and the Audit team is expected to be fully resourced for the majority of the year, and it is expected that wider coverage of organisational risks will be delivered.

I am satisfied that sufficient internal audit work has been undertaken to allow me to draw a reasonable conclusion as to the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's governance, control and risk processes.

Based upon the results of work undertaken by Internal Audit during the year my opinion is that the Authority's governance, control and risk management provides moderate assurance that the significant risks facing the Authority are addressed.

Appendix A

Summary of audits completed during the year and total number of recommendations made.

Audit		Level of Assurance	Report Date	Total number of recs made	No of Fundamental recs made
Included in annual opinion 2021/22 – so not included in 2022/23					
Bury Council					
	Estates Property Management	Limited	July 2022	16	7
	Choices for Living Well (Killelea) Petty Cash	Limited	July 2022	9	3
	Residential Placements	Moderate	June 2022	2	0
	Leisure Income	Limited	June 2022	9	1
Six Town Housing					
	None				
Reports to include in annual opinion for 2022/23					
Bury Council					
1	Contracts Register	Substantial	August 2022	4	0
2	NNDR Key Controls	Moderate	November 2022	3	0
3	Housing Benefit Key Controls	Substantial	November 2022	1	0
4	Council Tax Key Controls	Substantial	November 2022	2	0
5	Debtors Key Controls	Limited	January 2023	8	2
6.	Treasury Management Key Controls	Moderate	February 2023	5	0
7	Childrens Services Complaints	Substantial	January 2023	3	0
8	CCTV	Substantial	January 2023	1	0
9	Payroll Key Controls	Moderate	March 2023	9	0
10	Main Accounting Key Controls	Limited	March 2023	8	2
11	Transport Stores	Limited	March 2023	20	3
12	Supporting Families	Full	April 2023	0	0
13	Payroll and Additional Hours (Operations Department)	Moderate	May 2023	6	0
14	Cash and Bank Key Controls	Limited	May 2023	7	2

15	Creditors Key Controls	Limited	May 2023	4	1
16	Highways Maintenance	Substantial	May 2023	7	0
17	Procurement exercise (Specific creditor)	Limited	June 2023	5	1
	<u>Six Town Housing</u>				
18	Electrical Safety- Furnished Properties	Moderate	February 2022	3	0
19	Electrical Safety – Un furnished Properties	Moderate	February 2022	6	0
20	Disabled Facilities Adaptations	Limited	August 2022	4	2
21	Procurement of Contractors and Delivery of Capital Programme	Moderate	August 2022	4	0
22	Hoarders	Limited	October 2022	10	1
23	Anti Social Behaviour	Substantial	November 2022	3	0
24	No Access - Gas	Limited	April 2023	8	3
25	Housing Rents Key Controls	Substantial	April 2023	3	0

Appendix B

Summary of follow ups completed during the year.

		Report date	Recs made	Recs accepted	Follow up date	Recs implemented
	Bury Council					
1	GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations)	May 2021	15	15	May 2022	15
2	Members Allowances	August 2021	3	3	April 2022	3
3	ICES (Integrated Community Equipment Store)	November 2021	13	13	June 2022	11
4	Payroll Key Controls 2020/21	October 2021	7	7	October 2022	2
5	Council Tax Key Controls 2020/21	October 2021	6	6	July 2022	2
6	Housing Benefit Key Controls 2020/21	October 2021	2	2	June 2022	1
7	NNDR Key Controls	October 2021	5	5	July 2022	3
8	Main Accounting Key Controls 2020/21	October 2021	7	7	August 2022	6
9	Members Discretionary Budgets	November 2021	4	4	April 2022	3
10	Debtors' key controls 20/21	November 2021	5	5	April 2022	5
11	Cash and Bank Key Controls 2020/21	November 2021	4	4	September 2022	1
12	Treasury Management Key Controls 2020/21	November 2021	1	1	April 2022	1
13	Estates Property Management	July 2022	14	14	January 2023	7
14	Leisure Centres Income Review	May 2022	8	8	December 2022	4
15	Residential Placements	June 2022	1	1	February 2023	1
	Six Town Housing					

16	Data Quality	September 2021	4	4	September 2022	3
17	Procurement	November 2021	6	6	July 2022	4
18	Housing rent Key Controls 2020/21	February 2022	1	1	February 2023	1
19	Electrical Safety – Furnished Properties	February 2022	2	2	January 2023	1
20	Electrical Safety – Unfurnished Properties	February 2022	3	3	January 2023	2
21	Fire Safety	February 2022	2	1	January 2023	1