

Thame Town Council

Internal Audit Report 2024-25: First Interim

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*For and on behalf of
Auditing Solutions Ltd*

Background

All town and parish councils are required by statute to make arrangements for an independent internal audit examination of their accounting records and system of internal control and for the conclusions to be reported each year in the Annual Return. Auditing Solutions Ltd has provided this service to Thame Town Council since 2005.

This report sets out the work undertaken in relation to the 2024-25 financial year to date which was completed by 20th November 2024. We wish to thank the Responsible Finance Officer and staff in assisting the process, providing all necessary documentation to facilitate completion of our review for the year to date. We have ensured governance and financial controls remain effective.

Internal Audit Approach

In undertaking our first review for the year to date, we have had regard to the materiality of transactions and their susceptibility to potential mis-recording or misrepresentation in the year-end Statement of Accounts/Annual Return. We have employed a combination of selective sampling techniques (where appropriate) and 100% detailed checks in a number of key areas in order to gain sufficient assurance that the Council's financial and regulatory systems and controls are appropriate and fit for the purposes intended.

Our programme of cover has been designed to afford appropriate assurance that the Council's financial systems are robust and operate in a manner to ensure effective probity of transactions and to afford a reasonable probability of identifying any material errors or possible abuse of the Council's own and the national statutory regulatory framework. The programme is also designed to facilitate our completion of the 'Annual Internal Audit Report' in the Council's Annual Return, which requires independent assurance over a number of internal control objectives.

Overall Conclusion

We are pleased to conclude that, in the areas examined to date, the Council continues to have effective systems in place to help ensure that transactions are free from material misstatement and will be reported accurately in the Annual Governance and Accountability Return for the financial year.

We ask that members consider the content of this report and acknowledge that the report has been reviewed by Council.

We are also pleased to record that Council members and officers continue to operate a sound, pro-active approach to risk management and corporate governance issues, together with the development and management of effective internal controls and procedural documentation.

Detailed Report

Maintenance of Accounting Records & Bank Reconciliations

Our objective here is to ensure that the accounting records are being maintained accurately and currently and that no anomalous entries appear in cashbooks or financial ledgers. We have: -

- Agreed the opening Rialtas/Omega trial balance detail with that in the final Statement of Accounts and certified Annual Return for 2023-24;
- Verified that the ledger remains “in balance” at the present date;
- Ensured that the cost centre and nominal ledger coding structure remains appropriate for purpose;
- Checked detail of transactions in the current account cashbook, agreeing two months’ transactions (April & October 2024) to the relevant Lloyds Bank account statements; and
- Checked and agreed detail on bank reconciliations prepared using the Rialtas/Omega accounting software, as at 30th April and 30th October 2024 for the Lloyds accounts.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area of our review process. We will undertake further work at our interim update review.

Review of Corporate Governance

Our objective is to ensure that the Council has a robust regulatory framework in place; that Council and Committee meetings are conducted in accordance with the adopted Standing Orders and that, as far as we are able to ascertain, no actions of a potentially unlawful nature have been taken nor are such being considering currently. We are pleased to note that the Standing Orders and Financial Regulations were re-adopted by the Council at the May 2019 meeting.

- We have commenced our review of minutes of the Council and it’s Standing Committees for the year against the above criteria with no issues arising at present; and
- We note that the Standing Orders and Financial Regulations were adopted at the Full Council meeting in 14th May 2024 and 19th November 2024 respectively.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area warranting further comment. We will undertake further work at future reviews.

Review of Expenditure

Our aim here is to ensure that: -

- Council resources are released in accordance with the Council's approved procedures and budgets;
- Payments are supported by appropriate documentation, either in the form of an original trade invoice or other appropriate form of document confirming the payment as due and/or an acknowledgement of receipt, where no other form of invoice is available;
- All discounts due on goods and services supplied are identified and appropriate action taken to secure the discount;
- The correct expense codes have been applied to invoices when processed; and
- VAT has been appropriately identified and coded to the control account for periodic recovery.

Following the implementation of electronic payments, we previously examined the procedures in place for the authorisation and release of funds in this respect, ensuring that appropriate controls are in place and that members are undertaking appropriate reviews and checks on payments in order to ensure the effective discharge of their fiduciary responsibilities.

We have commenced the testing of our sample of payments to October 2024 in order to ensure compliance with the above criteria and the Council's approved working practices:

We have also examined the quarterly VAT reclaims to September 2024 which are submitted on line as required by HMRC and also reflected in the debtor figures at the financial year end.

Conclusions

We are pleased to record that no issues have been identified warranting formal comment or recommendation in this area. We will undertake further work at future reviews.

