



**MINUTES OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE MEETING OF THE AUDIT AND RISK COMMITTEE
HELD IN THE ROUND TOWER CHAMBER, ANTRIM CIVIC CENTRE
ON TUESDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 2025 AT 6.30 PM**

In the Chair	:	Alderman J McGrath
Committee Members (In person)	:	Councillor A Bennington
Committee Members (Remote)		Alderman S Ross Councillors - S Flanagan, M Goodman and S Wilson
Independent Member (In person)	:	Ms Ashley Neill
Non Committee Members (In person)	:	Councillor B Webb
Officers Present (In person)	:	Director of Finance & Governance – S Cole Director of Organisation Development (Interim) – H Hall Deputy Director of Finance – J Balmer Head of Finance – R Murray Head of Internal Audit – P Caulcutt Head of Human Resources – J Clarke ICT Helpdesk Officer – J Wilson Member Services Officer – C McGrandle
Officers Present (Remote)	:	Director of Sustainability – M Lavery Head of ICT – G Smyth
In Attendance	:	S Wade - NI Audit Office

CHAIRPERSON'S REMARKS

The Chairperson welcomed everyone to the quarterly Audit and Risk Committee Meeting and reminded all present of recording requirements.

The Chairperson further extended a welcome to Mr Seamus Wade from the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

1. APOLOGIES

None.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

3 ITEMS FOR DECISION

3.1 FI/FIN/SOA/11 ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2024/25

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was to obtain Members' approval of the Annual Governance Statement for 2024/25 and that the Statement be signed and dated by the Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee.

2. Introduction/Background

The Council was required to publish an Annual Governance Statement with its annual statement of accounts.

This statement was consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government,' and outlined how the Council was to comply with the Framework.

This statement also met the requirements of Regulation 4(2) of the Local Government (Accounts and Audit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 in relation to the review of the system of internal control.

Regulation 4(4) of the Local Government (Accounts and Audit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 also require that "...a local government body as a whole or committee must approve an annual governance statement prepared in accordance with proper practices on internal control."

3. Key Points

A copy of the draft (unaudited) Annual Governance Statement 2024/25 was presented to Members at the June 2025 Audit and Risk Committee and that Statement, along with the draft Financial Statements were submitted to the Department of Communities for external audit.

A number of minor amendments had been suggested by external audit to provide additional clarity, and management had agreed to make these.

A copy of the updated Annual Governance Statement 2024/25 was

circulated.

Proposed by Councillor Wilson
Seconded by Ms Neill and agreed that

the Annual Governance Statement for 2024/25 be approved and be signed and dated by the Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee.

ACTION BY: Paul Caulcutt, Head of Internal Audit

3.2 FI/FIN/SOA/11 FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2025

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was to obtain Members' approval of the Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 March 2025.

2. Introduction/Background

The Local Government (Accounts and Audit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 required that:

"8 (3)...a local government body must, no later than 30 September, following the end of the financial year to which the statement related:

- a) Consider either by way of a committee of that body or by the members of the body as a whole, the statement of accounts;
- b) Following that consideration, approve the statement of accounts for submission to the local government auditor by a resolution of that committee or meeting;
- c) Following approval, ensure that the statement of accounts is signed and dated by the person presiding at the committee or meeting at which the approval was given..."

and

"(4) The chief financial officer must re-certify the presentation of the statement of accounts... before the relevant local government body approves it."

The Council delegated authority in April 2015, to the Audit and Risk Committee to approve the Statement of Accounts.

3. Key Points

The (unaudited) Statement of Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2025 were presented at the June 2025 Audit and Risk Committee and that the

Committee would be required to approve the audited Statement of Accounts at the September Committee.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office had completed their audit of the Financial Statements, which had resulted in no change to the Council's financial position and the Local Government Auditor providing an unqualified audit opinion.

Officers were finalising the Financial Statements, including minor amendments in preparation for publication. Details of the Financial Statements (circulated) were presented to Members of the Committee, prior to seeking approval.

