

AUDIT & GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE
(Devon & Somerset Fire & Rescue Authority)

29 November 2024

Present:

Councillors Kerley (Vice Chair – in the Chair), Biederman, Coles (vice Roome), Fellows, Kendall and Prowse

Co-opted, Independent Members:

Messrs. Perks and Turkington

Apologies:

Councillors Clayton and Sproston

* **AGC/24/13** **Minutes**

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 30 September 2024 be signed as a correct record.

* **AGC/24/14** **External Audit 2023-24 update**

Nathan Coughlin, Audit Partner at Bishop Fleming, was in attendance for this item.

The Committee received for information a report of the Authority's external auditor, Bishop Fleming, setting out work undertaken so far against the 2023-24 audit and the judgements made. The work was being carried out in accordance with the National Audit Office's Code of Practice and International Standards on Auditing.

The Committee's receipt of 2023-24 audit documents, to include a Final Statement of Accounts and Statement of Assurance, had been delayed due to a recommended material adjustment in the accounts, at 4%, against the value of the Service's land and buildings. The audit had progressed well since and Bishop Fleming was on track to render the final accounts at the Audit and Governance Committee meeting of 20th January 2025, ahead of the 28th February 2025 deadline. After seeking assurance, it was confirmed to the Committee that there were no negative consequences from this delay.

Upon enquiry, the Committee was appraised of the following audit updates:

- The Management Override had not raised anything significant;
- The audited accounts of the Authority's trading company, Red One Ltd., had been received and Bishop Fleming was comfortable with the position; and

- Against the Pensions Liability, Bishop Fleming was comfortable with the assumptions used by the Actuary. There was a small difference in accounts which would be taken forward as an adjusted difference.

* **AGC/24/15** **Internal Audit 2024-25 Progress Report**

Joanne McCormick, Deputy Head of Devon Assurance Partnership, was in attendance for this item.

The Committee received for information a report of the Head of Devon Assurance Partnership (DAP) (AGC/24/20) that provided an update on the progress made against the approved Internal Audit Plan for 2024-25, and the items of work left to do. The DAP anticipated confirming its overall audit opinion to the Committee at its July 2025 meeting.

Based on the audit work undertaken so far, and previous experience of the Service, the DAP was working towards a final audit opinion of Reasonable level of assurance. The report highlighted that three of the planned fourteen audits had been completed with opinion outcomes ranging from reasonable assurance to limited assurance. The direction of travel against all three of those risk areas was “A” given that the reports were in draft and actions plans were in the process of agreement. The DAP had no concerns at this time.

Noting an anticipated overall opinion of reasonable assurance, the Committee enquired what steps the Service might next take to achieve an audit opinion of substantial assurance. It was recognised that reasonable assurance was a positive outcome and that the Service had a proven upwards trajectory in the opinions it had achieved over recent years. Substantial assurance would be challenging to achieve for three reasons:

- The Service’s current finance systems required upgrading. A replacement system had been identified with the Service on track to complete a switch over during Quarter 3 of 2025;
- The Cyber Security risk landscape was continually evolving and would likely always be a risk to any organisation; and
- Ongoing Pensions challenges presented a continued risk into the foreseeable future.

Referencing page 15 of the report and the Service’s commitment to undertake development of a professional standards approach aligned to the Fire Standards, the Committee enquired whether this undertaking was complete. The Committee was advised that evidencing the shift from a point of compliance with the Fire Standards to a point of assurance marked a significant piece of work. It was, however, confirmed to the Committee that the Service was moving in the right direction.

An enquiry was made about how the Service reviewed efficiencies within the Prevention and Protection risk area and the Committee understood that the related Key Performance Indicators were monitored by the Community Safety Committee.

* **AGC/24/16** **Internal Audit Follow Up Report**

The Committee received for information a report of the Assistant Director, Corporate Services (AGC/24/21) which provided updates on the actions taken to address the findings of those internal audits with an opinion of “limited assurance” together with explanations where actions had been extended by more than 12 months.

The following was highlighted for the Committee:

- The Applications of Learning audit report had been approved for closure;
- The number of overdue actions had decreased by 92% since the last Committee meeting;
- 36 of the 84 high and medium priority risk actions were on target to complete with publication of key policies during December and January; and
- Where action time frames had been extended, this was attributed to resource and capacity challenges within the Service which the Service Leadership Team kept under regular review.

Referencing the reported seven priority risk areas due to be completed at the end of November 2024, with the publication of the Recruitment Policy, the Committee enquired if this was on track. Officers confirmed that the policy consultation period had passed and the final review and publication was expected imminently.

Identifying the Service’s increasing use of data solutions, the Committee sought assurance that systems and processes were in place to mitigate IT failures. The Committee was advised that data solutions were simplified wherever possible and training was in place to upskill colleagues in their use.

Concern was expressed about the overdue actions resulting from the audit of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) 2021/22. The Committee was apprised that training was in place to ensure PPE was worn appropriately by staff. Some staff had not completed the training in the requisite time frame due to competing statutory training requirements and other workload priorities. The Committee was assured that the existing PPE was compliant with regulations and funding had been allocated within the Medium-Term Financial Plan.

Mr Perks queried the reasons for the reported delays against the Contamination Project. The Committee understood that this was a national issue relating to older stations not meeting modern regulations. The Service had identified actions to ensure compliance was achieved.

The Service undertook to provide the Committee with an interim update against Action PPE 2021/22 and to submit a formal progress report at its next meeting on 20th January 2025. The Service also undertook to include greater detail in future Committee reports about the reasons and mitigations for overdue actions.

***DENOTES DELEGATED MATTER WITH POWER TO ACT**

The Meeting started at 10.00 am and finished at 11.04 am