

Report to:	Audit Committee	Date: 09 February 2024
Subject:	Internal Audit Progress Report	
Report of:	Section 151 Officer	

Summary

1. This report sets out the progress to date against the annual audit plan 2023/24. The report enables Members to monitor the work of the Internal Audit service, raise any issues for further consideration and provide an opportunity to request further information or to suggest areas for additional or follow up work.

The conclusions drawn from the report are:

- The majority of work outstanding from the 2022/23 plan has now been completed and work on 2023/24 plan is progressing.
- Sixteen reviews have concluded, and reports have been issued to Members since the beginning of the financial year. Eight reports relate to the 2022/23 annual audit plan and were considered when formulating the annual audit opinion for 2022/23. Eight reports relate to the 2023/24 annual audit plan.
- Work on 2023/24 plan is progressing. Fourteen reviews are ongoing, five reviews are at draft report stage.
- Three follow up exercises and four second follow up exercises have been completed since Audit Committee met in December 2023.

.Recommendation(s)

- Members note this report and the work undertaken by Internal Audit

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Background

- 1.1 This report outlines the work undertaken by Internal Audit between from 18th November 2023 to 31st January 2024.
- 1.2 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. On behalf of the Council, Internal Audit review, appraise and report on the efficiency, effectiveness and economy of these arrangements and provide

assurance to the organisation (Chief Executive, Executive Directors, and the Audit Committee) and ultimately the taxpayers, that the Council maintains an effective control environment that enables it to significantly manage its business risks. The service helps the Council achieve its objectives and provides assurance that effective and efficient operations are maintained.

- 1.3 The assurance work culminates in an annual opinion given by the Head of Fraud, Audit Insurance and Risk on the adequacy of the Council's control environment, based on the work undertaken, and this opinion feeds into the Annual Governance Statement.
- 1.4 The Internal Audit Plan for 2023/24 provides for 898 days to be delivered throughout the 2023/24 year across all Council Departments, and group companies i.e., Six Town Housing and Persona. The Audit plan covers a range of themes.
- 1.5 The 2023/24 plan was approved by Audit Committee at the meeting on 30th March 2023.
- 1.6 Work has been continuing throughout the year to date, completing outstanding reviews from 2022/23 and addressing audits in the 2023/24 plan. Regular progress reports are produced, informing Members of audit activities, and this is the fourth report of the 2023/24 financial year covering the period from 18th November to 31st January 2024 which includes 10 completed weeks.

2.0 ISSUES

2.1 Annual Audit Plan

- 2.1.1 The annual plan for 2023/24 was presented to Audit Committee in March 2023 and provided for 898 audit days to be delivered throughout the year. At the December 2023 Audit Committee it was agreed to remove 120 days from the 2023/24 plan.

The original plan is shown at appendix A and has been updated to show the position as at 31st January 2024.

There have been two management requests for work to be undertaken before the end of the financial year, and these are: -

- Starters and leavers and control of establishment
- Assurance of Six Town Housing HR data to be transferred to the Council

After discussion with the Director of People and Inclusion it was agreed that the review of starters and leavers and control of establishment will be deferred until 2024/25. The assurance of Six Town Housing HR Data will be met from the contingency already built into the audit plan.

2.2 Audit Plan Progress

This report details the outcome of reviews undertaken, including work reported to Audit Committee in this period, work currently ongoing and draft reports which have been issued to Audit clients.

Audits completed and Reports Issued

2.2.1 Sixteen audits have been finalised and issued since commencement of the current financial year, eight of these reports were considered in formulating the annual opinion of the Head of Fraud, Audit, Insurance and Risk, and reflected in the Annual Governance Statement for 2022/23 and will not be carried forward and reflected in the opinion for 2023/24.

Full reports have been provided to Committee Members for each of these reviews.

2.2.2 The Table below summarises the two audits that have been finalised and issued since Audit Committee last met in December 2023, and the corresponding number of agreed actions and overall level of assurance provided for each of those audits. These reports will be considered when formulating the annual opinion of the Head of Fraud, Audit, Insurance and Risk which will be reflected in the Annual governance Statement for 2023/24.

