

FRAG Committee's Self-Assessment Exercise

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Portfolio: Finance

Ward(s) Affected: All

Purpose of the Report:

This report outlines the results of the self-assessment review exercise emailed to Members to complete in February 2024.

Recommendations:

1. It is recommended that:

Members agree the final scores for the first tool assessment, the 'Self-assessment of good practice' attached at **Appendix 1** and the 'Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the audit committee' attached at **Appendix 2**.

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report details the collated scores from Members' returned questionnaires for two assessments, the 'Self-assessment of good practice' attached at **Appendix 1** and the 'Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the audit committee' attached at **Appendix 2**, for Members to agree.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) document on "Audit committees – practical guidance for local authorities and police 2022" sets out the guidance on the function and operation of audit committees. It represents CIPFA's view of best practice. The guidance states the purpose of an audit committee "is to provide an independent and high-level focus on the adequacy of governance, risk and control arrangements.
- 2.2 In 2022 CIPFA updated its advice and guidance for Local Authority Audit Committee's and a new Audit Committee self-assessment template is now available.
- 2.3 Good audit committees are characterised by; objective, independent knowledgeable and properly trained members, a membership that promotes good governance principles, a strong, independently minded chair, an unbiased attitude, the ability to challenge when required.
- 2.4 It is good practice for Audit Committee members to review their knowledge and skills – for example, as part of an annual self-assessment process or training needs analysis.
- 2.5 In addition, the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards also call for the Audit Committee to assess their remit and effectiveness, in relation to Purpose, Authority and Responsibility, to facilitate the work of this Committee.
- 2.6 The guidance provides two tools against which the Committee can assess itself. The first, 'Self-assessment of good practice' support an assessment against recommended practice to inform and support the Committee under the areas of 'purpose and governance', functions of the Audit Committee', 'membership and support', and 'effectiveness of the committee'. Scores of 0-5, does not comply / major improvement to fully complies / no further improvement are the available options for the questions.
- 2.7 The second assessment tool, 'Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the audit committee' helps Members to consider where it is most effective and where there may be scope to do more. To be effective the Committee should be able to identify evidence of its impact or influence. For each area, an evaluation of strengths, weaknesses and proposed actions is required. The areas are: -
- Promoting the principles of good governance and their application to decision making;

- Contributing to the development of an effective control environment;
- Supporting the establishment of arrangements for the governance of risk and for effective arrangements to manage risks;
- Advising on the adequacy of the assurance framework and considering whether assurance is deployed efficiently and effectively;
- Supporting effective external audit, with a focus on high quality and timely audit work;
- Supporting the quality of the internal audit activity, particularly by underpinning its organisational independence;
- Aiding the achievement of the authority's goals and objectives through helping to ensure appropriate governance, risk, controls and assurance arrangements;
- Supporting the development of robust arrangements for ensuring value for money;
- Helping the authority to implement the values of good governance, including effective arrangements for countering fraud and corruption risks; and
- Promoting effective public reporting to the authority's stakeholders and local community and measures to improve transparency and accountability.

3. Current position/findings

- 3.1 The collated scores from Members' returned questionnaires for the two assessments, the 'Self-assessment of good practice' and the 'Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the audit committee' are attached at **Appendix 1 and Appendix 2** for Members to consider and agree.

4. Proposed action

- 4.1 For Members to agree the final scores for the two assessments, the 'Self-assessment of good practice' attached at **Appendix 1** and the 'Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the audit committee' attached at **Appendix 2**.

5. Issues and Risks

- 5.1 **Resource implications** –there are no resource implications arising from this report.
- 5.2 **Legal implications** – there are no legal implications arising from this report.
- 5.3 **Equality implications** – there are no equality implications arising from this report.
- 5.4 **Environmental impact** – there are no impacts on the environment arising from this report.
- 5.5 **Crime and disorder** – there are no impacts upon crime and disorder arising from

this report.

- 5.6 **Risks** – There is a risk that the Committee may not fulfil its role and purpose because an evaluation of itself is not undertaken, and improvements not considered.

6. **Conclusion**

- 6.1 Members to consider and agree the final scores for the two assessments, the 'Self-assessment of good practice' attached at **Appendix 1** and the 'Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the audit committee' attached at **Appendix 2**.

7. **Recommendations**

- 7.1 The Members to consider and agree the final scores for the two assessments, the 'Self-assessment of good practice' attached at **Appendix 1** and the 'Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the audit committee' attached at **Appendix 2**.

