

# Audit and Risk Panel

Monday, 16th September, 2024

## HYBRID MEETING OF AUDIT AND RISK PANEL

### HELD IN THE BOARDROOM AND REMOТЕLY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Members present: Councillor R. McLaughlin (Chairperson);  
Councillor Groogan; and  
Mr. D. Wilson (External Member).

In attendance: Mrs. S. McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive/Director of  
Corporate Services;  
Ms. N. Largey, City Solicitor/Director of Legal and Civic  
Services;  
Mr. J. Tully, Director of City and Organisational  
Strategy;  
Ms. C. Sheridan, Director of Human Resources;  
Mr. T. Wallace, Director of Finance;  
Ms. C. O'Prey, Head of Audit, Governance and Risk  
Services;  
Mr. L. Mulholland, Audit, Governance and Risk  
Services Manager;  
Mr. M. Whitmore, Audit, Governance and Risk  
Services Manager;  
Ms. H. Lyons, Corporate Finance Manager;  
Ms. E. Eaton, Corporate Health and Safety Manager;  
and  
Mrs. L. McLornan, Committee Services Officer.

Also attended: Mr. P. Barr, Northern Ireland Audit Office.

### **Pre-Meeting**

The Audit and Risk Panel met privately with the Head of Audit, Governance and Risk Services prior to the meeting commencing, to enable the Panel members to raise any concerns around the work of internal audit or the Council's risk, control and governance arrangements.

### **Apologies**

An apology for inability to attend was reported from Alderman Rodgers.

### **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of 4th June, 2024, were approved by the Panel.

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**Declarations of Interest**

Mr. D. Wilson declared an interest in relation to agenda item 14 - Extension to Contract with External Member, in that it related to his contract and he left the meeting before it was considered.

**Management update report - BWUH Ltd.**

(Mr. J. Greer, Director of Economic Development, attended in connection with this item.)

The Director of Economic Development provided the Panel with an update on the progress which had been made by Senior Management to address the issues highlighted in the internal audit of BWUH Ltd., which had been completed in April 2024. The audit had examined the company's cyber security, data protection and finance controls. The outcome of the audit had been "major improvement needed".

He provided an outline of each agreed action, the timeframe for implementation and a short update on the progress which had been made to date to implement each of the actions. He highlighted to the Members that the company had taken the audit extremely seriously and that a significant amount of work had been carried out to address the issues raised. He added that the BWUH Management and Audit, Risk and Compliance Committee had been receptive to the audit report and that implementation of many of the recommendations were underway at the date of finalising the report.

A Member thanked the staff for all their hard work in getting to that point. He asked for assurance that the company would never again find itself with those issues going forward.

In response, the Director of Economic Development explained that the new SRO would have monthly management meetings with the Financial Controller. The Head of Audit Governance and Risk Services added that they were in the middle of their 2024/2025 audit of the BWUH but that AGRS would periodically come in and examine the processes and procedures to help ensure that the company retained good practices but that ultimately it was the responsibility of management to ensure that the relevant controls were in place and operating effectively.

The Panel noted the update which had been provided.

**Absence Management Q/E September 2024**

The Director of Human Resources drew the Panel's attention to the following report:

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**“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues**

**1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform the Audit Panel of the Council’s performance in managing absence at the end of quarter one, April – June 2024.**

**2.0 Recommendations**

**2.1 The Audit Panel is asked to note the contents of this report.**

**3.0 Main report**

**3.1 Key corporate indicators:**

**At the end of quarter one:**

- **The Council’s average sickness absence rate stands at 3.59 days, a decrease of 0.29 days compared to absence for the same period last year (3.88 days).**
- **A total of 7881.86 working days was lost due to sickness absence. This accounted for 6.39% of the total working days available.**
- **The table below provides a summary of how departments are performing against the target. 2 departments did not meet the corporate quarterly target of 4.06 days for quarter one .**

End of year target	16.23					
Q1 target	4.06					
Department	Number of Employees (FTE)	Total days lost FTE	Actual absence per FTE	Variance	% of workforce	% of absence
City and Neighbourhood Services	1249.76	5336.13	4.27	0.21	56.98%	67.70%
City and Organisational Strategy	84.77	211.49	2.49	-1.57	3.86%	2.68%
Corporate Services	127.88	221.11	1.73	-2.33	5.83%	2.81%
External Affairs, Comms and Marketing	27.85	18.38	0.66	-3.40	1.27%	0.23%
Finance	48.45	110	2.27	-1.79	2.21%	1.40%
Human Resources	31.54	148.51	4.71	0.65	1.44%	1.88%
Legal and Civic Services	152.1	568.01	3.73	-0.33	6.93%	7.21%
Place and Economy	351.66	831.44	2.36	-1.70	16.03%	10.55%
Property and Projects	119.27	436.79	3.66	-0.40	5.44%	5.54%
Totals	2193.28	7881.86	3.59	-0.47		