Table 1: Final Reports Issued during period 18th November to 31st January 2024.

Audit	Number of agreed actions and priority				Level of Assurance
	Fundamental	Significant	Merits Attention	Total	
Bury Council					
Persona - Creditors	0	2	0	2	Moderate
Persona - Payroll	0	0	7	7	Substantial
Total	0	2	7	9	

Summary reports detailing the overall opinion, the findings, recommendations, and action plans of these reviews, are also presented in part B of the Audit Committee meeting. The summary reports are exempt from publication as they may contain information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual or information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the Authority).

2.2.3 In 2022/23, following a restructure within the Finance Department, a number of vacancies became available on the Internal Audit Team. From 5th June 2023, all vacancies on the team have been filled. The Audit Team falls under the portfolio of the Head of Fraud Audit, Insurance and Risk, and comprises two Senior Auditors, and three auditors (one of which is part time).

Since the resources for the 2023/24 plan were calculated, changes were identified that required 125 days to be removed the plan. The reason for the changes were reported to the December 2023 meeting of this committee.

Since the last meeting in December 2023, further slippage has been identified in 2023/24 plan due to detailed testing now required on the follow up process, the introduction of second follow up process and additional time required for investigations / completion of ongoing reviews. Consequently the 2023/24 audit plan will not be fully achieved. Audit reviews which have not been undertaken in 2023/24 will be reconsidered and where appropriate will be carried forward to the 2024/25 plan. The 2024/25 plan is to be presented to this committee this evening.

2.2.4 Any level of assurance given to each audit is a balanced judgement based upon the established system of controls, the subject's approach to risk management and the

nature of any recommendations and actions agreed. (See appendix B for explanations of the various levels of assurance).

Actions are classified over the categories of Fundamental, Significant and Merits Attention. See appendix B for explanations of the various levels of priority.

- 2.2.5 The agreed actions are designed to improve the control environment and / or improve “value for money” within the client’s area of responsibility and we can report that the actions made in this period have been agreed by management.

Our audit reports include an action plan that records the detail of our findings, the agreed action that management intend to take in response to these findings and the timescale to undertake such action. This provides a record that progress can be measured against when we undertake our Post Implementation Reviews or follow up work.

2.3 Follow ups.

All audit reports are subjected to a follow up review. For those reports issued with limited assurance, a follow up review is undertaken three months after the report has been finalised, and for all other reports, a follow up is undertaken after six months. The recommendations which had been graded fundamental or significant are subjected to follow up.

Internal Audit processes have been amended during this year, to support the strengthening of Corporate Governance within the organisation, and a second follow up is now undertaken six weeks after the first follow up, to pick up on any recommendations that have not been implemented or only had partial implementation. Updates will be provided to Audit Committee.

A recommendation tracker has been developed and all fundamental and significant recommendations made and, progress to implement these recommendations, will also be reported to the newly established Corporate Governance Group, which is headed by the Council Monitoring Officer.

There are no plans for a third follow-up process. Any reviews with recommendations which have not been implemented / only partially implemented will then be passed to the Corporate Governance Group to progress.

Twenty-three first follow up exercises have taken place during the year, 3 of which, (shown in table 1 below) have been completed since reporting to the last Audit Committee in December 2023.

Seven second follow up exercises have been undertaken during the year, 4 of which (shown in table 2 below) have been completed since reporting to the last Audit Committee in December 2023.

Table 1: First Follow Ups Undertaken since 18th November to 31st January 2024

Audit	Number of agreed actions and priorities (fundamental and significant only)		
	Fundamental	Significant	Follow up number of recs fully implemented
Six Town Housing - Hoarders	1	8	6 of 9

Highway & Footway Maintenance	0	1	0 of 1
Creditors Key Controls 2021/22	1	2	2 of 3

Table 2: Second Follow Ups Undertaken since 18th November to 31st January 2024

Audit	Number of agreed actions and priorities (fundamental and significant only)		
	Fundamental	Significant	Follow up number of recs fully implemented
Taxi Licensing	0	1	0 of 1
Debtors Key Controls 2021/22	2	3	2 of 5
National non-domestic rates (NNDR) Key Controls 2021/22	0	2	0 of 2
Treasury Management Key Controls 2021/22	0	1	1 of 1

Further information about follow ups is shared in part B of the meeting on 6th March 2024.