A complete copy of the Financial Statements would be provided to Members for information by email.

The Head of Finance answered Members' queries in relation to future rates appeals.

Proposed by Councillor Goodman
Seconded by Councillor Bennington and agreed that

the Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 March 2025 be approved and a copy of the Financial Statements be emailed to Members of the Audit and Risk Committee.

ACTION BY: Richard Murray, Head of Finance

4 ITEMS FOR INFORMATION

4.1 FI/FIN/SOA/11 NIAO: REPORT TO THOSE CHARGED WITH GOVERNANCE 2024/25 (DRAFT)

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was for Members to note the draft Report to Those Charged with Governance 2024/25.

2. Key Points

The Local Government Auditor had completed the audit of the Statement of Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2025 and had now issued correspondence and the draft Report to Those Charged with Governance (circulated).

A copy of the final Report to Those Charged with Governance, incorporating management responses, would be presented at the next Committee meeting in December 2025.

A representative of the NIAO was in attendance to answer Members' questions.

Proposed by Ms Neill
Seconded by Councillor Bennington and agreed that

the draft Report to Those Charged with Governance 2024/25 be noted.

NO ACTION

4.2 FI/FIN/SOA/10 UPDATE ON ACTIONS TAKEN BY COUNCIL IN RELATION TO THE AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE NIAO IN THE REPORT TO THOSE CHARGED WITH GOVERNANCE

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was for Members to note the progress of actions taken in relation to the audit recommendations made by the NIAO in the Report to those Charged with Governance.

2. Introduction/Background

Further to the December 2024 report by NIAO: Report to those Charged with Governance, it was recommended an update on the findings raised within the report along with the agreed actions be provided to a future Audit and Risk Committee.

In line with this recommendation, a progress report was circulated providing an update on actions taken by Council to address matters raised.

Following a query from a Member, it was agreed that management would provide further clarification to the Member on the Contract arrangements of the Leisure software.

Proposed by Councillor Wilson
Seconded by Ms Neill and agreed that

the progress made on the audit recommendations within the Report to those Charged with Governance be noted and further clarification be provided in relation to the leisure software.

ACTION BY: Richard Murray, Head of Finance

4.3 PT/CI/60 2024/25 ANNUAL SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT ON PERFORMANCE

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was to recommend to Members that the 2024/25 Annual Report Self-Assessment on Performance (Final Draft) was noted.

2. Background

Under Part 12 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014, Section 92(2)(b)(i) & (ii) of the Act required Council to publish an assessment of its performance for 2024/25.

3. Previous Decision of Council

The Council's Corporate Performance and Improvement Plan 2024/25 was approved in June 2024. This set out a range of robust performance targets, along with identified improvement objectives and several Statutory Performance Targets.

4. Annual Performance Report, Self-Assessment

This report provided an assessment of the Council's performance for 2024/25 in relation to its statutory performance and self-imposed corporate performance indicators and self-imposed performance indicators. In line with the legislation, it included a comparison of performance against previous financial years and where possible, benchmarked against other Councils. The Annual Self-Assessment Report on Performance for 2024/25 was circulated for Members' Information.

5. Governance

The Annual Self-Assessment Report on Performance for 2024/25 was reported to relevant Committees.

In response to a Member's query, the Director of Organisation Development (Interim) provided insight into the reason some of the performance indicators were not achieved.

Proposed by Councillor Wilson
Seconded by Ms Neill and agreed that

the 2024/25 Annual Self-Assessment Report on Performance for 2024/25 (Final Draft) be noted.

NO ACTION

4.4 PT/CI/066 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE AND IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2025/26 QUARTER 1 PERFORMANCE PROGRESS REPORT

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was to recommend to Members to note the Corporate Performance and Improvement Plan 2025/26, Quarter 1 Performance Progress Reports for overall Council.

2. Background

Part 12 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 put in place a framework to support the continuous improvement of Council services.