**3.2 Additional Absence information:**

- There has been an increase in the number of staff with no recorded absence this period (74.32%) compared to the same time last year (74.03%).
- There has been a significant decrease in absence classified as long term (20+ days) this quarter (5340.37 days or 67.76% of total absence) compared to the same quarter last year (6056.27 days or 74.00% of the total absence).
- The number of days lost per full time equivalent decreased by almost one full day in quarter one (3.59 days) when compared to quarter four (4.56 days). This decrease is illustrated in figure 1.
- Depression/anxiety/stress (34.46% of total days lost) and musculo-skeletal (26.82% of total days lost) continue to be the top two reasons for absence. Refer to figure 2 for further information.
- From 1 April to 30 June 2024, 613 employees were off due to sickness absence (accounting for 7881.86 days). Discretion was reported as being applied to 108 employees (17.6%) which accounts for 2681.08 days (approximately 34% of the total absence for quarter one). Refer to figure 3 for further information.
- Issues were identified in how absences were being managed in 101 cases. These were discussed in detail departments during quarter one. Refer to figure 4 for further information.
- Approximately 26.26% of absence (2069.73 days) is recorded as disability related. Over half (53.5%) of disability related absence was managed as long term. Employees who reported absence with Depression / Anxiety / Mental Health (34.58%), Chronic back pain (13.87%) and Osteoarthritis (12.7%) accounted for 61% of all disability related absence days Refer to figure 5 for further information.
- The Council continued to be impacted by absence due to COVID 19 during quarter one. 51 employees were recorded as absent due to COVID19, and this accounted for 262.59 days or 3.3% of the total absence in quarter one.
- 13 employees met the trigger for a Stage4/FAH in quarter one.
  - 4 employees were retired on the grounds of ill health prior to hearing being arranged.

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- Discretion was applied to 1 of these cases not to progress to a FAH. This was due to 1 employee returning to work at month six.
- 2 employees were dismissed.
- 1 decision was deferred by the panel as they awaited further medical information.
- 2 employees did not progress to a final hearing as further medical information was required.
- 2 employees met the trigger in late June and these hearings have been scheduled for August 2024.
- 1 employee attended a stage four hearing. Discretion was shown due to the employees poor mental health and they were given a final opportunity to improve attendance.

Corporate HR monitors how departments are managing attendance. Matters about the management of cases at the final stages of the attendance policy, are raised with departmental senior management when necessary.

**3.3 Departmental improvement plans/Absence Reporting to DMT:**

Corporate HR has reviewed all of the departmental improvement plans and provided feedback. Departments are currently considering the feedback. It is expected that these suggested improvements will lead to more meaningful improvement actions and updates will be provided to CMT and Audit Panel in the quarter two absence report.

7 of the 9 departments returned its absence dashboards for April, May and June. City and Neighbourhoods Services and Property and Projects did not return its absence dashboards for June as requested.

**3.4 Health and Wellbeing Strategy and initiatives:**

Following the launch of the new Health & Wellbeing Strategy in April, Corporate HR continue to roll out a full programme of H&WB initiatives. A total of 15 events were delivered in Q1 2024-2025 with 266 employees attending a range of in person events or webinars. In addition, 58 employees registered and took part in the Active Travel Challenge during June.

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**One new initiative is a regular Interlink article 'Wellbeing Wednesday' which highlights a topic and signposting to support for employee's health and wellbeing.**

**In addition, Corporate HR promoted a variety of wellbeing themes including Stress Awareness month and Mental Health Week with information and support being delivered by partners. An additional 'Positive mental health' face to face session was carried out at Duncrue which proved very engaging for attendees.**

**The Keeping Well van visited 2 CNS sites and 31 frontline staff received a 30-minute health check.**

**Training was organised in June to help managers deal with the more challenging aspects of implementing the Attendance Policy as well as the ongoing Understanding the Attendance Policy mandatory session for new managers. A range of management skills training is addressed in the L&D programme such as Conflict Resolution, Dealing with Difficult Conversations and Skills for Managing Performance to further support managers.**

**The Council's current network of 15 Health & Wellbeing Champions are supported with a monthly email of all health and wellbeing activity to promote throughout departments. Reaching out to front line staff remains a key priority and this is being achieved by utilising the screens in depots to display information on events and greater use of on-site training rooms to deliver webinars.**

**4.0 Resource Implications**

**4.1 Directors are asked to ensure that:**

- Attendance management continues to be a priority item on DMT agendas and related matters discussed and appropriate actions taken forward.**
- Resources are in place to ensure that adequate monitoring and review is in place at department level.**

**5.0 Equality and Good Relations Implications**

**5.1 Approximately 26.26% of absence (2069.73 days) is recorded as disability related.**

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**The use of discretion and reasonable adjustments is considered in such cases.”**

The Panel noted the contents of the report.