Follow up matrices with details taken to address the recommendations are sent to Audit Committee Members each month.

2.4 Other work

This section details other work completed by the audit team.

2.4.1 Assurance work - Ongoing reviews

There is one audit still being finalised from the 2022/23 plan and work has also commenced to deliver the audits detailed in the audit plan for 2023/24. Audits which are currently taking place are: -

2022/23

- Care Planning Permissions

It was reported to December 2023 Committee that it was expected that draft reports for this subject would be completed with a final report being brought to Audit Committee in March 2024. This review is still ongoing. The review has been delayed due to a variety of reasons, including auditor ongoing unplanned work and delays ascertaining system access and gathering information to progress the review from the department. The review has been reallocated and testing has now been progressed.

2023/24 – Ongoing reviews

- Car Parking Income – testing completed, and draft report being prepared.
- Rent Collection from Commercial Tenants - draft report currently being reviewed by Senior Auditors
- Persona – Debtors – draft report currently being reviewed by Senior Auditors.
- Department of Work and Pensions – Memorandum of Understanding
- Integrated Community Equipment Stores (ICES)
- Building Stores – draft report currently being reviewed by Senior Auditors.
- Persona Building Property Maintenance.
- Substance Misuse Commissioning.
- NNDR.
- Climate Change
- Highways Potholes
- Debtors Key Controls 23/24
- Creditors Key Controls 23/24
- Members Delegated Funds

2023/24 - allocated to Auditor, preparation work being undertaken

- Council Tax Key Controls 2023/24
- Income & Banking Key Controls 2023/24
- Payroll Key Controls 2023/24

It was also reported in December 2023 that the Corporate Health & Safety had been allocated and preparation work was being undertaken. This audit has been removed from the audit plan due to an external review of this area being completed. The recommendations from this review are being monitored by the Director of People and Inclusion and progress is reported to the Chief Executive and the Health & Safety Joint Consultative Committee.

The key control audits normally focus on transactions made in the previous financial year, in this case, 2022/23, however as there are many changes currently being made to finance systems and procedures, to address previous audit recommendations, and also due to changes to staffing responsibilities following the Finance Department restructure, the key control reviews have been deferred to quarter 4 and will focus on examining the revised processes using 2023/24 transactions.

2.4.2 Assurance work – Draft reports

The following reviews have been completed and draft reports have been issued to client:-

- Six Town Housing – Debtor Invoice Processing
- Six Town Housing – Arrears Prevention
- Independent Foster Agency
- STH Right to Buy
- School and College Transport

2.4.3 Grants

The following grants have been reviewed during the current financial year so far:

- Bus Operators Grant for 2022/23
- Changing Places Fund Grant

2.4.4 Information Governance and Data / Digital

Internal Audit provide advice and consultative support to the Council's arrangements for information governance and its continued response to the Information Commissioners Office (ICO) inspection of June 2021. An IG Delivery Group has been established, this work is now contained within the remit of the Corporate Governance Group.

2.4.5 Supporting Transformation and Change

The Internal Audit Plan includes a provision of days to be made available to support services throughout the year by providing consultancy advice or independent assurance as / when our input is appropriate.

Advice since last Committee in December 2023: -

- Work is undertaken with Registrars on a quarterly basis to securely destroy any spoilt certificates.
- Children Services – Guidance issued on the use of Income from penalty notices received into the Council.
- Operations – Guidance issued on a resolution to a school building contract dispute.
- Insurance renewals – Support has been provided to the Insurance Team in relation to the renewal process.
- STH Transfer to Council – Support has been provided to the STH Project Plan Finance Workstream.