Background papers

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Self-Assessment of Good Practice (containing scores) 2024

Appendix 2 - Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the audit committee

Self-assessment of good practice 2024

A regular self-assessment should be used to support the Governance and Audit Committee work programme, training plans and the annual report. This evaluation will support an assessment against recommended practice to inform and support the Governance and Audit Committee. This review incorporates the key principles set out in CIPFA’s Position Statement: Audit Committees in Local Authorities and Police. Where an Audit Committee has a high degree of performance against the good practice principle’s then it is an indicator that the committee is soundly based and has in place knowledgeable membership. These are essential factors in developing an effective Audit Committee.

Please note the red shaded boxes have been completed following a review of the Committee’s terms of reference.

	Good Practice Questions	Does not comply	Partially complies and extent of improvement needed*			Fully complies
		Major improvement	Significant improvement	Moderate improvement	Minor improvement	No further improvement
Weighting of answers		0	1	2	3	5
Audit committee purpose and governance						
1	Does the authority have a dedicated audit committee that is not combined with other functions (eg standards, ethics, scrutiny)?					5
2	Does the audit committee report directly to the governing body (PCC and chief constable/full council/full fire authority, etc)?					5
3	Has the committee maintained its advisory role by not taking on any decision-making powers?				Approves the SOA and AGS. CIPFA recommends role of Committee is review for these matters.	

4	Do the terms of reference clearly set out the purpose of the committee in accordance with CIPFA's 2022 Position Statement?					
5	Do all those charged with governance and in leadership roles have a good understanding of the role and purpose of the committee?	Not able to answer				5
6	Does the audit committee escalate issues and concerns promptly to those in governance and leadership roles?					5
7	Does the governing body hold the audit committee to account for its performance at least annually?					5
8	Does the committee publish an annual report in accordance with the 2022 guidance, including:					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compliance with the CIPFA Position Statement 2022 					5
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Results of the annual evaluation, development work undertaken and planned improvements 	0				5
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How it has fulfilled its terms of reference and the key issues escalated in the year? 			Annual report appears to include no reference to key issues		5, Reports at Q-Meetings
Functions of the committee						
9	Do the committee's terms of reference explicitly address all the core areas identified in CIPFA's Position Statement as follows?					
	Governance arrangements					
	Risk management arrangements					
	Internal control arrangements, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial management Value for money Ethics and standards 					

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counter fraud and corruption 					
	Annual governance statement					
	Financial reporting					
	Assurance framework					
	Internal audit					
	External audit					
10	Over the last year, has adequate consideration been given to all core areas?		On basis that TORs are missing some areas			5
11	Over the last year, has the committee only considered agenda items that align with its core functions or selected wider functions, as set out in the 2022 guidance?					Agenda only 5 Don't know
12	Has the committee met privately with the external auditors and head of internal audit in the last year?	0, No, I believe				5, Don't know
Membership and support						
13	Has the committee been established in accordance with the 2022 guidance as follows?					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Separation from executive 					5
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A size that is not unwieldy and avoids use of substitutes 			2	3, substitutes are common	5
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusion of lay/co-opted independent members in accordance with legislation or CIPFA's recommendation 	Not yet	1	2		
14	Have all committee members been appointed or selected to ensure a committee membership that is knowledgeable and skilled?	Not clear		2	3	

15	Has an evaluation of knowledge, skills and the training needs of the chair and committee members been carried out within the last two years?	No?			3	5
16	Have regular training and support arrangements been put in place covering the areas set out in the 2022 guidance?	No specific training for FRAG members				5
17	Across the committee membership, is there a satisfactory level of knowledge, as set out in the 2022 guidance?				Unclear	5, unknown
18	Is adequate secretariat and administrative support provided to the committee?					5
19	Does the committee have good working relations with key people and organisations, including external audit, internal audit and the CFO?				3	5
Effectiveness of the committee						
20	Has the committee obtained positive feedback on its performance from those interacting with the committee or relying on its work?			2, Not known		5
21	Are meetings well chaired, ensuring key agenda items are addressed with a focus on improvement?			2, No focus on improvement. Chair can appear partisan at times.		5
22	Are meetings effective with a good level of discussion and engagement from all the members?				3	5
23	Has the committee maintained a non-political approach to discussions throughout?		1	Voting often seems to be along party lines		5

24	Does the committee engage with a wide range of leaders and managers, including discussion of audit findings, risks and action plans with the responsible officers?			2		5
25	Does the committee make recommendations for the improvement of governance, risk and control arrangements?			Not often		5
26	Do audit committee recommendations have traction with those in leadership roles?			2, Not sure		5
27	Has the committee evaluated whether and how it is adding value to the organisation?	Not to my knowledge		2		5
28	Does the committee have an action plan to improve any areas of weakness?	As above	1			5
29	Has this assessment been undertaken collaboratively with the audit committee members?	No	1			5
Total score						
Maximum possible score						?/200

* Where the committee does not fully comply with an element, three options are available to allow distinctions between aspects that require significant improvement and those only requiring minor changes.

Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the audit committee

An audit committee’s effectiveness should be judged by the contribution it makes to and the beneficial impact it has on the authority’s business. Since it is primarily an advisory body, it can be more difficult to identify how the audit committee has made a difference. Evidence of effectiveness will usually be characterised as ‘influence’, ‘persuasion’ and ‘support’.

This assessment tool helps Audit Committee members to consider where it is most effective and where there may be scope to do more.

Assessment Key: -

5 - Clear evidence is available from a number of sources that the committee is actively supporting the improvement across all aspects of this area. The improvements made are clearly identifiable.

4 - Clear evidence from some sources that the committee is actively and effectively supporting improvement across some aspects of this area.

3 - The committee has had mixed experience in supporting improvement in this area. There is some evidence that demonstrates their impact but there are also significant gaps.

2 - There is some evidence that the committee has supported improvements, but the impact of this support is limited.

1 - no evidence can be found that the audit committee has supported improvements in this area.

Areas where the audit committee can have impact by supporting improvement	Examples of how the audit committee can demonstrate its impact	Key indicators of effective arrangements	Your assessment score (plus any strengths, weaknesses and proposed actions)
<p>Promoting the principles of good governance and their application to decision making</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting the development of a local code of governance. • Providing a robust review of the AGS and the assurances underpinning it. • Supporting reviews/audits of governance arrangements. • Participating in self-assessments of governance arrangements. • Working with partner audit committees to review governance arrangements in partnerships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected members, the leadership team and senior managers all share a good understanding of governance, including the key principles and local arrangements. • Local arrangements for governance have been clearly set out in an up-to-date local code. • The authority’s scrutiny arrangements are forward looking and constructive. • Appropriate governance arrangements established for all collaborations and arm’s- 	<p>3</p> <p>+ves Improving oversight of Big Sky</p> <p>-ves Poor attendance by councillors is not consistent with effective FRAG governance. In 2022/23, attendance averaged 59%. Over 3 meetings in the current year,</p>

		<p>length arrangements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The head of internal audit's annual opinion on governance is satisfactory (or similar wording). 	<p>attendance has improved to 70% (should perhaps target 85%). No review of scrutiny arrangements No review of governance in collaborations, etc</p> <p>3 Decisions should be non-political, but this does not always feel like this is in evidence. More leadership should be in evidence on making sure decision making is on a factual basis.</p>
<p>Contributing to the development of an effective control environment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encouraging ownership of the internal control framework by appropriate managers. Actively monitoring the implementation of recommendations from auditors. Raising significant concerns over controls with appropriate senior managers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The head of internal audit's annual opinion over internal control is that arrangements are satisfactory. Assessments against control frameworks such as CIPFA's FM Code have been completed and a high level of compliance identified. Control frameworks are in place and operating effectively for key control areas – for example, information security or procurement 	<p>4</p> <p>Strong focus on internal audit reports and implementation of recommendations.</p> <p>Recent request for enhanced reporting of progress on recommendations.</p> <p>5</p>
<p>Supporting the establishment of arrangements for the governance of risk and for effective arrangements to manage risks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewing risk management arrangements and their effectiveness, e.g., risk management maturity or benchmarking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A robust process for managing risk is evidenced by independent assurance from internal audit or external review 	<p>3</p> <p>Good Practice Recent review of risk management framework leading</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring improvements to risk management. Reviewing accountability of risk owners for major/ strategic risks 		<p>to revised risk management policy.</p> <p>Improvement Areas Increase oversight of “in appetite risks” to provide increased assurance over risk management practices.</p> <p>5</p>
<p>Advising on the adequacy of the assurance framework and considering whether assurance is deployed efficiently and effectively.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewing the adequacy of the leadership team’s assurance framework. Specifying the committee’s assurance needs, identifying gaps or overlaps in assurance. Seeking to streamline assurance gathering and reporting. Reviewing the effectiveness of assurance providers, eg internal audit, risk management, external audit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The authority’s leadership team have defined an appropriate framework of assurance, including core arrangements, major service areas and collaborations and external bodies 	<p>2</p> <p>Improvement Area Start to do this. I have seen no evidence that FRAG undertakes this role (to date).</p> <p>4. Ongoing area of improvements.</p>
<p>Supporting effective external audit, with a focus on high quality and timely audit work.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewing and supporting external audit arrangements with focus on independence and quality. Providing good engagement on external audit plans and reports. Supporting the implementation of audit recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The quality of liaison between external audit and the authority is satisfactory. The auditors deliver in accordance with their audit plan and any amendments are well explained. An audit of high quality is delivered 	<p>3</p> <p>Effective external audit is undermined by late audit of results.</p> <p>2. In not allowing sufficient time to review the accounts for 2020/21 before being put to a vote to accept them, we were expected to rely on the external auditors not making any errors when</p>