**Corporate Health and Safety Performance Report**

The Corporate Health and Safety Manager reminded the Panel that it was responsible for overseeing the Council's risk, control and governance arrangements for health and safety. In undertaking this function, the Panel provided independent scrutiny of the Council's health and safety performance, with reports being presented to it on a quarterly basis.

Accordingly, she submitted for the Panel's consideration a report on corporate health and safety performance and activities for the quarter ending on 30th June, 2024.

She provided, on a Departmental basis, information on the implementation of actions associated with the key performance indicators of health and safety and fire safety and pointed out that, at a corporate level, compliance rates had been 56% and 51% respectively. She highlighted that no high priority actions remained open.

In terms of accident/incident reporting, there had, in quarter 1, been 22 employee accidents, 9 non-employee accidents, 10 RIDDOR accidents and 14 incidents of work-related violence.

She provided the details of contacts which had been received from the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service during the quarter.

In response to a Member's query, the Corporate Health and Safety Manager provided further information in respect of an incident at the lion enclosure in the Zoo.

In response to the Panel's request, a list of departmental action plans for any actions open longer than nine months was provided. A Member expressed concern regarding the outstanding fire actions. He suggested that the Panel did not require the full detail of each individual action but rather an assurance that each action had an allocated responsible officer and an agreed timeframe for implementation. The Corporate Health and Safety Manager agreed to include that information in future reports to the Panel.

The Panel noted the update which had been provided.

**Financial Statement of Accounts; and**

**Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) - Draft Report to  
Those Charged with Governance**

The Director of Finance presented the Panel with the following report:

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**“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present to the Audit and Risk Panel, the Statement of Accounts of the Council, including the Annual Governance Statement, for the period ending 31 March 2024.**
- 1.2 The Statement of Accounts are an important element of the council’s overall corporate governance framework as they provide assurance to Members and ratepayers on the stewardship of the council’s finances and its financial position.**
- 1.3 The Statement of Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2024, as attached, have been prepared in line with the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2023/24 based on International Financial Reporting Standards and the Department for the Communities Accounts Direction, Circular LG 05/24 dated 16 January 2024.**
- 1.4 I can confirm that the Statement of Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2024 has been prepared in the form directed by the Department for the Communities and in my opinion the Statement of Accounts give a true and fair view of the income and expenditure and cash flows for the financial year and the financial position as at the end of the financial year.**

**2.0 Recommendations**

- 2.1 The Panel is asked to note the Council’s Statement of Accounts and incorporated Annual Governance Statement for the year ended 31 March 2024. The audit of these accounts by Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) is still ongoing. NIAO will provide a verbal update at this meeting on the status of the audit of these accounts and the draft Report To Those Charged with Governance for 2023/24.**
- 2.2 In prior years, the Panel is asked to recommend that Strategic Policy and Resource Committee approve the Statement of Accounts and Annual Governance Statement, however this year any recommendation would now be subject to the outcome of the verbal update being provided by NIAO at this meeting.**

**It is noted the legislative requirements under Regulation 8 of the Local Government (Accounts and Audit)**



**Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 and the requirement on the Council to publish these accounts no later than 30 September.**

**3.0 Main report**

**Key Issues**

**3.1 Audit Opinion**

**We await an update on the likely completion of the local government audit for the period ending 31 March 2024 and confirmation of the Local Government Auditor’s opinion that:**

- the financial statements give a true and fair view, in accordance with relevant legal and statutory requirements and the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2023-24, of the financial position of Belfast City Council as at 31 March 2024 and its income and expenditure for the year then ended; and**
- the statement of accounts have been properly prepared in accordance with the Local Government (Accounts and Audit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 and the Department for Communities directions issued thereunder; and**
- the part of the Remuneration Report to be audited has been properly prepared in accordance with the Department for Communities directions made under the Local Government (Accounts and Audit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015; and**
- the information given in the Narrative Report for the financial year ended 31 March 2024 is consistent with the financial statements.**

**3.2 Reserves  
General Fund**

**The credit balance on the General Fund has increased to £59.3m (of which £46.1m relates to specified reserves). The movement on the reserves balance is summarised in Table 1 below:**

**Table 1: Summary of Reserves Position**

<b>Opening Balance</b>		<b>£58.8m</b>

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In year movement in reserves		<u>£0.5m</u>
<u>Closing Balance</u>		<u>£59.3m</u>
Specified Reserves at year end		<u>£46.1m</u>
<u>Balance Available</u>		<u>£13.2m</u>

**3.3 Capital Fund           £14,409,960**

The Capital Fund is made up of the Belfast Investment Fund (£4,807,700). The fund has been created to support key partnership projects to regenerate Belfast and help lever substantial funds from other sources, the Local Investment Fund (£348,433) to fund smaller local regeneration projects, the City Centre Investment Fund (£8,246,713) to support the Belfast City Centre Regeneration Investment Plans, the Social Outcomes Fund (£1,007,114) to support City Centre projects which might not generate a direct financial return but would enhance the overall City Centre offer and support and attraction of investment.