3. Previous Decision of Council

The Council's Corporate Performance and Improvement Plan 2025/26 was approved in June 2025. This set out a range of robust performance targets, along with identified improvement objectives and several Statutory Performance Targets.

4. Key Points

First Quarter Performance Progress Report was circulated for Members' information.

5. Governance

Quarterly performance progress reports were reported to relevant Committees.

The Director of Organisation Development (Interim) addressed a Member's query in relation to staff absences.

In response to a Member's query in relation to improved ways of measuring indicators, the Director of Organisation Development (Interim) provided assurance that Council was constantly looking at ways to improve.

Proposed by Councillor Bennington
Seconded by Councillor Wilson and agreed that

the Quarter 1 Performance Progress Report be noted.

NO ACTION

4.5 FI/AUD/02 UPDATE ON AUDIT AND RISK COMMITTEE ACTIONS

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was for Members to note the progress on actions raised at previous Audit and Risk Committees.

2. Introduction/Background

At each Committee meeting, a progress update on previous Committee actions would be provided for consideration.

3. Key Points

The following table provides a progress update on the actions raised.

Item	Action	Progress update	Anticipated Completion Date
March 2024			
4.5	INTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE REPORT		
(i)	The new Contract Review report to be provided to CLT, to also be provided to the Audit & Risk Committee.	In Progress Development of a contract review report has been paused pending the implementation of the Procurement Act 2023 on 24 February 2025. The implications of the Act are being considered to assess how we will manage, monitor and report on contracts, ensuring compliance with the Legislation, with the first contract reviews under the new Legislation due by the end of September 2025.	31/12/25
December 2024			
4.2	NIAO: REPORT TO THOSE CHARGED WITH GOVERNANCE		
(i)	An update on the findings raised be provided to a future Committee.	Complete An update is provided to this Committee.	N/A
June 2025			
3.1	AUDIT AND RISK COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2024/25		
(i)	The Audit and Risk Committee Annual Report 2024/25 provided to the June 2025 Council meeting.	Complete The Audit and Risk Committee Annual Report 2024/25 was provided to Full Council on 30 June 2025.	N/A

Proposed by Councillor Wilson
 Seconded by Ms Neill and agreed that

the progress on actions raised at previous Audit and Risk Committees be noted.

NO ACTION

4.6 FI/AUD/01 INTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE REPORT

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was for Members to note the Internal Audit activity since the Audit and Risk Committee last met in June 2025.

2. Introduction/Background

A report providing a summary of the Internal Audit activity since the Audit and Risk Committee last met, would be presented on a quarterly basis.

3. Key Points

The circulated Internal Audit update report included the objectives and conclusions reached for each completed engagement and management comments as applicable.

The report also provided details of the progress of the implementation of agreed Internal Audit recommendations and the results of Internal Audit's Quality Assurance and Improvement Programme (QAIP).

Proposed by Ms Neill

Seconded by Councillor Bennington and agreed that

the Internal Audit activity since the Audit and Risk Committee last met in June 2025 be noted.

NO ACTION

4.7 FI/AUD/147 EQUALITY SCREENING AND RURAL NEEDS IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was for Members to note the progress update on the actions from the Equality Screening and Rural Impact Needs Assessment Audit.

2. Introduction/Background

The Equality Screening and Rural Impact Needs Assessment audit was presented to the Audit and Risk Committee in June 2025 with a limited level of assurance.

At this meeting, Members were advised that an update of the agreed actions would be brought back to a future Committee.

3. Key Points

Work had been undertaken by management to implement the agreed actions.

Internal Audit had completed a follow up review of the implementation and confirmed all had been fully implemented.

Members were provided with a summary (circulated) of the actions taken by management.

A further update would be provided to Members at a future committee, on completion of a review of compliance, with the revised requirements to provide assurance that the Equality Assessment and Rural Needs Impact Assessment was completed appropriately.

Proposed by Councillor Wilson
Seconded by Councillor Bennington and agreed that

the progress update on the actions from the Equality Screening and Rural Impact Needs Assessment Audit be noted.

