

Minutes of the **County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service Audit and Finance Committee meeting** held at Fire HQ on **26 September 2024 at 13:30hours**.

Present:	Cllr R Bell (Chair)
Durham County Council:	Cllr Julie Cairns
Darlington Borough Council:	Cllr A Anderson
Officers:	Tony Hope Keith Lazzari
Internal Audit:	Nicola Cooke
External Audit (Mazars):	Smriti Sood

Part A

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Cllr Neville Jones, Cllr Alison Batey and Alan Foster.

2 Minutes of the Previous Meetings

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 10 April 2024 were agreed as a true record.

3 Annual Internal Audit Opinion and Report 2023/24

N Cooke introduced a report presenting the Annual Internal Audit for 2023/24; summarising work carried out by Internal Audit and providing assurance on the effectiveness of the Combined Fire Authority's control environment, risk management and corporate governance arrangements in place.

T Hope raised a query on behalf of A Foster regarding weaknesses and evidence of ineffective controls which appear to be IT related, asking if they are being improved.

N Cooke explained that the wording relates to the Moderate overall assurance opinion and is standard wording. The moderate assurance opinion should be regarded as a positive overall. It does not specifically relate to IT.

Members **noted** the Annual Internal Audit report for 2023/24.

4 Annual Review of the System of Internal Audit 2023/24

N Cooke introduced a report summarising the Annual Review of the system of Internal Audit, asking members to consider the findings and conclusions of the 2023/24 review.

Members **considered** and **noted** the content of the report.

5 **Fraud and Corruption Annual Report 2023/24**

N Cooke presented a report providing assurances to Members of the results of work being undertaken within the Authority in seeking to identify, control and prevent fraud and corruption.

N Cooke explained that the latest exercise carried out by the National Fraud Initiative focused upon payments made in relation to pensions, payroll and creditors and generated various reports containing a total of 143 data matches for further investigation across the Authority. All 143 data matches were reviewed and investigated as appropriate with no instances of fraudulent or irregular activity, being perpetrated by Service employees, pensioners or their representatives identified.

Members **noted** progress made and assurance provided in relation to the Authority's anti-fraud and anti-corruption arrangements.

6 **Internal Audit Progress Report 2023/24**

Members were updated on work undertaken by Internal Audit between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024.

The report was **considered** and **noted**.

7 **Auditors Progress Report 2023/24**

S Sood introduced a report updating Members on progress measures to tackle the backlog in local audit.

S Sood that the backstop date for the 2023/24 accounts is now the 28 February 2025. Mazars will start the planning phase in October with work commencing on the audits in November.

R Bell requested that, if possible, work begins on the audits as soon as possible.

Members **noted** content of the report.

8 **Action to Tackle the Local Audit Backlog in England – Letter from Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government**

T Hope presented a letter that has been issued from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, recognising there is an issue with the completion of local audits and the decisive action that is being taken to tackle the backlog.

R Bell asked if the same audit standards will be applied to all. T Hope explained that all public and private organisations and business are required to follow the same audit standards.

Members **noted** the content of the letter.

9 Revenue and Capital Outturn for the Year Ended 31 March 2024.

T Hope introduced a report providing information on the 2023/24 revenue and capital outturn compared with the original budget.

T Hope highlighted that the total net revenue expenditure for 2023/24 after transfers to and from reserves was in line with the original budget, and there was an underspend of capital expenditure for the year of £1.592M.

A Anderson commented that the budget is balanced and currently in a good position.

T Hope raised a query on behalf of A Foster regarding the underspend on vehicles, plant and equipment. A Foster asked if the change in planned timing of vehicle replacements is due to a supplier issue.

T Hope explained that since COVID there have been delays in the delivery of replacement vehicles however the situation is improving. The vehicle fleet overall is in a good position and replacements are made in line with the vehicle replacement plan.

Members **noted** the outturn position for the financial year ended 31 March 2024.

10 Annual Governance Statement

T Hope presented a report providing Members with the details of the 2023/24 Annual Governance Statement.

Members **approved** the 2023/24 Annual Governance Statement.

11 Short-Term Investments and Long-Term Borrowing – Period to 31 March 2024 (Quarter 4)

K Lazzari presented a report updating members on the performance of the Authority's short-term investments and long-term loans for the period ended 31 March 2024

Members **noted** the content of the report.

12 Short-Term Investments and Long-Term Borrowing – Period to 30 June 2024 (Quarter 1)

K Lazzari presented a report updating members on the performance of the Authority's short-term investments and long-term loans for the period ended 30 June 2024

Members **noted** the content of the report.

Part B

13 Outstanding Audit Recommendations March 2024

The Internal Audit Outstanding Actions were discussed in turn.

T Hope raised a query on behalf of A Foster regarding the Fire Home Safety Visits audit. A Foster asked for assurance that the home visits are not delayed in the winter and safety is paramount for vulnerable people. TH explained that discussions take place at the Winter Planning Group to ensure delays do not occur during the winter months.