



<b>Subject:</b>	Audit and Risk Panel Report and Minutes of Meeting of 3 December 2024
<b>Date:</b>	13 December 2024
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Sharon McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive / Strategic Director of Corporate Services
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Claire O'Prey, Head of Audit, Governance and Risk Services

**Restricted Reports**

Is this report restricted? Yes  No

Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.

Insert number

1. Information relating to any individual
2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)
4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter
5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained
6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction
7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime

If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?

After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Call-in**

Is the decision eligible for Call-in? Yes  No

1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues
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1.1	The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with a summary of the key issues that were considered and discussed by the Audit & Risk Panel at its December 2024 meeting and present the minutes of the last meeting of the Panel for approval.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
2.1	<p>That Strategic Policy and Resources Committee:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- notes the key issues arising at the Audit and Risk Panel meeting</li> <li>- notes that the Annual Audit Letter from the NIAO, providing a positive unqualified audit opinion on the financial statements for 2022/23, has been received and will be published on the Councils website in line with the regulations and;</li> <li>- approves the minutes of the Audit &amp; Risk Panel of 3 December 2024 at appendix A.</li> </ul>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main Report</b>
	<p><b>Key Issues</b></p> <p><u>Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO)</u></p> <p>3.1 On 16 September 2024, Strategic Policy and Resources Committee approved the Statement of Accounts for the year-end 31 March 2024. The NIAO have now completed their audit of the accounts and the Panel considered the final Report to Those Charged with Governance (RTTCWG) and the Annual Audit Letter, which provided an <b>unqualified audit opinion</b> on the accounts. These accounts are a fundamental part of the councils overall corporate governance framework and provide assurance to Members and ratepayers on the stewardship of the council's finances and its financial position.</p> <p>3.2 The RTTCWG contains <b>seven recommendations for management action, with one recommendation relating to an EU penalty being classed as priority one</b>, with the Panel emphasising the need to ensure full compliance with the terms and conditions of funding. Management have agreed the recommendations, which are all due to be implemented by March 2025. <b>The Annual Audit Letter summarises the key aspects of the RTTCWG and in line with the Local Government (Accounts and Audit) Regulations (NI) 2015 will be published on the Councils website as soon as reasonably possible.</b></p> <p><u>Key reports</u></p> <p>3.3 The Panel noted the <b>progress being made against the annual internal audit plan</b> noting that 49% of planned activity is either underway or completed. Ten audits were finalised in the period September - November 2024, which all had an assurance opinion of "some improvement required" except for the internal audit of the Belfast Region City Deal Programme Management Office, which received an opinion of "substantial" assurance. The Panel also noted the range of advisory work undertaken. The Panel agreed the request by management to defer the internal audits of Recruitment and Selection and Travel and Subsistence which are linked to the ongoing work to implement the new HR System.</p> <p>3.4 The Panel considered an update on the gap analysis completed by AGRS between the arrangements currently in place and the <b>Good Practice Checklist for Local Councils included in the NIAO guide 'A Strategic Approach to the Use of Public Sector Assets – A Good Practice Guide for Local Government in Northern Ireland'</b>. Regarding this piece of work the Panel asked for the Director of Property and Projects to report to their next meeting on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2025 on the approach that will be taken to improve asset management in BCC.</p>

3.5	The Panel considered the <b>corporate risk dashboard</b> which provided an analysis and update on the progress being made to manage the 23 risks that are considered to present the greatest threat to the delivery corporate priorities and / or compliance with key statutory requirements.
3.6	The Panel noted the <b>quarterly assurances provided by Directors</b> regarding compliance with risk management and internal control processes.
3.7	The Panel noted the work that was underway to exercise, review, and update <b>business continuity management (BCM) plans</b> for the critical services by the year-end, to confirm the business continuity champions and to prepare for potential planned emergency power cuts.
3.8	The Panel received <b>quarter 2 reports on corporate health and safety, absence management and performance improvement.</b>
3.9	Regarding health and safety, <b>the Panel focussed on the six outstanding high priority fire safety actions</b> , and for their next meeting the Panel asked for more detail on the reasons why these actions have not been implemented by their expected date, to enable the Panel to understand the root cause for the delay.
3.10	Regarding absence management, although absence levels are below target and <b>the Panel endorses the need for attendance management to be a priority item on DMT agendas</b> , the Panel noted the reduction compared to the same period last year. In addition, the Panel learned how 43% of people were referred to their GP to investigate health concerns following an appointment at the Keeping Well Van initiative and commended this health initiative.
3.11	Regarding <b>performance improvement arrangements</b> the Panel noted the mid-year progress update on the actions and measures of success contributing to the achievement of the performance improvement objectives contained within the Performance Improvement Plan 2024-25. The Panel highlighted the importance of performance management in relation to household waste collection. In addition, following a query raised by a member of the Panel, the Director will provide the Panel member with an explanation of the <b>Cleanliness Index Score</b> and the reason why the target has reduced to 65%.
3.12	The Panel received an update on the key messages contained in the <b>Local Government Auditors Report 2024</b> , which sets out their observations on financial performance, governance issues and key challenges facing councils in NI, including the need to ensure value for money in the use of agency workers, based on audits relating to 2022/23.
3.13	<p><u>National Fraud Initiative (NFI)</u></p> <p>A key element of the Council's counter-fraud arrangements is our participation in <b>the National Fraud Initiative</b>. The NFI is essentially a data matching exercise that involves comparing sets of data against other records held by the same or another body, allowing potentially fraudulent or erroneous payments to be identified, reviewed and, where necessary, investigated. The Panel received an update on the preparatory work that is underway for the 2024 exercise and received an update from the NIAO on the overall outcome of the previous 2022 – 24 National Fraud Initiative (NFI) exercise in Northern Ireland.</p> <p><b><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></b> None.</p> <p><b><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></b> None known at this time.</p>
4.0	<b>Appendices - Documents Attached</b>
	Appendix A - Minutes of Audit & Risk Panel 3 December 2024