**3.4 Neighbourhood Regeneration Fund £10,052,018**

This fund was created from the Belfast Investment Fund, to support neighbourhood regeneration and tourism projects in local neighbourhoods.

**3.5 Leisure Mobilisation Fund   £534,521**

This fund is to support the Leisure Transformation Programme and will cover programme level costs including communications, engagement and procurement costs.

**3.6 Capital Receipts Reserve £729,008**

These are capital receipts which have originated primarily from the sale of assets and which have not yet been used to finance capital expenditure.

**3.7 Other Fund Balances and Reserves   £2,935,552**

This relates to the Election Reserve (£62,745) which has been set up to smooth the cost of running council elections, the BWUH Subvention Fund (£1,078,513) to

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support national and international organisations in bringing their conferences to Belfast and the BWUH Sinking Fund (£1,794,294) to support planned maintenance and future capital works at the new exhibition centre.

**3.8 Debt**

The overall level of trade debtors is now standing at £5m at 31 March 2024 compared to £4.3m at 31 March 2023. An analysis of trade debtors, inclusive of VAT, for the last two years is shown below:

	31 March 2024	31 March 2023
Less than three months	£2,962,988	£3,129,548
Three to one year	£1,158,399	£482,337
More than one year	£918,640	£720,939
<b>Total</b>	<b>£5,040,027</b>	<b>£4,332,824</b>

**3.9 Creditors**

The Department for Communities has set councils a target of paying invoices within 30 days. During the year the council paid 75,629 invoices totalling £192,418,313.

The average time taken to pay creditor invoices was 17 days for the year ended 31 March 2024. The Council paid 58,774 invoices within 10 days, 70,456 invoices within 30 days, and 5,173 invoices outside of 30 days. The council endeavours to process invoices as quickly as possible and has an improvement plan to support this process.

**3.10 Annual Governance Statement (AGS)**

The Statement of Accounts include the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) for the year 2023/24, which has been prepared in line with the Accounts Directive provided by the Department for Communities, NIAO guidance and is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government'.

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**Specifically the AGS sets out:**

- **scope of responsibility**
- **the purpose of the governance framework**
- **the governance framework in place**
- **review of effectiveness**
- **update on the significant governance issues declared last year**
- **significant governance issues for current year**

**3.11 The AGS is approved by the Chair of the Strategic Policy and Resources and the Chief Executive. It is subject to review by the LGA (NIAO) as part of their annual audit.**

**3.12 Financial & Resource Implications**

**None**

**3.13 Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment**

**None.”**

The Panel was apprised of a number of amendments which officers had made to the draft accounts and which had been sent to the NIAO on 12th September, 2024. The amendments included staff costs having been updated in light of the amount of pay and grading accrual of £1.126million and the figures pertaining to the Northern Ireland Civil Service Pension Arrangements to reflect the most recent valuation.

Mr. P. Barr, NIAO, confirmed that the audit of the Council’s Financial Statement of Accounts for 2023/24 was now at an advanced stage and that no major issues had been identified to date. Staff from the NIAO were working with their counterparts in the Council to resolve some minor issues and it was anticipated that a draft report would be forwarded to the Council shortly. He also provided a verbal update on the NIAO’s draft Report To Those Charged with Governance for 2023/24.

In response to a Member’s question, the Director of Finance provided clarity on the process for approving specified reserves through the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.

The Panel noted the Council’s Statement of Accounts and incorporated Annual Governance Statement for the year ending 31st March, 2024, and agreed to recommend that the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee approve the Statement of Accounts and Annual Governance Statement.

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**AGRS Progress Report August 2024**

The Audit, Governance and Risk Services Manager submitted for the Panel's consideration a report providing an update on the progress which had been made on the Service's audit and related activities during the period from June to August, 2024.

He summarised the outcome of the three assignments which had been finalised during that period, namely, the Urban Villages Funding Programme, a follow up of open actions related to the implementation of the new E5 system and, in response to the Panel's request, the validation of the mapping of the programmes in the Resilience Strategy to alternative plans.

In terms of progress against delivery of the 2024/25 audit plan, 38% of planned activity was complete or underway.

