

MRWA UPDATE ON AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS
WDA/42/24

Recommendation

That Members:

1. Note the Authority's progress in response to audit recommendations

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MRWA UPDATE ON AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS**WDA/42/24****Report of the Chief Executive****1. Purpose of the Report**

- 1.1 Members are reminded that the external auditor's report in November 2021 included statutory recommendations for the Authority to respond to.
- 1.2 One of the recommendations was that Members receive a report on progress against the other recommendations until agreed actions were implemented; this report responds to that recommendation.

2. Update

- 2.1 The Authority has been working with the financial advisers KPMG to ensure the working papers supporting statements of accounts for 2018-19 and 2019-20 are clear and provide a trail through to the statutory statements of accounts which can be followed by the external auditor.
- 2.2 The Authority believes that at the time of writing the audit queries in respect of the 2018-19 accounts have been resolved and we are awaiting confirmation of that. Once the confirmation has been received, we will be in a position to finalise the publication of the Statement of Accounts. It is our expectation that once this set of accounts has been concluded the following accounts can begin to be agreed as the approach taken in the 2018-19 final statements will be carried forward into the next statements.
- 2.3 For the 2019-20 accounts we have continued to work alongside the audit team in response to their queries and clarifying any matters where they may need further information. A significant amount of audit work has been agreed and we would hope the completion of the prior year will enable the completion of the 2019-20 year to be concluded within a reasonable timescale thereafter.
- 2.4 This still leaves the later years to catch up and we are in discussion with the external financial adviser over how to proceed with the catch up. It is likely that during the period between now and the end of the year at least one and possibly two of the subsequent years will be considered by the

adviser and then made available to the auditor for their review. This is a positive message and confirms that catching up with the statutory accounts deadline remains a priority for the Authority.

- 2.5 It is worth noting for Members that the external financial adviser has commented that for the statements of accounts and working papers that they have reviewed so far, their overall comment is that the numbers in the accounts are in line with those that were submitted for audit some time ago.
- 2.6 However, there remains an issue, unrelated to this authority that may impact on any of the audit years that we are concerned with. The Government and the Financial Reporting Council are concerned that across local government there continue to be more than 900 audit opinions outstanding, i.e. the audit is not completed. This is for a range of technical accounting and audit reasons, but also relates to a lack of capacity in public sector audit across the board.
- 2.7 The Government has been consulting on an approach to this issue, and that consultation involves the prospect of multiple years of accounts not being signed off by auditors. The proposal reflects a need to move forward, recognising that the delays have happened and seeking a way of normalising the relationship between local authority accounts and audit going forward. However, the consultation and planning for the way forward was not concluded before the election was called for July 2024 and so we await the outcome of the ballot to see how that will be taken forwards.
- 2.8 Meanwhile, whilst we will continue to work alongside our own auditors in seeking to ensure the Authority's accounts are all up to date and are audited, there is a probability that at least some of the Authority's accounts may be caught up in the process, if the next Government continues to take that approach. As the consultation reaches a conclusion and proposals are finalised, we will ensure that Members are informed of the likelihood that the Authority will be impacted by the approach.
- 2.9 As previously reported one of the Authority's staff has been given the opportunity for professional development and is currently in an early stage of training with CIPFA with a view to completing their accountancy training as a fully qualified CIPFA accountant. It is expected that the combination of the additional targeted support and the additional CIPFA qualified member of staff will contribute towards providing the additional resilience that the Authority needs to be better placed to support the production of the Financial Statements.

- 2.10 The auditor had identified that the cash reconciliation in the accounts production was incomplete. Working with the service provider, we are satisfied that the cash reconciliation provided to MRWA and reviewed by MRWA and the auditor is sufficient to satisfy the requirement for the bank reconciliation to be reviewed. The auditor will review the bank reconciliations provided and will provide their view in due course.
- 2.11 The auditor noted that the systems used by the Authority to support the production of the accounts needed to be reviewed. The Authority has asked to be a part of the service provider's working group to enable it to work with the provider so that the particular requirements of the Authority, which may be different from the service provider's requirements, may be reflected in the revised financial information system. It is likely that the implementation of any changes or a new system will take up to 18 months.
- 2.12 Ongoing discussions have been held with the service provider to ensure that the Authority continues to be represented on the user group for the new system.
- 2.13 Separately the complex spreadsheet used to support the accounts production has been reviewed and much simplified, so that the production of the accounts and the support for the auditor are made easier to follow.
- 2.14 The auditor has set out that the Authority should be updated at each meeting on the progress being made against each of his recommendations. This report forms the latest of those updates; Members will continue to receive an update on these recommendations as requested, until they are all implemented.
- 2.15 As a separate matter, the auditor has also been working alongside the Authority to carry out their Value for Money audit across a number of years to enable them to both reach a conclusion on the Authority's arrangements and to provide recommendations for improvements for the Authority to consider. The Auditor sought a significant amount of information from the Authority before the New Year and has reviewed that data. They have issued an initial report on the basis of that review and the Authority's officers have spent some time reviewing and responding to the points raised. At the time of writing the Auditors conclusions were not finalised, but when they are we will ensure that Members are provided with the information about the conclusion, recommended actions and any response that the Authority may propose making to those recommendations.

3. Risk Implications

3.1 The following risks have been identified in relation to the development and implementation of the Authority's corporate planning processes:

Identified Risk	Likelihood Rating	Consequence Rating	Risk Value	Mitigation
Failure to respond to statutory recommendations	1	5	5	The Authority will respond positively to the auditor's recommendations
Statements of accounts uncorrected errors, risks of balances being misstated	3	4	12	Ensuring that actions arising from the auditor's recommendations will ensure this risk is mitigated.

4. HR Implications

4.1 Directing the work of either seconded or contract staff may need to be managed.

5. Environmental Implications

5.1 No new environmental implications.

6. Financial Implications

6.1 The support from KPMG is in line with their proposals and our expectations. To date their costs amount to some £44k, which will be funded from amounts set aside for financial support which were not spent in prior years.

7. Legal Implications

7.1 The Authority is legally required to consider the external auditor's recommendations, whether they are accepted, and what action to take in response.

7.2 The Authority's proposed response is set out in this report.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Members are asked to note the Authority's progress against the agreed recommendations.

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The background documents to this report are open to inspection in accordance with Section 100D of The Local Government Act 1972 - Nil.