

Report to the Constitution Working Group



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Date of meeting: 16 April 2018

Subject: Audit and Standards Committee – Review of Merger Proposals

Responsible Officer: Simon Hill (01992 564249)

Democratic Services: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That, as required by the Council, the Working Group reviews the proposals for the merger of the Audit and Governance Committee with the Standards Committee.**

Report:

- (Deputy Monitoring Officer) The Council, at its meeting on 26 April 2016, considered the results of a review of the desirability of combining the Audit and Governance and Standards Committees.
- At that meeting, the Council concluded that the proposals for a merged committee not be adopted as part of the changes to the constitution but that there be a review of this position after two years, and that the Standards Committee be convened to meet only when there is business to be transacted.
- The review is required before the end of the municipal year in April 2018.
- Since that time this Committee has met twice, once in January 2017 and once in August 2017 for a total of two hours meeting time. In the last three and a half years the Committee has only met five times for a total of four hours and five minutes.
- At the time of the last review this Committee expressed the view that they accepted that the implementation of the new arrangements for dealing with allegations of Member misconduct under the Localism Act 2011 had dramatically reduced its workload. However, the Committee was not minded to support the proposals and expressed a number of concerns regarding the proposed merger:
 - (i) there were currently 9 Members available to consider Standards issues, which would reduce to 3 under the proposals and it was felt by the Committee that this was not enough;

The Committee suggested that the Working Group could:

- Recommend a higher number of members for the new Committee
- Ask Council to create a specific group to deal with Standards Investigation Hearings either on an ad hoc or standing basis.

(ii) there was a perceived lack of involvement of Parish Councils under the proposals as currently there were three representatives from the Local Councils affiliated to the District Council's Standards Committee formally invited to each meeting; and

The Committee suggested that the Working Group could:

- Ask that all agendas are notified to Parish and Town clerks that are aligned to the Districts Standards Committee
- Ask that existing parish representatives be invited to attend meetings of the new committee as they consider necessary
- Change the Terms of reference to include that any hearing into a Parish/Town Councillor includes an appropriate representative.

(iii) there was a perceived risk that a smaller Committee would be less objective when considering Standards issues.

6. The original report to Committee, made in January 2016 is attached which contained the proposals at that time for a combined committee and a new terms of reference.

7. The Standards Committee were asked to comment on the review in December 2017 and they remain of the view that a merger is not favoured for the following reasons:

(i) That combining Standards with a technical committee would give the perception of making it the poor relation and would not keep standards matters in members minds;

(ii) That the current levels of involvement by the parishes would be placed at risk; and

(iii) That the public perception of the District taking a lead in standards was the most important factor.

8. The Working Group is asked to form a view and make a recommendation to the Council if appropriate.

Report to the Standards Committee

Report Reference: STD-002-2015-16

Date of meeting: 25 January 2016



**Epping Forest
District Council**

**Subject: Audit & Standards Committee – Proposed
Terms of Reference**

Responsible Officer: Colleen O'Boyle (01992 564475)

Democratic Services: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) To approve in principle the proposed merger of the Audit & Governance Committee and the Standards Committee;**
- (2) To consider and approve the proposed Terms of Reference for the new Audit & Standards Committee; and**
- (3) To request the Constitution Working Group to consider the necessary constitutional amendments and report to the Council accordingly.**

Report:

Merging Audit and Standards Committee

1. The main role of the Standards Committee is to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members. Matters around member conduct at committee level are relatively light and three of the six scheduled meetings have been cancelled in the last 18 months (9 October 2014, 8 January 2015 & 7 April 2015).
2. The Council's Audit and Governance Committee is responsible for providing independent assurance of the adequacy of the Council's risk management framework and provides independent scrutiny of the authority's financial and non-financial performance. The Committee approves the financial statements and Annual Governance Statement and enhances public trust and confidence in the governance of the authority.
3. A number of other councils have combined audit and standards committees successfully, including Broxbourne and Harlow Councils, the main drivers for this being:
 - Low complaint activity especially as the Monitoring Officer has delegated authority to seek to resolve a complaint informally where a formal investigation is not merited; and
 - Similarities and synergies – both Committees deal with governance, probity and transparency of processes.
4. There is by law an independent person appointed by the Council who advises on standards issues but is not permitted to be a member of the committee. This requirement has been incorporated into the proposed Terms of Reference which states:

'the Council is required to appoint at least one Independent person to advise on Standards relating to complaints who shall be invited to meetings in a non-voting capacity'.