			<p>processing the previously agreed amendments, or that they have included amendments that had not been agreed.</p> <p>I did not put a score of 1 here as it was brought up in Full Council and the Leader apologised for this.</p>
<p>Supporting the quality of the internal audit activity, in particular underpinning its organisational independence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing the audit charter and functional reporting arrangements. • Assessing the effectiveness of internal audit arrangements, providing constructive challenge and supporting improvements. • Actively supporting the quality assurance and improvement programme of internal audit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal audit that is in conformance with PSIAS and LGAN (as evidenced by the most recent external assessment and an annual self-assessment). • The head of internal audit and the organisation operate in accordance with the principles of the <u>CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Head of Internal Audit</u> (2019). 	<p>4</p> <p>Good practice. Internal audit teams are structurally independent of Council officers.</p> <p>5</p>
<p>Aiding the achievement of the authority's goals and objectives by helping to ensure appropriate governance, risk, control and assurance arrangements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing how the governance arrangements support the achievement of sustainable outcomes. • Reviewing major projects and programmes to ensure that governance and assurance arrangements are in place. • Reviewing the effectiveness of performance management arrangements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspection reports indicate that arrangements are appropriate to support the achievement of service objectives. • The authority's arrangements to review and assess performance are satisfactory 	<p>2</p> <p>Little evidence of much work in this area.</p> <p>5</p>
<p>Supporting the development of robust arrangements for ensuring value for money.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring that assurance on value-for-money arrangements is included in the assurances received by 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External audit's assessments of arrangements to support best value are satisfactory 	<p>2</p> <p>Review of VFM report by external auditors.</p>

	<p>the audit committee.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considering how performance in value for money is evaluated as part of the AGS. • Following up issues raised by external audit in their value-for-money work. 		5
<p>Helping the authority to implement the values of good governance, including effective arrangements for countering fraud and corruption risks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing arrangements against the standards set out in the Code of Practice on Managing the Risk of Fraud and Corruption (CIPFA, 2014). • Reviewing fraud risks and the effectiveness of the organisation's strategy to address those risks. • Assessing the effectiveness of ethical governance arrangements for both staff and governors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good ethical standards are maintained by both elected representatives and officers. This is evidenced by robust assurance over culture, ethics and counter fraud arrangements). 	<p>4</p> <p>Good practice. Review of counter fraud strategy.</p> <p>5</p>
<p>Promoting effective public reporting to the authority's stakeholders and local community and measures to improve transparency and accountability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with key members/ the PCC and chief constable to improve their understanding of the AGS and their contribution to it. • Improving how the authority discharges its responsibilities for public reporting – for example, better targeting the audience and use of plain English. • Reviewing whether decision making through partnership organisations remains transparent and publicly accessible and encourages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The authority meets the statutory deadlines for financial reporting with accounts for audit of an appropriate quality. • The external auditor completed the audit of the financial statements with minimal adjustments and an unqualified opinion. • The authority has published its financial statements and AGS in accordance with statutory guidelines. • The AGS is underpinned by a robust evaluation and is 	<p>3</p> <p>Effective public reporting is undermined by late audit of results, the high number of amendments to the last published accounts, and the limited time (30 mins) permitted for review of the last audited set of accounts.</p> <p>I have reservations of whether the accounting for the Ella May Barnes building (one of the late amendments) is fully compliant with audit best practice.</p>

	<p>greater transparency.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Publishing an annual report from the committee	<p>an accurate assessment of the adequacy of governance arrangements</p>	<p>2. There is a meeting scheduled on 23/02/24 to review the government's proposal to tackle late audited accounts. We do not know at present if this support will be enough.</p>
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