He advised the Members of the various audits which were currently underway.

The Panel was also advised that preparation for the 2024 National Fraud Initiative exercise was well underway. The AGRS Manager outlined that, unlike previous years, the NIAO had highlighted that agency worker data should be uploaded, where the agency organisation had issued Privacy Notices. He advised that, while valuable, it would be a significant change for the Council and would take some time to prepare for. AGRS would liaise with Corporate HR on the feasibility of uploading data on agency workers.

The Panel was asked to consider deferring the planned internal audit of the Public Hire Bicycle Scheme (Belfast Bikes) until a new operator contract had been procured. He outlined that Management was currently preparing tender and approval documents and that it was planned to award the new contract in early 2025. A deferral of the internal audit of External Funding Opportunities was also being requested until an approach to external funding coordination was agreed with CMT and implemented.

After questions seeking further clarity on the Belfast Bikes request, the Panel noted the update which had been provided and agreed to the two deferral requests.

**Management update report -  
Open Spaces and Streetscene**

(Mr. S. Leonard, Director (Operational) of City and Neighbourhood Services, attended in connection with this item)

The Director (Operational) of City and Neighbourhood Services provided the Panel with an update on the progress which had been made to address the issues which had been highlighted in the recent audit of Open Spaces and Streetscene. The audit had indicated three new high priority recommendations and three medium priority recommendations. He outlined the high priority actions which had been undertaken to date in respect of the OSS Service's Transition and Improvement Project, the development of Service Standards for former street

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cleansing and Parks staff and a stock take of the achievements under the Belfast Open Spaces Strategy and the next phase of actions for the next five years.

He also provided details in relation to the medium-term actions in respect of CRM requests, Asset Management and Contract Management.

The Panel thanked the Director for the update which had been provided.

**Corporate Risk Management**

The Head of Audit, Governance and Risk Services submitted for the Panel's consideration a report on the corporate risk dashboard, which summarised the key updates from the risk reviews by management for the quarter ending 30th June, 2024. She provided an update on compliance with the Risk Strategy based on the new updated assurance statements completed by senior management for the quarter.

She sought the Panel's agreement for the inclusion of a proposed new significant governance issue on the penalty being applied to the Black Mountain Shared Space project in the Council's annual government statement.

In respect of business continuity management, the Panel was also asked to consider requesting the critical services to complete a template on preparedness for planned emergency power cuts.

The Head of AGRS also requested that the Panel would consider the BCM Improvement Action Plan, including a proposal to review and update the Business Impact Analysis (BIA's) of the 17 critical services only, rather than all BCC services.

The Panel:

- a) Noted the corporate risk management dashboard and the updates for quarter-end June 2024;
- b) Noted the assurances from senior management regarding compliance with the Risk Strategy, based on the new format assurance statements for quarter-end June 2024;
- c) Reviewed and agreed the inclusion of a proposed new significant governance for inclusion in our annual government statement, which formed part of the published financial accounts;
- d) Noted the current position regarding business continuity arrangements and agreed to request each of the 17 critical services to complete a template on preparedness for planned emergency power cuts; and
- e) Agreed the practice of reviewing and updating the Business Impact Analysis (BIA's) of the 17 critical services only (rather than all BCC services) and for this update to be completed by the end of March 2025.

**Management update report - Resilience Strategy**

The Director of City and Organisational Strategy presented the following report to the Panel:

**“1.0 Purpose of Report**

**1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide members with an overview of the progress of projects outlined in the Resilience Ambitions document and the additional projects emerging from the Resilience and Sustainability Board.**

**2.0 Recommendations**

**2.1 The Panel is asked to note the contents of this report and the detailed review attached at Appendix 1.**

**3.0 Main report**

**3.1 Members will be aware that in December 2020, Belfast launched a Resilience Strategy, a framework to safeguard the city against situations (shocks and stresses) that could threaten its safety and stability over coming years. The strategy had been developed as a city rather than a council document, to be delivered in partnership with external partners across the city.**

**3.2 Many of the programmes contained within the Resilience Strategy are being progressed, monitored, and reported on individually through the appropriate led organisations including regular reporting to the Climate & City Resilience Committee and the Belfast Agenda Resilience & Sustainability Board.**

**3.3 Since its publication, a number of developments have occurred including the corporate decision to pivot the focus on climate related activity, at both a council and city level and the appointment of a Climate Commissioner and the creation of an internal climate team. Significant engagement has been undertaken to refresh the Belfast Agenda (the city’s community plan) for the period 2024-2028 with an enhanced focus on climate related priorities.**

**3.4 The Panel will recall that a report had been submitted to its meeting in June 2024 on the Belfast Resilience Strategy including a detailed assessment of the status**

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of each of the ambitions and programmes contained therein. The report sought to provide assurance in relation to the status of such programmes as well as highlighting that the responsibility for a number of commitments rested with other organisations to progress as part of their normal planning and delivery arrangements.