5. There is no requirement to have independent members although the Council can appoint independent members to committees and the current Audit and Governance Committee has two independent members, and this arrangement should continue as it is line with good practice. It should be noted that Harlow District Council does not have any independent members on their Audit and Standards Committee but Broxbourne Council has an independent Chair.

6. It is important the new committee considers Standards issues at each meeting so it is proposed to have standards as a standing item on its agenda

Proposed Terms of Reference

7. The newly merged Audit and Standards Committee would have the objective of making a positive contribution to the Council's governance and control environment. The proposed terms of reference articulate the Committee's wide remit including advising and reviewing the Council's arrangements for internal audit, internal control, risk management, financial management, standards and corporate governance. The Committee also has an important role in ensuring public money is spent wisely and providing assurance to the public that the council is complying with the law, has an effective control framework in place and provides quality services in line with corporate priorities.

8. The proposed Terms of Reference for the Audit and Standards Committee (Appendix 1) draws on the experience of merging the Audit and Standards Committee at Broxbourne and Harlow Councils and is based on model Terms of Reference for local authorities as detailed in the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy publication: Audit Committees - Practical Guidance for Local Authorities and Police 2013 Edition.

The View of the Audit & Governance Committee

9. The Audit & Governance Committee considered these proposals at its meeting held on 30 November 2015. The Committee welcomed the proposals and were in general agreement that the two Committees should merge as it would be more efficient and lead to a (albeit small) reduction in the number of Member meetings each year. It was also felt that oversight of the Council's Treasury Management function should remain with the new Committee, rather than transferring to the Resource Select Committee.

10. The Committee resolved to approve the merger of the two Committees in principle, along with the proposed Terms of Reference, and requested that the views of the Standards Committee be sought on the matter.

Conclusion

11. The Standards Committee is requested to consider the proposals and indicate if they are in agreement with the proposed merger of the two Committees. If the Committee is in favour then the proposed Terms of Reference for the new Committee is attached at Appendix 1 for the Committee to consider, propose amendments if necessary, and approve.

12. Final approval for the merger of the Audit and Standards Committee will need to be sought from the Council following formal consultation with both Committees. The Constitution Working Group would be asked to review the proposed new merged Articles and report to the Council accordingly.

Proposed Terms of Reference for Epping Forest District Council Audit and Standards Committee

Statement of Purpose

1. The role of the Audit and Standards Committee is a key component of the council's corporate governance. It provides an independent and high-level focus on the audit, assurance and reporting arrangements that underpin good governance and financial statements and provides a forum for considering ethical issues and ensuring high standards of conduct. The role of the committee is two-fold:
 - Audit - the purpose of the Committee is to provide independent assurance to the members of the adequacy of the risk management framework and internal control environment. It provides independent review of the council's governance, risk management and control frameworks and oversees the financial reporting and annual governance processes. It oversees internal and external audit arrangements, helping to ensure efficient and effective assurance arrangements are in place.
 - Standards – The Committee deals with a range of matters including issues concerning Councillor's conduct, provides advice and guidance to the Council, the Cabinet and individual Councillors and advises on the application and review of the Members' Code of Conduct.

Governance, risk and control

2. To review the council's corporate governance arrangements against the good governance framework and consider annual governance reports and assurances
3. To review the Annual Governance Statement prior to approval and consider whether it properly reflects the risk environment and supporting assurances, taking into account the internal audit opinion on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the council's framework of governance, risk management and control.
4. To note the council's overall approach to value for money in ensuring the council is making best use of its resources.
5. To consider the council's framework of assurance and ensure it is adequately addresses the risk and priorities of the council.
6. To monitor the effective development and operation of risk management in the council.
7. To monitor progress in addressing risk-related issues reported to the committee
8. To consider reports on the effectiveness of internal controls and monitor the implementation of agreed actions
9. To review the assessment of fraud risks and potential harm to the council from fraud and corruption.
10. To monitor the anti-fraud strategy, actions and resources.

