
Thame Town Council

Internal Audit Report 2015-16: Final update

Adrian Shepherd-Roberts

For 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 2015-16 financial year, during our visits on 7th October 2015, 12th January, 16th March and 25th May 2016, together with the matters arising and recommendations for action, where appropriate.

Internal Audit Approach

In undertaking our review for the year, 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 have concluded that, on the basis of the programme of work we have undertaken, the Council has maintained adequate and effective internal control arrangements during the year. We ask that members consider the content of this report and acknowledge that the report has been reviewed by Council.

We have completed and signed the 'Annual Internal Audit Report' in the year's Annual Return, having concluded that, in all significant respects, the control objectives set out in that report were being achieved throughout the financial year to a standard adequate to meet the needs of the Council.

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 Omega trial balance detail with that in the final Statement of Accounts and certified Annual Return for 2014-15;
- 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 five months’ transactions (April, August, November 2015 and January and March 2016) to the relevant Lloyds Bank account statements;
- Checked and agreed the daily “sweep” transfers to and from the Current account to maintain the Lloyds Bank Business Extra account balance at circa £2,500 for the same five months;
- Checked and agreed detail of receipt and payment transactions in the Barclays account cashbook for the year to 31st March 2016; and
- Checked and agreed detail on bank reconciliations prepared using the Omega accounting software, as at 30th April, 31st August, 30th November 2015 and 31st January and March 2016 for the Lloyds and Barclays accounts.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area of our review process: we have undertaken further work in this area at this final visit, including ensuring that the March 2016 cashbook and bank reconciliation detail corresponds appropriately to the relevant bank statements and that the year-end balance is disclosed accurately in the detailed Statement of Accounts and Annual Return.

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 were re-adopted by the Council in July 2015, with the Financial Regulations also submitted for approval to Full Council and adopted at the May 2015 meeting.

- We have completed our review of minutes of the Council and it’s Standing Committees for the current year against the above criteria with no issues arising at present.
- We note the continued development and adoption of various governance policies, including those on Financial Management, Anti-Fraud and Corruption, Debit Card,

together with an Investment Strategy, all of which we consider further enhance the Council's governance controls; and

- In the light of Procurement Guidelines issued in April 2015 we have been advised that the value for formal tender action is to be considered by Full Council and encompassed in the Financial Regulations to meet the requirements of these updated EU Procurement Regulations.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area warranting further comment. We have discussed the requirement for revisions to the FRs following changes in EU legislation in relation to the advertising of contracts over £25,000 and note from that a revision has been approved at the Annual Council Meeting in May 2016.

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.

We have 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 extended our sample of payments for examination to 31st March 2016 in order to ensure compliance with the above criteria and the Council's approved working practices: our test sample includes 41 individual payments in excess of £4,000 also including every 40th payment recorded in the cashbook in order to provide a more random sample and totals £459,506 equating to 66% of non-pay related payments to the above date.

We have also reviewed the management controls and procedures in respect of the authorisation and the issuing of specific grants to various local events and organisations.

We have also examined the four quarters VAT reclaims now submitted on line as required by HMRC.

Conclusions

We are pleased to record that no issues have been identified warranting formal comment or recommendation in this area.

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 approved by Full Council in March 2016;
- Also noted that a full review of the Health & Safety and Human Resources requirements has been undertaken by Ellis Whittam with the contract approved by Full Council and renewed for a further three-year term; and
- Examined the Council's current insurance schedule for the year to May 2016 with cover again provided by Aviva together with a separate policy for motor vehicles. We are pleased to record that cover in all areas appears appropriate for the Council's current requirements and have also reviewed the Asset Inventory comparing, where possible, the valuation figures to the policy.

Conclusions

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

Budgetary Control & Reserves

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.

We note that, on 19th January 2016, a precept of £596,209 for 2016-17 was formally approved by Full Council, also noting that the Council will not be receiving additional funding by way of a Council Tax Support Grant.

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.

We have also reviewed the year-end retained reserve balances to ensure that they are appropriate for the Council's future revenue spending and development aspirations.

Conclusions

No issues have arisen in this area warranting formal comment or recommendation. Whilst the General Fund balance at the year-end (£135,000) is potentially low when compared with the annual revenue spending, should an urgent need arise, funds could be released from earmarked reserves.

