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Our Ref: MARK/BUX001

Mrs C Feltham
Buxted Parish Council
PO Box 202
Heathfield
East Sussex
TN21 1BN

6 December 2022

Dear Claudine

Re: Buxted Parish Council
Internal Audit Year Ended 31 March 2023 – Interim Audit report

Executive summary

Following completion of our interim internal audit on 6 December 2022 we enclose our report for your kind attention and presentation to the council. The audit was conducted in accordance with current practices and guidelines and testing was risk based. Whilst we have not tested all transactions, our samples have where appropriate covered the entire year to date.

Our report is presented in the same order as the assertions on the internal auditor report within the published AGAR. The start of each section details the nature of the assertion to be verified. Testing requirements follow those detailed in the audit plan previously sent to the council, a copy of this is available on request. The report concludes with an opinion as to whether each assertion has been met or not at the interim audit. Where appropriate **recommendations for action are shown in bold text and are summarised in the table at the end of the report.**

Our sample testing did not uncover any errors or misstatements that require reporting to the external auditor at this time, nor did we identify any significant weaknesses in the internal controls such that public money would be put at risk.

It is clear the council takes governance, policies and procedures seriously and I am pleased to report that overall, the systems and procedures you have in place are fit for purpose and whilst my report may contain recommendations to change these are not indicative of any significant failings, but rather are pointers to improving upon an already well-ordered system.

It is therefore our opinion that the systems and internal procedures at Buxted Parish Council are well established and followed.

Regulation

The Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 require smaller authorities, each financial year, to conduct a review of the effectiveness of the system of internal control and prepare an annual governance statement in accordance with proper practices in relation to accounts. In addition to this, a smaller authority is required by Regulation 5(1) of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 to “undertake an effective internal audit to evaluate the effectiveness of its risk management, control and governance processes, taking into account public sector internal auditing standards or guidance.”

Internal auditing is an independent, objective assurance activity designed to improve an organisation’s operations. It helps an organisation accomplish its objectives by bringing a systematic, disciplined approach to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of risk management, control and governance processes. The purpose of internal audit is to review and report to the authority on whether its systems of financial and other internal controls over its activities and operating procedures are effective.

Internal audit's function is to test and report to the authority on whether its specific system of internal control is adequate and working satisfactorily. The internal audit reports should therefore be made available to all Members to support and inform them when they considering the authority's approval of the annual governance statement.

Independence and competence

Your audit was conducted by Andy Beams of Mulberry & Co. We confirm we are independent from the management of the financial controls and procedures of the council and neither the internal auditor or the firm have any conflicts of interest with the audit client, nor do they provide any management or financial assistance to the client.

Your auditor has over 30 years' experience in the financial sector with the last 12 years specialising in local government.

Engagement Letter

An engagement letter was previously issued to the council covering the 2022/23 internal audit assignment. Copies of this document are available on request.

Planning and inherent risk assessment

The scope and plan of works including fee structure was issued to the council under separate cover. Copies of this document are available on request. In summary, our work will address each of the internal control objectives as stated on the Annual Internal Audit Report of the AGAR. As part of the inherent risk assessment, we have concluded that:

- There have been no reported instances of breaches of regulations in the past
- The client uses an industry approved financial reporting package
- The client regularly carries out reconciliations and documents these
- There is regular reporting to council
- The management team are experienced and informed
- Records are neatly maintained and referenced
- The client is aware of current regulations and practices
- There has been no instance of high staff turnover

It is our opinion that the inherent risk of error or misstatement is low, and the controls of the council can be relied upon and as such substantive testing of individual transactions is not required. Testing to be carried out will be "walk through testing" on sample data to encompass the period of the council year under review.

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A. BOOKS OF ACCOUNT

Internal audit requirement

Appropriate accounting records have been properly kept throughout the financial year.