2.5 Investigations / Fraud / Whistleblowing

The team continues to be available to support the business with internal investigations providing technical skills and advice when called upon and managing the whistleblowing hotline / online referrals.

Details of investigations are reported separately to Audit Committee in part B of the meeting.

National Fraud Initiative

The Council is required to take part in the mandatory exercise which is undertaken every two years. Data extracts from a variety of financial systems are submitted to the Cabinet Office, where the information is cross checked to similar information from other organisations. Data was extracted on 30th September 2022 and results were released for checking in January 2023. The results are being checked by Housing Benefits staff and also by members of the Fraud Team. An update on progress has been provided in the Fraud Team's latest fraud plan and update report to this committee.

Anti-fraud and corruption policy and strategy

Internal Audit are responsible for updating of the Council anti-fraud and corruption policy and strategy which incorporates the whistleblowing policy.

This strategy was very detailed and covered a variety of topics: -

- Whistleblowing Policy
- Housing Benefit / Council Tax Benefit – Fraud Prosecution Policy
- Standards of Conduct (Local Government Act 2000 PART III)
- Guidance for Members and Officers on how to report suspected fraud and corruption.
- Local Code of Corporate Governance
- Anti-Money laundering Guidance
- Anti-Bribery Policy

Work has been undertaken to review the documents. All documents have been reviewed and approved by Audit Committee during 2023/24. Five separate documents have been produced:

- Bury Anti -Fraud and Corruption Strategy
- Bury Fraud and Corruption Prosecution Policy
- Bury Council Whistleblowing Policy
- Bury Council Anti-Money Laundering Policy
- Butry Council Anti-Bribery Policy

The new policies have been placed on the Council intranet and internet pages and a communication has been sent to all staff via SharePoint to make them aware of the new policies. Training awareness of the Whistleblowing Policy is to be provided to Senior Managers in February 2024.

2.6 School Audits

In recent years individual School Audits have not been incorporated in the annual audit plan, they were, replaced with thematic reviews of areas which were covered in the school audit reviews.

For 2023/24 the annual plan includes a mix of thematic reviews, and individual school reviews. The audit team have consulted with colleagues from Childrens Services and have developed a school audit plan to be delivered during 2023/24. Request have been made for 10 school reviews to be undertaken. This has been provisionally agreed but caveated that the time taken to complete reviews will be monitored and there may be a need to take uncompleted reviews forward into the 2024/25 financial year.

In addition, arrangements remain in place that Internal Audit will undertake School Audits on requests received, during the year, from the Executive Director of Children's Services and / or Executive Director of Finance, where it is thought an audit review would be beneficial to the School and the Council.

A Schools Assurance Group has also been established within the Council and Internal Audit are represented on this group, providing advice to the group on specific issues which may arise at schools.

2.7 Collaboration

We have ongoing representation on sub-groups of the Northwest Heads of Internal Audit Group. The groups have been established to share good practice across the region.

- Contract Audit Group
- IT Audit Group
- Schools Audit Group.
- Fraud Group (attended by members of the Counter-Fraud Team, information shared with Internal Audit)

Links with the Corporate Priorities:

Please summarise how this links to the Let's Do It Strategy.

- Internal Audit undertakes assurance work to all Departmental Directors and Statutory Officers regarding the systems in place, making recommendations for improvements to control and protect the assets and resources of the Council. The control and mitigation of the loss of funds gives the assurance that public money is used in an appropriate manner to deliver the Corporate Priorities.

Equality Impact and Considerations:

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.

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.

Internal Audit provide assurance to Committee Members and the public that the organisation is delivering services in line with agreed policies and procedures which have considered the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

Environmental Impact and Considerations:

Please provide an explanation of the carbon impact of this decision.

- N/a – no decision required.

Assessment and Mitigation of Risk:

Risk / opportunity	Mitigation
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.

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 however supports the governance framework.

Background papers:

- Internal Audit Plan 2023/24

- Internal Audit Reports issued throughout the course of the year.

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

Term	Meaning
GMCA	Greater Manchester Combined Authority