

LOUTH COUNTY COUNCIL

Audit Committee:

Minutes of the Meeting of Louth County Council Audit Committee held in the Setanta Room, County Hall, Dundalk on Thursday, 7th December 2023, which commenced at 9a.m.

Present: Mr. Richard Bowden
Cllr. Paula Butterly
Mr. Billy Doyle
Ms. Irene McCausland

Apologies: Cllr. Conor Keelan
Attempts were made to facilitate Cllr Keelan to the meeting by Teams

In attendance: Ms. Joan Martin, Chief Executive
Mr. Joe McGuinness, Director of Services
Ms. Gráinne Tuomey, Meetings Administrator
Mr. David Jones, Director of Services
Mr. Ger Murphy, Director of Services
Mr. Eamon Woulfe, A/Director of Services
Ms. Claire Gavin, Principal Officer, NOAC

***Items were taken out of sequence, but minutes are recorded in order of agenda item**

1. Minutes

On the proposal of Billy Doyle and seconded by Irene McCausland, the minutes of the meeting of 16th. November 2023, were approved.

2. Matters arising

The next meeting was agreed to be held in Mid-February, with the Chair Richard Bowden advising that he would forward a draft S60 Report to Committee Members in advance of the meeting. He advised that as the meeting to review the reports of the auditor had only been considered at the meeting of 16th November and as it was established practice that the reports be drafted by the Chair and reviewed by the Committee, it was not practicable to have the S60 report submitted to Council for the December meeting of the Council.

3. Conflicts of Interest

None declared.

4. Annual Meeting with the Chief Executive Officer

Joan Martin, Chief Executive of Louth County Council was welcomed to the meeting and offered to respond to any queries the Committee might have. Items discussed included access of the Audit Committee to legal advice obtained by the Chief Executive, procurement procedures specifically concerning the Narrow Water Bridge, the efficacy of the Internal Audit Function and the fact it is fully outsourced and her view on how if at all the Audit Committee could be of assistance. The Chief Executive's view was that access to legal advices were solely her privilege, the fully outsourced internal audit function provided access to expertise not found in house, the procurement procedures surrounding the Narrow Water were sound and she welcomed input from the Audit Committee on any item as she felt that there is always room for improvement.

5. Meeting with NOAC (National Oversight and Audit Committee) Representative

Claire Gavin, Principal Officer NOAC, was welcomed to the meeting and gave the Committee an overview of NOAC. NOAC was established under the Local Government Reform Act, with the aim of providing an added dimension of independent scrutiny to local government and to encourage best practice. NOAC's wide range of functions are laid out in the Act. The Membership Board comprises 9 currently but is shortly increasing to 11, with a maximum of 12 allowable. Reports on 25 Local Authorities have been published since 2017 with the 26th Report imminent.

Ms. Gavin stated given the diverse functions of NOAC, it was decided to streamline the work into 4 Working Groups as follows.

- Local Government Governance, Efficiency and Reform
- Performance Indicators (PI)
- Communications and Customer Survey
- Financial Management and Performance

At the end of the presentation a Q&A session took place with Ms Gavin responding to all questions raised by the Committee. Members were advised that NOAC does not rank County Councils against each other in the Performance Indicator Report as one size does not fit all and different Authorities have differing challenges.

Following some further discussion, the Committee thanked Ms Gavin for her attendance.

6. NOAC Reports Issued – Synopsis

The Committee thanked Director of Services Joe McGuinness for providing the following:

- a) NOAC Local Authority Performance Indicator (PI) 2022 & Synopsis
- b) NOAC Public Spending Code Report 2022 & Synopsis

The synopses provided were described as 'top class' with the Committee noting that while the Fire Services came out well in the PI Report, some other areas, such as Library services and ICT did not appear to perform so well. The Director of Services advised of general consistency in Louth's PI. The chair suggested that perhaps a better assessment of the PI's could be achieved if Louth PI's and those of comparative counties such as Kerry could in any future assessment be used in a comparator context.

7. Annual Directorate Report – David Jones

Director of Services David Jones advised he had taken up the role of Director in September, taking over from Catherine Duff. He gave the Committee an overview of the Placemaking & Physical Development Directorate noting that within the directorate, there were 63 internal and 87 outdoor staff, a three-year Capital Programme of €275m and an annual budget of around €36m.