NO ACTION

4.8 FI/AUD/146 NATIONAL FRAUD INITIATIVE 2024-25

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was for Members to note the results from participation in the National Fraud Initiative 2024-25

2. Introduction/Background

Council had been participating in the latest National Fraud Initiative exercise and has been investigating the matches provided as per the approach reported to the Audit & Risk Committee in March 2025.

3. Key Points

We had substantially completed our investigations and a progress report outlining the results of our work was circulated for Members' information.

No frauds had been identified through the work undertaken during this National Fraud Initiative exercise.

The remaining matches yet to finalise were in relation to Payroll matches with other public sector organisations. The finalisation of these matches would be dependent on the information flow to and from these counterparties.

The completion of these matches would be undertaken throughout the remainder of this year and would be finalised prior to the deadline of 31 March 2026. An update report would be provided to the Audit Committee where there was an outcome to any of the investigations.

In response to a Member's query in relation to cleansing the system, the Head

of Finance confirmed that this process would start within the next few months and agreed to provide an update on this at the next Audit and Risk Committee.

Proposed by Councillor Bennington
Seconded by Ms Neill and agreed that

the results from participation in the National Fraud Initiative 2024-25 be noted and agreed to provide an update on cleansing the system at the next Audit and Risk Committee.

ACTION BY: Richard Murray, Head of Finance

4.9 FI/AUD/03 CORPORATE RISK REGISTER

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was for Members to note the updated Corporate Risk Register.

2. Introduction/Background

A report providing details of the Council's Corporate Risk Register, since the Audit and Risk Committee last met, would be presented on a quarterly basis.

3. Key Points

The review and update of the Corporate Risk Register by Directors had been completed and the updated risk register, agreed by the Corporate Leadership Team, was circulated for Members' review.

The Director of Organisation Development (Interim) agreed to a Member's request that Officers continue to monitor the absence risk over the next quarter.

Proposed by Ms Neill
Seconded by Councillor Bennington and agreed that

the updated Corporate Risk Register be noted.

NO ACTION

4.10 FI/AUD/02 NIAO: MAJOR IT PROJECTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was for Members to note the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor General's report into the review of Major IT Projects in Northern Ireland.

2. Introduction/Background

On 4 July 2025, the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) published the Comptroller and Auditor General's report (circulated) providing an overview of the portfolio of major IT projects across Northern Ireland central government over the period April 2022 to March 2025.

During the period of review, Northern Ireland departments and their arm's length bodies, managed 29 major (greater than £25 million in whole life cost) IT projects, with a current total estimated whole life cost of £5.2 billion.

The report looked in detail at five such projects. One of those projects was the Department for Infrastructure's development and implementation of the new Planning Portal system, which replaced the previous Northern Ireland Planning Portal that had been in place since 2010.

3. Key Points

In overall terms, of the 29 projects covered in the report, the vast majority (24) aim to replace existing business critical legacy systems operating beyond their intended life.

In almost all cases, the legacy contract had been extended multiple times, with an average extension of around 8 years and the longest extension around 18 years.

The report noted that there could be valid reasons for extending contracts, but in many cases these extensions would not be a strategically planned choice but made out of necessity to maintain continuity of service.

The report further highlighted that extensions come at a cost, including missed opportunities to improve efficiency, functionality and performance, as well as risks of service disruption or vulnerability. Additionally, there are significant financial costs associated with extensions. Of the five projects detailed in the report, the contract extension costs totalled in excess of £573 million.

In respect of the Department for Infrastructure's Planning Portal system, the legacy contract was due to end in March 2014, but required £14.2 million in contract extensions to ensure continuity of service until the replacement system was implemented in December 2022.

The main reason for the extension was the delay in initiating the project and underestimating the time required to develop and procure.

As previously noted, the legacy Planning Portal was due to end in March 2014. Work to develop and procure a new system did not commence until 2016, with an initial expected go live date of 2019. However, the time required to initiate the project and complete the business case process was underestimated and the Outline Business Case was only approved in 2019, when it was envisaged the Planning Portal would be operational in early 2022.