Audit findings

The interim audit was conducted remotely with one of the council's Clerks, who also acts as the council's Responsible Financial Officer (RFO). The Clerk had prepared the information advised and forwarded to me for review, in advance of a telephone conversation to cover any queries. Other information was reviewed through discussion with the Clerk and a review of the council website www.buxtedparishcouncil.gov.uk

The council continues to use the Rialtas Business Solutions (RBS) accounting package for recording the day-to-day financial transactions of the council. This is an industry specific accounting package and I make no recommendation to change. The system is used regularly to record transactions and produce management information reports for review at council meetings.

B. FINANCIAL REGULATIONS, GOVERNANCE AND PAYMENTS

Internal audit requirement

This authority complied with its financial regulations, payments were supported by invoices, all expenditure was approved, and VAT was appropriately accounted for.

Audit findings

Check the publication and minuting of the prior year audited AGAR and notice of conclusion of audit.

The External Auditor's Report for 2021/22 was not qualified and has been published on the council website along with the Notice of Conclusion of Audit. The conclusion of the audit was reported to council at the meeting held on 22 November 2022.

I note within minutes of Finance Committee meetings there is reference to the receipt and review of internal audit reports.

Confirm by sample testing that councillors sign statutory office forms.

I confirmed by sample testing that councillors sign "Acceptance of Office" forms. These are published on the council website along with each individual councillor's Register of Members Interests form.

Confirm that the council is compliant with the relevant transparency code.

As the council's income and expenditure exceeds £25,000, it is not a statutory requirement to follow the requirements of the Local Government Transparency Code, although it is recommended best practice to do so. I recommend reviewing the way the information is published on the website of Upper Beeding Parish Council as a best practice example via this link www.upperbeeding-pc.gov.uk/finance-transparency

Confirm that the council is compliant with GDPR.

The council is fully aware of GDPR and has undergone training. It was noted the council has established common email addresses for all councillors. This is recommended because it gives a natural segregation between work and personal lives, making it clear beyond doubt in what capacity a councillor is acting. In addition to this it gives control to the council, adds a degree of professionalism and in the event of a FOI request limits access to personal computers.

The council has a Privacy Notice and Accessibility Statement on the home page of its website, although I note these are generic templates and should be updated to personalise them to Buxted Parish Council.

Confirm that the council meets regularly throughout the year.

In addition to full council, the council has a committee structure in place. Future meeting dates are published on the council website along with historic agendas and minutes.

Check that agendas for meetings are published giving 3 clear days' notice.

I was able to confirm that at least 3 clear days' notice is given on agendas. Whilst we have not tested every single committee and council meeting there was no evidence of non-compliance in giving three clear days' notice of the meeting. I note that non-confidential supporting papers are also available on the website in accordance with the requirements of the Information Commissioner's Office.

Check the draft minutes of the last meeting(s) are on the council's website.

Draft minutes are routinely uploaded to the council website.

Confirm that the Parish Council's Standing Orders have been reviewed within the last 12 months.

The Standing Orders are based on the current NALC model and were most recently reviewed and adopted by council in May 2022 (minute ref 08/05/22).

Confirm that the Parish Council has adopted and recently reviewed Financial Regulations.

Financial Regulations are based on the current NALC model and were last reviewed and adopted by council in November 2022 (minute ref 05/11/22). The regulations contain provisions for the approval of spending, setting of budgets, reconciliation of the bank and reporting to council.

Check that the council's Financial Regulations are being routinely followed.

The council has thresholds in place at which authorisations to spend must be obtained as below:

FR 4.1. Expenditure on revenue items may be authorised up to the amounts included for that class of expenditure in the approved budget. This authority is to be determined by:

- the council for all items over [£5,000];*
- a duly delegated committee of the council for items over [£500]; or*
- the Clerk, in conjunction with Chairman of Council or Chairman of the appropriate committee, for any items below [£500].*

Such authority is to be evidenced by a minute or by an authorisation slip duly signed by the Clerk, and where necessary also by the appropriate Chairman.

Contracts may not be disaggregated to avoid controls imposed by these regulations.