Internal Audit

11. To approve the Internal Audit Charter
12. To approve the internal audit strategy and plan, including internal audit resource requirements, the approach to using other sources of assurances and any work required to place reliance upon these other sources. To approve any significant interim changes to the plan and resource requirements and make appropriate enquires of both management and the Chief Internal Auditor to determine if there any inappropriate scope or resource limitations.
13. To consider regular reports from the Chief Internal Auditor which:
 - Updates on the work of internal audit including key findings, issues of concern and action in hand as a result of internal audit work
 - Highlighting where there are concerns about progress with the implementation of agreed actions or where management has accepted a level of risk that the Chief internal Audit considers is unacceptable to the council.
 - Reports on instances where the internal audit function does not conform to the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards, considering whether the non-conformance is significant enough that it must be included in the Annual Governance Statement
14. To consider the Chief Internal Auditor's annual report:
 - The statement of the level of conformance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards and results of the Quality Assurance and Improvement Programme that supports the statement – these will indicate the reliability of the conclusions of internal audit
 - The opinion on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the council's framework of governance, risk management and control together with the summary of the work supporting the opinion – these will assist the committee in reviewing the Annual Governance Statement.
15. To support the development of effective communication with the Chief Internal Auditor.

External Audit and Financial Reporting

16. To consider the external auditor's annual letter, relevant reports and the report to those charged with governance.
17. To review the annual statement of accounts. Specifically to consider whether appropriate accounting policies have been followed and whether there are concerns arising from the financial statements or from the audit that need to be brought to the attention of the council.
18. To consider the external auditor's report to those charged with governance on issues arising from the audit of the accounts.
19. To be responsible for the appointment of the Council's external auditors and ensure it is in line with the requirements of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

Treasury Management

20. To be responsible for the scrutiny of the Council's Treasury Management Strategy, including receiving regular reports on activities, issues and trends to support the committee's understanding of treasury management activities, risks and associated assurances.

Accountability arrangements

21. To report to those charged with governance on the committee's findings, conclusions and recommendations concerning the adequacy and effectiveness of their governance, risk management and internal control frameworks, financial reporting arrangements and internal and external audit functions.
22. To report to the full Council on a regular basis on the committee's performance in relation to the terms of reference and the effectiveness of the committee in meeting its purpose.

Membership

23. The committee shall comprise 5 members, including 3 Councillors and 2 co-opted members. Additionally the Council is required to appoint at least 1 Independent Person to advise on Standards relating to complaints who shall be invited to meetings in a non-voting capacity.
24. Councillors serving as members of the Committee shall be appointed at the Annual Council meeting of Epping Forest District Council for a term of office of one year and shall be eligible for re-appointment for further terms of office.
25. That the seats should be allocated so they are not all drawn from one political group and are also open to councillors who are not affiliated to any political group.
26. Co-opted members shall serve for a period of 3 years from appointment. Such three year appointments shall be overlapping in terms of their expiry dates. A co-opted member may serve for a total of two such terms as of right but may be considered for two further three year terms, provided he or she is successful after open competition following public advertisement. Re-appointment for further terms shall be subject to satisfactory attendance.
27. Casual vacancies for members of the Committee who are Councillors which occur shall be filled at the next ordinary Council meeting (but not an extraordinary meeting) with a term of office expiring on the date of the next Annual Council meeting.

Standards Committee

28. Promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct by Councillors and Co-Opted Members.
29. Assisting Councillors and Co-Opted Members to observe the Members' Code of Conduct.
30. Advising the Council on the adoption or revision of the Members' Code of Conduct
31. Monitoring the operation of the Members' Code of Conduct.