- 3.5 At the meeting in June, it was agreed that a further report would be brought back to the Panel outlining the work underway in relation to our Resilience Strategy commitments as well as other work underway on climate action. Attached at [Appendix 1](#) is a detailed report which recently submitted to the Climate and Resilience Committee on 8 August 2024, providing an update on work currently underway across the city, including those linked to the Resilience Strategy, to support the transition to an inclusive, resilient and low emission economy.

4.0 **Financial & Resource Implications**

There are no financial or resource implications contained within this report.

5.0 **Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment**

There is no equality, good relations of rural needs implications contained within this report.”

The Panel noted the contents.

**Performance Improvement**

The Director of City and Organisational Strategy submitted the following report for the Panel’s consideration:

“1.0 **Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues**

- 1.1 To provide the Audit and Assurance Panel with an update on:

- Performance Improvement Self-Assessment 2023-24
- Performance Improvement Plan 2024-25.
- Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) Section 95 Audit and Assessment 2024-25.



**2.0 Recommendations**

**2.1 The Panel is asked to:**

- i. Agree that the draft Performance Improvement Self-Assessment report 2023-24 (Appendix 1) is published by the statutory timescale of 30 September 2024, subject to SP&R Committee approval.**
- ii. The agreed Performance Improvement Plan 2024-25 (Section 3.6).**
- iii. That a mid-year 2024-25 progress report will be brought to the Audit and Assurance Panel on 3 December 2024.**
- iv. That the NIAO Section 95 Audit and Assessment 2024-25 will take place in approximately October/ November 2024.**

**3.0 Main report**

**Background**

**3.1 Part 12 of the Local Government (NI) Act requires councils to agree improvement objectives on an annual basis and publish these in the form of a Performance Improvement Plan, to be published by 30 June. The Act also requires that progress is regularly monitored against the improvement objectives and reported in an annual Self-Assessment of performance, to be published by 30 September.**

**Performance Improvement Self-Assessment 2023-24**

**3.2 At the preceding Audit and Assurance Panel meeting in June 2024, the Panel were advised that they would receive:**

- The statutory Performance Improvement Self-Assessment report 2023-24.**
- The final Performance Improvement Plan 2024-25.**

**Councils are firstly required to undertake an annual self-assessment of their performance. In 2021-22, the NIAO also recommended that we should consider ways to ensure that ‘Self-Assessment reports’ provide a comprehensive and useful overview of how the council has performed across its wider corporate activities’.**

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**3.3 The Panel will note that Appendix 1 fulfils both requirements above assessing the Council's performance against five agreed performance improvement objectives. A series of improvement milestones and indicators had been set out against each objective to enable success to be measured. A summary of the assessment is set out below.**

- **All 5 improvement objectives have been achieved.**
- **Milestones – all 66 milestones have either been achieved (85%) or partially achieved (15%).**
- **In total there are 28 performance indicators – 8 statutory and 20 self-imposed indicators.**
- **Of the 28 performance indicators:**
  - **75% (21) of performance indicators were on target or exceeded target (within 1% or better);**
  - **7% (2) were slightly adrift of target (between 1% and 5%) and these are:**
    - **Number of adult and junior leisure centre monthly prepaid memberships (including swim school); and**
    - **Amount (tonnage) of council collected municipal waste arisings (reduce).**
  - **18% (5) were adrift of target (5% or more) and these are:**
    - **Percentage of corporate complaints resolved within timeframe;**
    - **Number of participants or businesses supported;**
    - **One Million Trees Programme - number of trees planted per annum;**
    - **Average (weeks) processing time for major planning applications; and**
    - **Average (weeks) processing time for local planning applications.**
- **Of the 28 performance indicators:**
  - **57% (16) showed a positive change from previous years.**
  - **25% (7) showed no significant change or maintained a similar level of performance as previous years, and these are:**

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- Number of parks and green spaces with green flag accreditation;
  - Number of jobs promoted through the 'Go For It' programme [statutory performance indicator];
  - Number of participants or businesses supported;
  - Carbon disclosure project (CDP) score;
  - Northern Ireland environmental benchmarking survey rating;
  - % of household waste collected that is sent for recycling (or prepared for re-use) (increase); and
  - Number of small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) and companies directly engaged in the Smart District programme.
- 18% (5) showed a negative change from previous years and these are:
- Percentage of corporate complaints resolved within timeframe;
  - One Million Trees Programme - number of trees planted per annum;
  - Amount (tonnage) of council collected municipal waste arisings;
  - Average (weeks) processing time for major planning applications; and
  - Average (weeks) processing time for local planning applications.