FR 4.5. In cases of extreme risk to the delivery of council services, the clerk may authorise revenue expenditure on behalf of the council which in the clerk's judgement it is necessary to carry out. Such expenditure includes repair, replacement or other work, whether or not there is any budgetary provision for the expenditure, subject to a limit of [£500]. The Clerk shall report such action to the chairman as soon as possible and to the council as soon as practicable thereafter.

Based on the level of financial activity of the council, these authorisation thresholds appear appropriate.

From a review of the council minutes and the non-confidential supporting information published with the agendas, it is clear that councillors are provided with sufficient financial details to make informed decisions.

Check receipt of VAT refund matches last submitted VAT return.

I reviewed the VAT submission for the period ended 31 March 2022 which shows a refund amount due of £4,456.72. I was able to confirm receipt of this amount to the council's bank account on 1 July 2022.

Confirm that checks of the accounts are made by a councillor.

The system noted above details internal review takes place and I am under no doubt that council properly approves expenditure.

C. RISK MANAGEMENT AND INSURANCE

Internal audit requirement

This authority assessed the significant risks to achieving its objectives and reviewed the adequacy of arrangements to manage these.

Audit findings

The council has a Risk Management Policy Statement which was most recently reviewed and approved by council in May 2022. This outlines the council's general approach to risk management and sets its objectives. In addition, there is a risk assessment document (updated November 2022) which outlines the risk areas, actual identified risks, control measures in place, responsibility for action, and assesses the impact and probability of the risk.

This is a suitable approach for a council of this size with minimal risks.

I confirmed that the council has a valid insurance policy in place with Hiscox which expires on 31 May 2023. The policy includes Public Liability and Employers Liability cover of £10 million each and a Fraud & Dishonesty (Fidelity Guarantee) level of £420,000 which is sufficient for a council of this size.

D. BUDGET, PRECEPT AND RESERVES

Internal audit requirement

The precept or rates requirement resulted from an adequate budgetary process; progress against the budget was regularly monitored; and reserves were appropriate.

Audit findings

The council set a precept of £105,091 for 2022/23. With a tax base of 1,867.4, this equates to a band D equivalent of £56.28 (compared to the average in England of £74.81).

The Clerk confirmed that the 2023/24 budget setting process is underway. A draft budget has been prepared and this has been reviewed and updated at the Finance Committee meeting held on 22 November 2022. The council aims to agree the final budget and precept at the meeting scheduled for 13 December 2022.

There is evidence within council meetings of regular reviews of financial information, and I am satisfied that councillors are provided with sufficient detail to make informed financial decisions.

The council holds circa £305,000 in a range of clearly identified earmarked reserves. These include amounts ring-fenced for Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). I tested the purpose of these earmarked reserves with the Clerk and am satisfied that are all for legitimate future planned projects of the council.

The council also holds circa £52,000 in the general reserve.

The Joint Panel on Accountability and Governance (JPAG) Practitioner's guide states *'the generally accepted recommendation with regard to the appropriate minimum level of a smaller authority's general reserve is that this should be maintained at between three and twelve months of net revenue expenditure'* (para 5.33).

The general reserve balance is comfortably within this range.

E. INCOME**Internal audit requirement**

Expected income was fully received, based on correct prices, properly recorded and promptly banked; and VAT was appropriately accounted for.

Audit findings

Apart from the precept, the council receives income from allotments, recreation and field hire, grant income, bank interest and VAT refunds. From a review of the nominal ledger records on RBS, amounts appear to be recorded with sufficient narrative detail to identify the source and allocated to the most appropriate nominal ledger code.

F. PETTY CASH**Internal audit requirement**

Petty cash payments were properly supported by receipts, all petty cash expenditure was approved, and VAT appropriately accounted for.

Audit findings

The council has no petty cash.

G. PAYROLL**Internal audit requirement**

Salaries to employees and allowances to members were paid in accordance with this authority's approvals, and PAYE and NI requirements were properly applied.

Audit findings

There are two employees, each of whom has a signed contract of employment based on the NALC template. Salaries are aligned to the NJC scale point range, and the council is in the process for arranging for appraisals for both staff members. The council is enrolled in the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS).

