

**Report to:** **AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE**

**Date:** **26<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

**Title:** **Internal Audit and Counter Fraud Report for the first half of the financial year 2020-2021 to the end of September 2020.**

**Report of:** **Chief Internal Auditor**

**Ward(s):** **All**

**Purpose of report:** **To provide a summary of the activities of Internal Audit and Counter Fraud for the first half of the financial year - 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020.**

**Officer recommendation(s):** **That the information in this report be noted and members identify any further information requirements**

**Reasons for recommendations:** **The remit of the Audit and Governance Committee includes the duties to agree an Annual Audit Plan and keep it under review, and to keep under review the probity and effectiveness of internal controls, both financial and operational, including the Council's arrangements for identifying and managing risk.**

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## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 The remit of the Audit and Governance Committee includes the duties to agree an Annual Audit Plan and keep it under review, and to keep under review the probity and effectiveness of internal controls, both financial and operational, including the Council's arrangements for identifying and managing risk.
- 1.2 The quarterly report includes a review of work undertaken by Internal Audit and Counter Fraud. At the end of the financial year the Chief Internal Auditor will state their opinion of the control environment of the authority based on this work.

## **2 Review of the work of Internal Audit carried out in the first half of 2020-21.**

- 2.1 A list of all the audit reports issued in final from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020 is as follows:

<b>Name of Audit</b>	<b>Assurance Level</b>
Benefits and Council Tax Reduction (19/20)	Substantial Assurance
Main Accounting (19/20)	Partial Assurance
Treasury Management (19/20)	Substantial Assurance
Payroll (19/20)	Partial Assurance
Council Tax (19/20)	Substantial Assurance
National Non Domestic Rates (19/20)	Substantial Assurance
Cash and Bank (19/20)	Partial Assurance
Debtors (19/20)	Partial Assurance
Housing Rents (19/20)	Partial Assurance
Creditors (19/20)	Partial Assurance
Information Technology (19/20)	Partial Assurance
Voids Management	Substantial Assurance
Rechargeable Repairs	Partial Assurance

*NB. These are the Assurance Levels given at the time of the initial report and do not reflect findings at follow up.*

2.2 Below are the descriptions of the levels of assurance referred to above.

<b>Assurance Level</b>	<b>Description</b>
Full Assurance	Full assurance that the controls reduce the risk to an acceptable level.
Substantial Assurance	Significant assurance that the controls reduce the level of risk, but there are some reservations; most risks are adequately managed, for others there are minor issues that need to be addressed by management.
Partial Assurance	Partial assurance that the controls reduce the level of risk. Only some of the risks are adequately managed; for others there are significant issues that need to be addressed by management.
Minimal Assurance	Little assurance that the controls reduce the level of risk to an acceptable level; the level of risk remains high and immediate action is required by management.
No Assurance	No assurance can be given. The reasons will be explained thoroughly in the report.

2.3 During this period the following draft reports have been issued and will be reported in future reports once agreed by the relevant manager.

#### Business Continuity Planning

2.4 Appendix A is the list of all reports issued in final during the year which were given an assurance level below "Substantial". This list includes brief bullet

points of the issues highlighted in the reviews which informed the assurance level given.

- 2.5 During this quarter work has also been undertaken in other areas in more of a consultancy capacity that has not resulted in an audit report with an assurance level given to the control environment. A couple of pieces of work were carried out in the Finance section to provide advice on processes. A small investigation was also carried out on a potential fraud involving a creditor providing temporary accommodation. This was found not to be a fraud but poor record keeping on the part of the creditor which had not been identified by the department passing the invoices for payment. There have been several instances of advice being sought from the Internal Audit department on a variety of subjects.
- 2.6 The other area of work involving the Internal Audit team is the Benefit Subsidy Claim. The council has to put in an annual claim to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for the repayment of the benefits paid out on their behalf. The claim has a number of fields which are filled out based on information input to the Open Revenues software. Every year this claim has to be tested for errors before it is submitted. This testing is carried out by the Internal Audit team based on samples selected by an external company. This external company has traditionally been the external auditors for the council. If any errors are found then an additional 40 cases must be selected and tested. Once this work is completed the external auditors test the work carried out by Internal Audit before the claim is signed off and passed to the DWP.
- 2.7 As well as the testing of the subsidy claim this year a piece of work was carried out on the information entered into Open Revenues and the fed into the subsidy claim. It was considered that Internal Audit was not best placed to continue to carry out this work as it distanced the users/department from the results and therefore appeared to transfer responsibility. Also, there was only one officer in Internal Audit who had the necessary experience in this area and this was a potential risk to the council if that member of staff was not available for any reason. It has therefore been agreed that after the current piece of subsidy work is completed then this work will be outsourced to a company to carry out. This will allow resilience of coverage and should allow for potential savings if the company provides the work for both authorities.
- 2.8 In the audit plan for 2020/21 it was proposed to have a list of audits to be carried out which reflected the size of the departments as a percentage of the councils. In this way, when the teams are tasked with pieces of work, these can be carried out within the allocation for the area. A planned audit may have to be dropped but the breadth of coverage would be maintained. It would be ensured that a lower risk audit was dropped if this were to be the case.