With regards to Risk Management, the directorate had identified 29 risks of which currently none are considered high, 28 are medium and 1 is low, however he cautioned that review of the Risk Register, which is carried out quarterly, can change risk levels due to the environment at the time of review.

Under the Value for Money section, Mr Jones advised of three recent significant initiatives.

- a) an internal procurement team within the directorate assigned to scope and specify all possible variables before going to tender.
- b) Mapping of 55 Standard Operating Procedures, by a graduate student, as a guide to counteract knowledge retention loss should staff leave.
- c) Purchase of the JCB Pro Machine which, while requiring a significant capital outlay, has provided efficiencies in road maintenance, by identifying deficiencies quicker and by more reliable and higher quality repair.

The committee thanked the Director for his attendance at the meeting.

8. Interim Update on the Cyber Security and Business Continuity

Head of IT Helen Divilly SEO advised the committee members of a major change in the ICT area since she had last met with them. A Cyber Security Officer had been appointed to the organisation. A Cyber Security Baseline Assessment in line with International Best Practice is underway looking at 18 pillars which assess the organisation against other public service bodies by way of a detailed survey, identifies areas of concern and allows for strategic planning. A report is expected by end of year.

The Committee were further advised that the LGMA are working on a Digital and ICT strategy for local government which will inform our strategy.

Further improvements include installation of new infrastructure for recovery which brings Louth up to National Standards, and roll out of MS365 to almost 80% of staff.

The Committee raised questions on training and upskilling of staff and were advised of issues attracting GIS officer applications and of a high retention of staff.

9. Risk Management – Management Annual Obligations to Audit Committee

The Annual Report on risk management strategy was presented by, Joe McGuinness, who is also Chief Risk Officer. The Committee were advised that the Risk Management Policy was revised and that the management of risk was subject to an internal audit, the findings of which will be implemented in 2024. Risk Registers are reviewed quarterly and changes in risk do result in changes in response an example being the risk attached to homelessness and the response to significant Ukrainian immigration. Joe explained that in certain areas the risk appetite approach would be low or zero, such as safety of staff and citizens and the risk of non-compliance with law, whilst a higher risk appetite was acceptable for areas such as Economic Development.

10. Protected Disclosures

The current Louth County Council Protected Disclosures Policy and Procedure as presented to the Committee was noted, with the Director of Services advising of National Guidelines having recently issued following enactment of the Protected Disclosures Amendment Act 2022. Draft policy and procedure documents are expected imminently which will be adopted by Louth County Council and published on our website.

11. Audit Committee Review of the Effectiveness of the Internal Audit Function

The Committee considered its statutory functions and other obligations. The Chair reviewed Regulation 9, SI 244 of 2014. The Chair specifically noted the fact that the Committee annually placed emphasis on a specific function (see Local Government Reform Act, 2014, Section 5 (2)) of an Audit Committee. In 2023 that had been "management of risks". He noted that in 2023 there was an internal audit on risk management, the appointment of a Chief Risks Officer and the revision of the risk management policy and complimented the Management on these achievements.

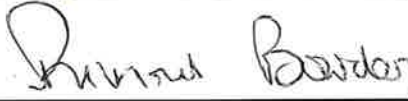
The Chair noted the failure to achieve a quorum for the meeting scheduled in September whilst acknowledging that members' health and other matters contributed to this eventuality. He thanked the members for their commitment in attending and contributing positively to the two meetings arranged subsequently, the second of which was today and which was only 3 weeks since the prior. This demonstrated a serious commitment to ensuring the Audit Committee met its obligations and this could only have been achieved by the support received from Director of Services Joe McGuinness and Meetings Administrator, Grainne Tuomey.

There was a brief discussion on the work conducted in the year following which the Chair and Audit Committee concluded that they were satisfied that the Audit Committee was working effectively. The Chair then thanked the Meeting Administrator, Grainne, Tuomey The Director of Services, Joe McGuinness and Vincent Teo of the internal auditors for their assistance throughout the year.

The Chair wished everyone a Merry Christmas and suggested the Committee would set dates for 2024 meetings and discuss the Internal Audit Plan at the first meeting in February.

The meeting concluded.

Confirmed at meeting held on: 15 Feb 2024

Chairman: 

Meeting Administrator: 