The council uses a third party for processing payroll, who calculates the PAYE and pension deductions. I reviewed the payslips for June and July and the payroll deductions appear correct.

I remind the Council that only salary, HMRC and pension payments should be included in box 4 on the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) and any other staff costs should be recorded in box 6.

There are no councillor allowances, although the Clerk is aware that only elected councillors are eligible for the allowance, and that any claims must be processed through payroll.

H. ASSETS AND INVESTMENTS**Internal audit requirement**

Asset and investments registers were complete and accurate and properly maintained.

Audit findings

The council has a fixed asset register in place which includes details of asset description, date of acquisition, original value, replacement cost, freehold/leasehold status, title deed details (where applicable) and any other comments.

I remind the council that all assets should be listed and valued at cost/proxy cost, or where gifted/donated, given a nominal £1 value for the purpose of the asset register.

A check of the register to ensure it is up to date and matches the AGAR information will be completed at the year-end audit.

The council has no PWLB borrowing nor long-term investments.

I. BANK AND CASH

Internal audit requirement

Periodic and year-end bank account reconciliations were properly carried out.

Audit findings

Financial Regulation 2.2 states 'On a regular basis, at least once in each quarter, and at each financial year end, a member other than the Chairman [or a cheque signatory] shall be appointed to verify bank reconciliations (for all accounts) produced by the RFO. The member shall sign the reconciliations and the original bank statements (or similar document) as evidence of verification. This activity shall on conclusion be reported, including any exceptions, to and noted by the council [Finance Committee].'

Bank reconciliations are completed monthly and presented to council at every meeting for review. I reviewed the reconciliations presented for the interim audit and was able to confirm the balances to the bank statements and found no errors.

The Clerk confirmed that the reconciliation and bank statement have been signed by the chairman in accordance with the Financial Regulations.

I note that the council hold balances in excess of the £85,000 protection limit offered by the Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS), and I recommend the council considers opening additional bank accounts with alternate providers to maximise the protection available to it.

J. YEAR END ACCOUNTS

Internal audit requirement

Accounting statements prepared during the year were prepared on the correct accounting basis (receipts and payments or income and expenditure), agreed to the cash book, supported by an adequate audit trail from underlying records and where appropriate debtors and creditors were properly recorded.

Audit findings

Testing to be conducted at final audit.

K. LIMITED ASSURANCE REVIEW

Internal audit requirement

IF the authority certified itself as exempt from a limited assurance review in 2020/21, it met the exemption criteria and correctly declared itself exempt. (If the authority had a limited assurance review of its 2020/21 AGAR tick "not covered")

Audit findings

Testing to be conducted at final audit.

L: TRANSPARENCY

Internal audit requirement

If the authority has an annual turnover not exceeding £25,000, it publishes information on a website / webpage up to date at the time of the internal audit in accordance with the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities

Audit findings

Testing to be conducted at final audit.

M: EXERCISE OF PUBLIC RIGHTS - INSPECTION OF ACCOUNTS**Internal audit requirement**

The authority has demonstrated that during summer 2022 it correctly provided for the exercise of public rights as required by the Accounts and Audit Regulations.

Audit findings

Inspection – key dates	2021/22 Actual
Date AGAR signed by council	14 June 2022
Date inspection notice issued	15 June 2022
Inspection period begins	16 June 2022
Inspection period ends	27 July 2022
Correct length (30 working days)	Yes
Common period included (first 10 working days of July)	Yes

I am satisfied the requirements of this control objective were met for 2021/22, and assertion 4 on the Annual Governance Statement can therefore be signed off by the council.

N: PUBLICATION REQUIREMENTS**Internal audit requirement**

The authority has complied with the publication requirements for 2021/22. Under the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015, authorities must publish the following information on the authority website / webpage.