**3.4** A rationale has been provided within Appendix 1 where targets have not been met or there has been limited or no improvement. Key factors impacting on the delivery of targets include regional issues and delays, council resource constraints as well as dependency on external factors including market forces and regulatory changes. Where targets have not been achieved or there has been no improvement, where relevant these have been carried forward to the 2024-25 Performance Improvement Plan.

**NIAO recommendations**

**3.5** Whilst the NIAO did not make any statutory recommendations, they did make several observations. The Panel will note that all NIAO recommendations since 2020-21 have been addressed and completed as

outlined in the appendices of the Performance Improvement Self-Assessment report 2023-24.

**Performance Improvement Plan 2024-25**

**3.6** At the preceding meeting of the Panel, members were presented with a draft Performance Improvement Plan. Following this meeting, the Improvement Plan 2024-25 was:

- formally approved by the SP&R Committee and the full Council;
- submitted to the NIAO;
- published on our website prior to the end of June in accordance with Part 12 of the Local Government Act; and
- circulated internally to all responsible and updating officers in July 2024.

The Panel will note that following approval of the Corporate Delivery Plan 2024-25 at Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 23 August 2024 and the full council on the 2 September 2024, the target for the % of invoices paid within 30 calendar days has been revised from 95% to 90%. The published web version of the [2024-25 Performance Improvement Plan](#) will be updated accordingly.

The first update on progress against the 2024-25 Performance Improvement objectives will be presented to the Panel on 3 December 2024.

**NIAO Section 95 Audit and Assessment 2024-25**

**3.7** Under Section 95 of the Local Government Act, the NIAO are required to conduct an annual audit and assessment of councils' performance management arrangements. In preparation for this, the Strategic Performance team are co-ordinating the completion of the NIAO Performance Improvement Audit Questionnaire 2024-25 to be submitted to the NIAO by 1 October 2024. The outcome of the audit will be reported to the Panel following receipt of the final audit report from the NIAO.

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**Next steps**

**3.8 Subject to consideration by the Audit and Assurance Panel, the proposed next steps include:**

- i. This report will follow to the SP&R Committee on 20 September 2024 for approval.
- ii. The Performance Improvement Self-Assessment report 2023-24 will be published on the council website by the statutory deadline of 30 September 2024.
- iii. The Strategic Performance team will submit the NIAO Performance Improvement Audit Questionnaire 2024-25 to the NIAO by 1 October 2024.
- iv. The Panel will receive a mid-year 2024-25 Performance Improvement Plan progress report on the 3 December 2024.
- v. The NIAO Section 95 report will be presented to the Panel when received from the Audit Office.

**4.0 Financial & Resource Implications**

**4.1 None.**

**5.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment**

**5.1 There are no equality or good relations implications associated with this report.”**

The Panel adopted the recommendations.

**Management update report – Planning**

(Ms. K. Bentley, Director of Planning and Building Control, attended in connection with this item).

The Director of Planning and Building Control provided the Panel with an update on Planning Performance, including how the Department's performance challenges were being addressed through the Planning Service's updated Improvement Plan.

The Panel was provided with the performance over the last nine years and for the current year to date. The current performance for processing Major applications in 2024/25 was an average processing time of 34.8 weeks against a target of 30 weeks. She outlined that that was a significant improvement from the previous year.

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She outlined that the Planning Service was subject to three statutory indicators set by the Department for Infrastructure. She highlighted that they were a simple but crude measurement which could be affected by a significant number of factors.

She explained that an analysis of the major applications determined in 2023/24 showed that the main impact on performance were delays post-Committee. In 2023/24, it had taken an average of 25 weeks to report Major applications to the Committee, which was well within the statutory target. However, the Key Performance Indicator statistics were generated from the time taken from validation to the issuing of the decision notice and so the overall processing time was 64.4 weeks.

She outlined that two withdrawn Major applications had also significantly adversely impacted the statistics, one having been withdrawn after 189 weeks and the other after 127 weeks.

The Panel was also advised of a number of delays in the signing of Section 76 Planning Agreements with developers before a decision could be issued.

Whilst the Section 76 Agreement process was the main cause of delays post-Committee, the most common reason for Major applications not achieving the 30 week target was found to be the quality of the applications.

She reiterated that the Department for Infrastructure's measurement of performance was very narrow and did not consider the quality of decision making or outcomes. She advised the Members that there was a significant amount of unmeasured work ongoing within the Planning Service in improving the quality of applications through negotiating amendments to schemes and seeking additional information to address Council policies and to satisfy consultees.

She outlined that the average processing time of local applications was 17.8 weeks against a target of 15 weeks which was a marked improvement from the previous year.