The approach for implementation was amended in November 2021, delaying the implementation date to July 2022. Further delays followed with the final go live date of the Planning Portal being December 2022.

In addition to the delays in implementation, the costs of implementation also increased from £26.8 million estimated in the Outline Business Case, to £39.6 million in the Full Business Case, to actual cost of £43.1 million.

The increase in costs was attributed to the contract term being increased from 10 years to 20 years, changes in the joint procurement makeup and higher revenue costs due to inflation and an increase in the central team costs.

The report outlined a number of recommendations to change the approach to major IT projects as, no change, the Comptroller and Auditor General concluded, "will result in continued risk to value for money and missed opportunities to realise the benefits that could be delivered through everchanging and evolving technologies".

Although these recommendations were tailored to Central Government departments and their Arm's Length Bodies, their lessons were relevant to Council's approach to the development and implementation of IT (and other) projects.

Proposed by Councillor Bennington
Seconded by Councillor Wilson and agreed that

the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor General's report into the review of Major IT Projects in Northern Ireland be noted.

NO ACTION

5 ANY OTHER RELEVANT BUSINESS (AORB)

There was no AORB raised.

PROPOSAL TO PROCEED 'IN CONFIDENCE'

Proposed by Councillor Bennington
Seconded by Ms Neill and agreed

that any remaining Committee business be taken in Confidence.

The Chairperson advised that the live stream and audio recording would now cease at this point.

6 ITEMS IN CONFIDENCE

6.1 **IN CONFIDENCE** ICT/GEN/020 CYBER SECURITY

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was to update Members on the current Cyber Security position of Council.

2. Introduction/Background

An annual Cyber Security update report was provided, setting out the risk to Council and the mitigations that were in place to manage this risk.

3. Key Points

Cyber Security remained a priority for the ICT Department, with a significant percentage of the ICT budget allocated to protecting Council's data and assets.

The Council would also actively monitor the risk of cyber attack as part of the regular Corporate Risk Management process.

The circulated Cyber Security report provided Members with an assessment of the risk posed to Council and the mitigations that were in place in maintaining the Council's Cyber resilience.

Proposed by Councillor Wilson
Seconded by Ms Neill and agreed that

the Cyber Security report be noted.

NO ACTION

6.2 **IN CONFIDENCE** PT/TP/021 POST PROJECT EVALUATION REPORTING

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was to note the revised Post Project Evaluation reporting.

2. Introduction/Background

Project evaluation would be essential for effective project management and accountability. It would provide a clear assessment of progress, outcomes, and the likelihood of successful delivery, whether during planning, delivery, or after completion.

In Council, evaluation should focus on achieving SMART objectives and delivering wider community benefits. It would also ensure public funds were used effectively and transparently.

3. Key Points

Objectives and indicators had been identified for Capital Projects that require a Post Project Evaluation (PPE).

Once a project was completed, reporting on the identified indicators and targets for Years 1–3 would begin. The progress report would be updated with upcoming capital projects in line with the Capital Projects schedule. Projects would be reviewed in accordance with this schedule, and once marked as complete, the PPE documentation would be issued to the relevant Heads of Service and reporting on the agreed objectives would commence.

4. Reporting

A revised Post Project Evaluation Progress Report was circulated for information. The Performance Improvement team would provide annual reports on objectives to Audit and Risk Committee in December.

Completed Post Project Evaluation documentation would be reported by the relevant Head of Service to the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and the Committee that granted approval of the Project's Business Case.

Proposed by Councillor Bennington
Seconded by Ms Neill and agreed that

the revised Post Project Evaluation reporting be noted.

NO ACTION

6.3 **IN CONFIDENCE** FI/AUD/02 NIPSO: FINDINGS ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH INVESTIGATION INTO ODOUR NUISANCE

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was to update Members on the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) investigation into a complaint against Council regarding odour nuisance.