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 controls in place over the hire of Town Hall facilities, examining a sample of transactions for November 2015 to ensure that all diarised bookings are recorded and have been invoiced at the appropriate approved fee and that payment has been received and banked accordingly.

We have also reviewed the Chipside parking procedures in relation to the recording of excess charge car parking fees examining the reports in respect of those tickets issued from October to December 2015 and the processes for the recovery of the fines.

Similarly, we have examined the processes and procedures in respect of the recovery /collection of income from the Christmas Market and Farmers Markets to ensure that the correct fees are collected in relation to the number of stall holders present.

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

We are also pleased to note that members have considered and approved increases in fees and charges in certain areas in accordance with the requirements of the approved Financial Regulations.

Conclusions

We are pleased to record that no issues arise in this area: we have updated our year-on-year analysis of income across the various budget headings at this final visit.

Petty Cash Account

Whilst the amount of spending involved by way of petty cash is very limited, we are required, as part of the annual Internal Audit Reporting process on the Annual Return, to indicate the soundness of controls in this area of the Council's financial activities. Consequently, we aim to ensure that petty cash payments are appropriately supported by a trade invoice or relevant till receipt; that, where applicable, VAT has been identified for recovery and appropriate entries are made in the Omega expenditure codes.

The Council operates an “imprest” account with an approved maximum float of £300, payment detail being summarised in a monthly spreadsheet analysing expenditure accordingly to the relevant nominal codes. We have examined payments in September 2015 and are pleased to report that all were supported appropriately, that VAT had been identified accordingly for recovery from HMRC and that monthly reimbursements made from the Barclays current account have been accounted for appropriately.

At our first visit we also checked the physical cash held, agreeing detail to the supporting trade invoices and till receipts for expenses incurred subsequent to the last “top-up” to the imprest holding of £300; we have also checked and agreed the petty cash and cash float held in the reception till.

We have, at this interim update visit, checked the cash held in the Tourist Information till to the printout provided and cross referenced the takings to include income and receipts in respect of the Farmers Market.

At our first visit, we noted that the Council had opened a debit card facility with the Clerk being sole operator of this card. We have reviewed the payment checking procedures and consider them satisfactory; subsequently at this interim update visit we reviewed the payments from September 2015 to January 2016 including the purchase orders and relevant supporting invoices.

Conclusions

No matters arise warranting formal comment or recommendation.

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 2015 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 September 2015 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.

Asset Register / Inventory

The Governance and Accountability Manual requires all councils to maintain a record of all assets owned. We have checked and agreed the principles used in the detail, as recorded in the Asset Register, noting that it has been prepared using purchase cost values or where that value is unknown at the previous year's Return level or uplifted or decreased to reflect the acquisition or disposal of assets.

Conclusions

We are pleased to report that no issues have been identified in this area of our review process. We have ensured the accurate disclosure of asset values in the year's Annual Return at this year's final visit.

Investments and Loans

The Council has a range of investments managed by an external fund manager (Rathbones Investment Management). We previously noted re-adoption of the Annual Investment Strategy by the Policy and Resources Committee in March 2016 with members agreeing that no changes in content were necessary at that time. We have subsequently examined the performance of the investment portfolio managed by Rathbones with no issues arising.

We have also noted the existence of two investments on Term deposits with Lloyds Bank plc for a total of £300,000.

The Council has three outstanding PWLB loans currently: we have verified detail of the two half-yearly repayment instalments for 2015-16 to the PWLB repayment demands.

We also noted that the Council had agreed and provided two third-party loans, which were repayable over 5 years and 12 years respectively, secured by a charge over land and/or buildings. We note that the 5-year loan has been fully repaid ahead of the agreed loan period. The 12 year loan has now been registered by the Council's solicitors; however, it has yet to be drawn down.

Conclusions

No matters arise in this area of our review for the year.

Statement of Account and Annual Return

The 1996 Accounts and Audit Regulations required all Councils to prepare annually a detailed Statement of Accounts, together with supporting statements identifying other aspects of the Council's financial affairs.

We have checked and agreed entries in the Statement of Accounts to the underlying Trial Balance and Balance Sheet and other documentation provided. Similarly, we have checked and agreed the financial data to be reported at Section 2 of the Annual Return.

Conclusions

No issues have arisen in this review area and on the basis of work undertaken during the year, we have duly signed off the Internal Audit Report at Section 4 of the Annual Return, assigning positive assurances in each relevant area.