Before 1 July 2022 authorities must publish:

- *Notice of the period for the exercise of public rights and a declaration that the accounting statements are as yet unaudited*
- *Section 1 - Annual Governance Statement 2021/22, approved and signed, page 4*
- *Section 2 - Accounting Statements 2021/22, approved and signed, page 5*

Not later than 30 September 2022 authorities must publish:

- *Notice of conclusion of audit*
- *Section 3 - External Auditor Report and Certificate*
- *Sections 1 and 2 of AGAR including any amendments as a result of the limited assurance review.*

It is recommended as best practice, to avoid any potential confusion by local electors and interested parties, that you also publish the Annual Internal Audit Report, page 3.

Audit findings

I was able to confirm that the Notice of Public Rights is published on the council website along with the Notice of Conclusion of Audit and External Auditor Report and Certificate and the publication requirements for 2021/22 have been met.

O. TRUSTEESHIP**Internal audit requirement**

Trust funds (including charitable) – The council met its responsibilities as a trustee.

Audit findings

The council is the trustee of The Basil Ionides Memorial Centre (charity number 305192). I reviewed the information on the Charity Commission website, which shows all reporting is up to date. Although the Parish Council is listed a trustee, they are recorded as one of eleven in total, with the other ten names being current Parish Councillors.

The Clerk confirmed this is currently under review, and the Charity Commission website should be updated to accurately reflect the Parish Council as the sole trustee.

Achievement of control assertions at interim audit date

Based on the tests conducted during the interim audit, our conclusions on the achievement of the internal control objectives are summarised in the table below. A further review and update of this opinion will be conducted at the final audit.

	INTERNAL CONTROL OBJECTIVE	YES	NO	NOT COVERED
A	Appropriate accounting records have been properly kept throughout the financial year	√		
B	This authority complied with its financial regulations, payments were supported by invoices, all expenditure was approved, and VAT was appropriately accounted for	√		
C	This authority assesses the significant risks to achieving its objectives and reviewed the adequacy of arrangements to manage these	√		
D	The precept or rates requirement resulted from an adequate budgetary process; progress against the budget was regularly monitored; and reserves were appropriate.	√		
E	Expected income was fully received, based on correct prices, properly recorded and promptly banked; and VAT was appropriately accounted for	√		
F	Petty cash payments were properly supported by receipts, all petty cash expenditure was approved, and VAT appropriately accounted for			√
G	Salaries to employees and allowances to members were paid in accordance with this authority's approvals, and PAYE and NI requirements were properly applied.	√		
H	Asset and investments registers were complete and accurate and properly maintained.	√		
I	Periodic bank account reconciliations were properly carried out during the year.	√		
J	Accounting statements prepared during the year were prepared on the correct accounting basis (receipts and payments or income and expenditure), agreed to the cash book, supported by an adequate audit trail from underlying records and where appropriate debtors and creditors were properly recorded.	√		
K	If the authority certified itself as exempt from a limited assurance review in 2021/22, it met the exemption criteria and correctly declared itself exempt. <i>(If the authority had a limited assurance review of its 2020/21 AGAR tick "not covered")</i>			√
L	The authority publishes information on a free to access website/webpage up to date at the time of the internal audit in accordance with any relevant transparency code requirements			√
M	The authority, during the previous year (2021-22) correctly provided for the period for the exercise of public rights as required by the Accounts and Audit Regulations <i>(evidenced by the notice published on the website and/or authority approved minutes confirming the dates set)</i> .	√		
N	The authority has complied with the publication requirements for 2021/22 AGAR.	√		
O	Trust funds (including charitable) – The council met its responsibilities as a trustee.	√		

Should you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Andy Beams

For Mulberry & Co

Interim Audit - Points Carried Forward

Audit Point	Audit Findings	Council comments
FINANCIAL REGULATIONS, GOVERNANCE AND PAYMENTS	The council has a Privacy Notice and Accessibility Statement on the home page of its website, although I note these are generic templates and should be updated to personalise them to Buxted Parish Council.	
BANK AND CASH	I note that the council hold balances in excess of the £85,000 protection limit offered by the Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS), and I recommend the council considers opening additional bank accounts with alternate providers to maximise the protection available to it.	
TRUSTEESHIP	The Clerk confirmed this is currently under review, and the Charity Commission website should be updated to accurately reflect the Parish Council as the sole trustee.	