2. Introduction/Background

In March 2022 a resident raised concerns about odours allegedly linked to cooking at a neighbouring domestic property, which they believed to be commercial in nature, and also reported a possible rodent infestation which was not part of the NIPSO investigation.

The resident reported the odours were occurring both during weekday daytime and evenings with additional occurrences at weekends. As Officer

presence was required to assess the odours, this was initially carried out during office hours although late in April 2023, the resident was supplied with an out-of-hours contact number to report odour incidents.

Council Environmental Health Officers investigated the matter over twelve months through site visits, review of odour log sheets, and engagement with the property owner. The investigation found no evidence of rodent infestation, no statutory odour nuisance, and no confirmation of a commercial food business.

Dissatisfied with the outcome, the resident referred the matter to NIPSO in June 2023. NIPSO subsequently identified shortcomings in administrative processes but did not alter the investigation's outcome, which confirmed that no statutory nuisance existed and no commercial food business was operating from the property.

3. Key Issues

Following a two-year investigation, NIPSO reported in July 2025 that Council's decision not to establish a statutory nuisance or commercial business was not unreasonable and therefore should not be revisited. However, the Ombudsman found maladministration in how the investigation was handled. Specifically, NIPSO identified:

- Failures in record-keeping and the provision of clear rationale for decisions;
- Delays in providing the complainant with full reasons for the Council's conclusion that no statutory nuisance existed;
- Failure to provide the out-of-hours reporting telephone number in a timely manner, which limited the complainant's ability to report odours occurring outside office hours;
- Insufficient consideration and documentation of evidence relating to potential food business registration;
- Lack of clarity in communication with the complainant, including acknowledgement of evidence provided.

A copy of the NIPSO report was circulated for Members' information.

NIPSO found that the issues identified constituted maladministration and caused the complainant frustration and injustice.

The Ombudsman made several recommendations for improvement, including issuing a formal written apology to the complainant, providing training for staff handling statutory nuisance complaints, improving record-keeping and decision-making processes, and considering a policy for providing the out-of-hours contact number. These recommendations were to be included in an Action Plan with a requirement to report progress back to NIPSO within six months. A copy of the action plan (circulated) was included for Members' information.

To date, the resident had received a written apology, officer training had been arranged, procedures had been reviewed and Environmental Health was working closely with the Council's Internal Audit team to ensure processes were robust.

It should be noted that no further complaints had been received from the resident regarding this matter since August 2023 and they had confirmed to NIPSO that the odour concerns had been resolved.

4. Summary

The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman upheld a complaint of maladministration in the Council's handling of an odour nuisance investigation. No statutory nuisance nor commercial activity was found, however NIPSO identified shortcomings in record-keeping, communication, and out-of-hours reporting.

The Council must now implement NIPSO's recommendations, including issuing an apology, providing staff training, improving procedures, and reviewing out-of-hours policy, with an action plan to be completed within six months.

Proposed by Councillor Bennington
Seconded by Ms Neill and agreed that

the NIPSO Investigation report into a complaint received against the Council be noted.

NO ACTION

6.4 **IN CONFIDENCE** FI/AUD/04 **CONCERNS RAISED AND INVESTIGATIONS UPDATE**

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report was for Members to note the update on concerns raised and investigations.

2. Introduction/Background

A report containing an update on concerns raised and investigations was presented on a quarterly basis.

3. Key Points

A report containing an update on concerns raised and investigations was circulated.

Proposed by Councillor Bennington
Seconded by Councillor Wilson and agreed that

the update on concerns raised and investigations be noted.

NO ACTION

PROPOSAL TO PROCEED OUT OF 'IN CONFIDENCE'

Proposed by Ms Neill

Seconded by Councillor Bennington and agreed that

any remaining Committee business be taken in Open Session.

The Chairperson advised that audio recording would resume.

There being no further committee business the Chairperson thanked everyone for their attendance, and the meeting concluded at 7.33 pm.

MAYOR