2.9 The table below shows the work carried out by the Internal Audit team in the first half of the year by percentage across the main areas services compared to that planned for the whole. It should be noted that the figures will be skewed as few audits (other than the annual audits) have been undertaken at this point in the year.

Area	Planned	Actual
Regeneration	12%	2.03%
Tourism and Enterprise	9%	0.12%
Service Delivery	37%	59.54%
Corporate Services	42%	38.32%

2.10 Appendix B shows outstanding recommendations/actions. This list includes recommendations from audit reviews that remain outstanding after the first follow up has been completed plus actions from other reports that have been brought to committee.

### 3 Review of the work of Counter Fraud carried out in the first half of 2020-21.

3.1 A flexible and creative approach has been taken in dealing with the existing and new fraud investigations under government guidelines and restrictions. Cases have continued to be built and monitored, with the team responding to new and emerging fraud risks following the release of Covid-19 support packages to businesses and individuals. The team continues to target the high risk and value areas of tenancy housing while also undertaking other exercises as detailed below. However, the effects of Covid-19 are still being felt and this is explained in more detail under each sub section.

3.2 Housing Tenancy – The team continue to work closely with colleagues in Homes First and Legal. There are currently 12 ongoing sublet/abandonment tenancy cases at various stages. Two abandoned properties have been successfully returned to the authority in this period with a net saving of £186,000.00. Another tenancy with considerable rent arrears was resolved by direct action from the Counter Fraud team. Eight other tenancy fraud cases were closed with no further action.

3.3 Right to Buy – There has been an increase in applications in the second quarter, as Covid-19 restrictions have gradually started to be lifted. Nine cases are currently being checked to prevent and detect fraud and protect the authority against money laundering. Six cases were withdrawn during this period with a net saving to the authority of £479,200. Six other cases have been approved for sale.

3.4 Housing Options – Access for Homes First caseworkers and specialists to use HM Land Registry and the National Anti-Fraud Network facilities for credit checks has been rolled out to help verify applications and prevent fraud.

3.5 Small Business Grant Fund – Following on from the government's announcement to support businesses through the Covid-19 pandemic, the team have been working closely with the revenues specialists to prevent and

investigate fraudulent applications. Nine applications were verified during this period to confirm the correct recipient of the grant. Further cases are currently being investigated, with the return of three separate £10,000 grant payments during this period. Work is ongoing on post verification of 130 applications verified by the council's Ascendant system. Upon completion of this review, additional checks may be made where fraud or error has been highlighted.

- 3.6 NNDR – As part of the review of Small Business Grant Fund applications discrepancies of Small Business Rate Relief and liable rate payer have been found. This has resulted in changes to nine business rate bills with a net income of £3,788.58 generated to the authority.
- 3.7 Council Tax – 20 cases have been closed during this period with a net recoverable income of £3525.84 generated. The planned work Council Tax Exemptions and Disregards has been put on hold due to work commitments around the Small Business Grants.
- 3.8 Council Tax Reduction - 12 cases have been closed down in this period with a recoverable income of £8,484.03 and a preventative saving of £3,213.76.
- 3.9 Housing Benefit – The team continue to work closely with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and our colleagues in the benefit section. Due to resources restrictions and pressing need to assess Universal Credit applications, the DWP have limited their capacity to investigate Housing Benefit. However, 11 cases have been closed in this period with an increase in recoverable Housing Benefit of £2,452.74 and a preventative saving of £4,541.12. £984.06 was also recovered from historic Adpen collection.
- 3.10 Housing debtors – The team have commenced a project to look at debt avoidance where loans have been made to assist with securing housing and have remained outstanding following existing methods of contact. So far this activity has recouped £245 in debt.
- 3.11 National Fraud Initiative – No further work has been taken on the 2018/19 exercise following limited results from 10% of test checking. The next data set exercise for 2019/20 is due to be extracted at the end of this year.
- 3.12 Data Protection Requests – the team take an active role in supporting colleagues in other organisations to prevent fraud and tackle criminal activity. In this period we have dealt with nine DPA requests from the Police and other authorities.
- 3.13 A table showing the savings made by the Counter Fraud team in the first half of the year 2020-2021 can be found at Appendix C.

## **4 Financial appraisal**

- 4.1 There are no financial implications relating to expenditure arising from this report. Details of savings generated by the Counter Fraud team are included in Appendix C.

## **5 Legal implications**

- 5.1 This report is for noting only and therefore the Legal Services team has not been consulted on the content of it.

## **6 Risk management implications**

- 6.1 If the Council does not have an effective governance framework that is subject to proper oversight by Councillors it will not be able to demonstrate that it has in place adequate means to safeguard Council assets and services, and it could be subject to criticism from the Council's external auditor or the public.

## **7 Equality analysis**

- 7.1 An equalities impact assessment is not considered necessary because the report is for information only and involves no key decisions.

## **8 Environmental sustainability implications**

- 8.1 Not applicable

## **9 Appendices**

- 9.1 Appendix A – list of all reports issued in final during the year which were given an assurance level below “Substantial” with any issues highlighted in the reviews which informed the assurance level given.

Appendix B – Outstanding recommendations/actions

Appendix C - Counter Fraud work and savings.

## **10 Background papers**

- 10.1 Internal Audit reports issued throughout the year.