32. Advising, and/or censuring and/or imposing a sanction on a Councillor or Co-Opted person of a Committee (or former Councillor or Co-Opted person) of the Council.
33. To advise the Council to ensure that all members of the Council have access to training in all aspects of the Member Code of Conduct.
34. Considering dispensations to Councillors and Co-Opted Members (including Parish and Town Councillors) from requirements relating to interests set out in the Members' Code of Conduct.
35. Dealing with reports referred from or on behalf of the Monitoring Officer on any matter, including investigations relating to Councillor conduct.
36. The exercise of (29) to (35) above shall apply to parish councils and their members either directly or through a joint standards arrangement
37. Adjudication on complaints regarding the operation of District Council protocols annexed to the Constitution.
38. The Committee may appoint a Complaints Sub Committee to conduct any hearing into an allegation that a Member or Co-opted Member has breached the Council's Code of Conduct. The Audit and Standards Committee shall decide the membership of the subcommittee, ensuring where possible there is a minimum of three members of the Audit and Standards Committee.
39. The Complaints Sub Committee will undertake the following functions:
 - To conduct any Hearing into an allegation that a Member or Co-opted Member has breached the Council's Code of Conduct.
 - Following a hearing, make one of the following findings:
 - That the Member has not failed to comply with the Code of Conduct and no further action needs to be taken in respect of the matters considered at the hearing: or
 - That the Member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct but that no further action needs to be taken in respect of the matters considered at the hearing: or
 - That the Member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct and that a sanction and/or informal resolution should be imposed. The subcommittee may impose any action or combination of actions available to it, or impose any informal resolution or combination of informal resolutions as are available to it by law or policy.
 - After making a finding, providing written notice of its findings and the reasons for its decision to the Member and complainant.

Eligibility for membership

Councillor members

40. Councillors appointed to the Audit and Standards Committee may not also be members of the Cabinet or any select committee appointed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with responsibility for reviewing the Council's finances or financial procedures.
41. A Portfolio Holder Assistant (other than any Assistant involved in any portfolio dealing primarily with the Council's finances) appointed by the Leader of the Council shall be eligible for appointment to the Committee.
42. Appointment of Councillors shall be made on the basis of evidence of the aptitude, experience or interest and for this purpose the normal rules for pro rata appointments shall not apply.
43. Formal attendance standards be operated in respect of the three councillor members when reappointment is under consideration by the Council's Appointments Panel and the Chairman and co-opted members of the Audit and Standards Committee be consulted informally about the appointment or reappointment of councillors at the appropriate time.

Co-opted members

44. Co-opted members, independent of the Council, shall be appointed by the Council on the basis of their professional expertise, experience and background as relevant to the role and responsibilities of the Audit and Standards Committee. Initial appointments of co-opted members and the filling of casual vacancies shall be made following public advertisement and interviews, the latter conducted in accordance with arrangements agreed by the Council. If the number of suitable applicants exceeds the number of co-opted places on the Committee, the Council shall keep a waiting list of suitable applicants should casual vacancies occur.

Chairman and Vice Chairman

45. The Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Audit and Standards Committee shall be appointed at the first meeting of the Committee in each Council year for a term of one year expiring on the date of the first meeting of the Committee of the next Council year.
46. Casual vacancies in the position of Chairman and Vice Chairman shall be filled in the same way as required in respect of members of the Committee (see paragraph 28 above).
47. Both Councillors and co-opted members serving on the Committee shall be eligible for appointment to the office of Chairman and Vice Chairman.
48. Where the Chairman of the Committee is a Councillor, the Vice Chairman will be appointed from among the Co-opted members. Where the Chairman is one of the Co-opted members, the Vice Chairman shall be a Councillor.
49. The Chairman and Vice Chairman shall be eligible for re-appointment.

Parish/Town Councils

50. Parish/Town Councils affiliated to the Standards Committee will be sent meeting agendas and invited to attend where appropriate.

Meetings of the Committee

51. The Committee shall meet at least three times each financial year.
52. The Committee shall be entitled to require any Member, Director, their representatives or any other officer to attend their meetings in order to discuss any matters under discussion including the annual audit programme.

Decision Making

53. Only the Councillors and co-opted members serving on the Committee shall be entitled to vote.
54. All members of the Committee shall be entitled to all documents advice and facilities relevant to their membership of the Committee, regardless of their status as either a Councillor or Co-opted member.

Other Requirements

55. All members of the Committee shall respect the confidentiality of Council information and proceedings where appropriate, particularly where exempt or confidential business is involved.
56. All co-opted members of the Committee shall be required to make a statutory registration of interests in the same form as those required of serving councillors and to be aware at all times of the requirement to clear any interest relating to their work on the Committee.
57. Members of the Committee should seek to attend all meetings of the Committee unless there are exceptional circumstances which prevent this.
58. All members of the Committee should ensure that they participate fully in any training designed to assist them in their responsibilities as members of the Committee. Similarly all members should act on appropriate advice and other information supplied by the Council to improve their effectiveness.