In regards to enforcement, the Planning Service had historically exceeded the statutory target of concluding 70% of cases within 39 weeks by some margin, with last years performance reaching 88.6%.

The Panel was presented with the Regional Performance statistics. The Director highlighted that, whilst direct comparisons with other planning authorities were hard to make, it was clear that Belfast City Council received and determined the most Major and Local applications in 2023/24 by some margin, with an approval rate above the NI average and demonstrating strong commitment to customer service and positive decision making.

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She provided the Panel with an overview of challenges that the Service faced in 2023/24, including the implementation of the new regional Planning Portal and the adoption of the Belfast Local Development Plan: Plan Strategy.

The Panel was reminded that the Public Accounts Committee called for fundamental reform of planning at a regional level and an Interim Regional Planning Commission was established in February 2023 to oversee the regional improvement agenda, supported by a “Planning Improvement Programme” drawn up by DfI and local government.

The Director outlined the Service’s improvement priorities for the next 12 months, which included:

- continuing to influence positive change to the NI planning system;
- development of more comprehensive performance information to provide narrative to the current KPI statistics and to illustrate more qualitative performance factors;
- the establishment of a *Belfast Planning Partnership* as a forum for collaborative working with customers;
- the development of Belfast specific information on statutory consultee performance;
- implementation of a comprehensive internal Performance monitoring of performance at service, area team, sub-team and individual staff level;
- implementation of the model planning agreements and new procedures to speed up the Section 76 planning agreement process;
- continued operational improvement of processes including the wider roll-out of learning from the lean redesign experimentation;
- adoption and publication of a validation checklist for mandating information requirements on submission of applications (based on the current Application Checklist); and
- review of PAD fees and use of Planning Performance Agreements.

She stressed that it would be challenging for the Service to meet the statutory KPIs targets until 2025/26 due to the need to bed-in new streamlined processes, reduce the backlog of live applications to more manageable levels and to clear “legacy” applications of more than two years old from the system.

The Panel thanked the Director for the update which was provided.

**Report on Freedom of Information (FOI) / Environmental  
Information Regulations (EIR) Performance**

The City Solicitor/Director of Legal and Civic Services advised the Panel that the Council’s Information Governance Unit (IGU) was responsible for providing advice to individual departments in relation to data protection, Subject Access Requests (SAR), FOI and EIR requests.

She explained that the IGU assisted her in conducting internal reviews where a requestor was unhappy with the Council’s initial response, which could be due to the

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refusal to provide a response or for a delay in providing a response. They also led on responding to complaints to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) if a requestor remained unhappy with a response.

At a departmental level, each department had a nominated officer who was responsible for the co-ordination and issuing of FOI responses. Those officers logged an FOI/EIR or SAR request onto the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system within their department.

The Panel was advised that Section 10 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 provided that a public authority must provide a substantive response to FOI and EIR requests within 20 working days, subject to some limited exceptions. For example, a requestor could be asked to clarify their request if it was too wide and would incur a fee or where it was too vague. She explained that that had the effect of extending the timeframe for a response.

She advised that, unfortunately, the current CRM system could not run a report to provide overall response times. Each individual request would have to be reviewed in order to provide that information which would be a significant task in terms of officer time. There was, however, other information available which was indicative of good performance in terms of response times.

The Panel was advised that, since January 2024, the Council had received 614 FOI and EIR requests, out of a total of 803 total requests for information, and only 18 of those had been subject to internal review. Three complaints had been made to the ICO, one of which related to a delayed FOI response which was issued 2 weeks after the 20-working day due date. Whilst that complaint was upheld, no further action had been taken against the Council.

A Member expressed concern that the system was not up to date and queried what guidance was provided to staff in determining whether providing information to an Elected Member or to a member of the public fell under the normal course of business or as a Freedom of Information Request. The City Solicitor advised the Panel that the Council's bespoke CRM system was approximately 25 years old. She agreed to speak with the Member further regarding the provision of information to Elected Members and agreed to provide a future update to the Panel in respect of how best to improve the current system so that the team could collate the information that the Panel wished to be made aware of on a quarterly basis.

The Panel noted the update which had been provided.

**Audit & Risk Panel Governance - Extension to  
Contract with External Member**

(Mr. D. Wilson, Independent Member, having declared an interest, left the room for the duration of this item)

The Deputy Chief Executive and Strategic Director of Corporate Services advised the Audit and Risk Panel that the contract for the Non-Executive Member of the Panel had



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reached the one-year review point and that the Panel was asked to consider extending the contract for an additional two years.

The Panel agreed to recommend that the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee would extend his contract for a further two years.

**Date of next meeting**

The Panel was advised that the next meeting was scheduled to take place on Tuesday, 3rd December at 12.30pm.

Chairperson