Assessment and Management of Risk

Our aim here is to ensure that the Council has put in place appropriate arrangements to identify all potential areas of risk of both a financial and health and safety nature, whilst also ensuring that appropriate arrangements exist to monitor and manage those risks in order to minimise the opportunity for their coming to fruition. To meet that objective, we have: -

- Noted that the Council reviewed its Internal Controls and Financial Risk assessments which were received by Corporate Governance July 2024 and will be reviewed again in April 2025;
- Also noted previously that the Health & Safety and Human Resources requirements provided by Moorepay as per new contracts dated 1 November 2022 for the next 3 years.; and

- Examined the Council's current insurance schedule for the year to May 2025 with underwriting cover provided by Zurich We are pleased to record that cover in all areas appears appropriate for the Council's current requirements.

Conclusions

No issues have arisen in this area warranting formal comment or recommendation.

Precept Determination and Budgetary Control

We aim in this area of our work to ensure that the Council has appropriate procedures in place to determine its future financial requirements leading to the adoption of an approved budget and formal determination of the amount of the precept placed on the Unitary Authority, that effective arrangements are in place to monitor budgetary performance throughout the financial year and that the Council has identified and retains appropriate reserve funds to meet future spending plans.

The Council will commence consideration of the 2025-26 budgetary requirements later this year and we shall consider the action taken and outcomes, together with the approved level of precept at a future visit.

We are pleased to note that members continue to receive regular budget monitoring reports with over/under-spends and the level of earmarked reserves the subject of regular review.

Conclusions

We have been advised that the Council are to formally consider and finalise its budget and precept requirements for 2025-26 later in the financial year. Consequently, we shall review this area further at a future visit, also examining the year's budget outturn, following up any significant variances and obtaining appropriate explanations: we shall also consider the appropriateness of retained reserves to meet the Council's ongoing revenue spending requirements and any development aspirations.

Review of Income

In this area of our review process, we aim to ensure that all income due to the Council is identified, invoiced (where applicable) and recovered at the appropriate rate and within a reasonable time scale; also that it is banked promptly in accordance with the Council's Financial Regulations.

We have reviewed the Sales Ledger, as it stands currently, and are pleased to report that no significant or long-standing debts are in existence of which the Council are unaware.

We also reviewed fees and charges for the meeting rooms and SRRG football pitch hire in accordance with the requirements of the Financial Regulations and note that they have not been increased for 2024-25.

We also note that there is a new allotment site at Hampden Gardens containing 17 plots. We will undertake a review of this new development at our interim update audit.

Conclusions

There are no matters requiring formal comment or recommendation in this area of our review process. We will undertake further work at future reviews.

Petty Cash Account

Our aim in this area is to ensure that appropriate controls are in place; that all expenditure incurred is adequately supported by trade invoices or till receipts; that the expenditure is appropriate for the Council's requirements; that VAT has been separately identified for periodic recovery and that cheque encashments from the main cashbooks are properly recorded.

We have checked the cash and the TIC till and are satisfied that the controls and management of these is robust.

At the interim update audit we will review a sample of the debit card and fuel card transactions.

Conclusions

There are no matters requiring formal comment or recommendation in this area of our review process. We will undertake further work at our interim update review.

Review of Salaries

In examining the Council's payroll function, we aim to confirm that extant legislation is being appropriately observed as regards adherence to the Employee Rights Act 1998 and the requirements of HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) legislation as regards the deduction and payment over of income tax and NI contributions, together with meeting the requirements of the local government pension scheme, as further revised from 1st April 2023 in relation to employee percentage bandings.

The Council continues to use the services of an external payroll bureau (Moorepay Limited) to service its payroll requirements: in order to meet the above objectives, we have: -

- Ensured that the Council reviews and approves pay scales for staff annually, noting that all employees are on formal SCP scales;
- Agreed the gross salaries payable to individuals in October 2024 by reference to the Council's approved pay scales;
- Checked and agreed detail of all enhanced payments processed with the September salaries to supporting and appropriately certified time sheets / travel expense claims;
- Ensured that Tax and NIC deductions and employer's contributions have been calculated appropriately and been paid over to HMRC in an accurate and timely manner; and
- Ensured that the appropriate employee and employer contributions to the pension scheme have been determined.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area of our review process.

Investments and Loans

The Council has a range of investments managed by an external fund manager (Rathbones Investment Management). We have previously noted re-adoption of the Annual Investment Strategy by the Policy and Resources Committee which will be undertaken later in this financial year.

We have verified the 32 Day deposit with Lloyds Bank with an investment currently at £1.047k.

The Council has two outstanding PWLB loans: we have verified detail of the half-yearly repayment instalments for 2024-25 to the repayment demands.

There is also three loans totalling £135,000 to Chinnor Rugby Club repayable over 12 years, £90,000 of which is secured by a legal charge over land and/or buildings. The 12-year loan was registered by the Council's solicitors and it has been drawn down with capital repayments, excluding interest, being made monthly.

We have also noted from the accounts that The Council has provided an unsecured loan of £40,000 to Thame Cricket Club for a 12-year term.

The accounts also reflect a secured loan to Thame Sports Club Limited on a 12-year term for £40,000. The loan is interest bearing after an initial free two-year term.

There were also two loans to the Community Land Trust which have now been repaid in full.

Conclusions

No matters arise in this area of our review for the year. We will undertake further work at our next review.