

**MINUTES OF THE
AUDIT AND RISK COMMITTEE**
held on 16 September 2026 at 7pm

Present:

Councillor N. Walsh (Chair)

Councillors, C. Adutwim, G. Bonnett, D. Clark, H. Clark, N. Dudley, M. Sismey and
A. Sosin

Independent Persons –
Mr C Groves

1. Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

Apologies were received from Councillor J. Raven and Independent Person Ms J Hoeckx.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting on 24 June 2026 were confirmed as a correct record.

3. Declarations of Interests

All Members were reminded to disclose any interests in items of business on the meeting's agenda and that they should do so at this point on the agenda or as soon as they became aware of the interest. They were also obliged to notify the Monitoring Officer of the interest within 28 days of the meeting if they had not been previously notified. None were made.

4. Public Questions

There were no questions or statements from members of the public.

5. Announcements

No announcements were made.

6. External Audit Update

The Committee received an update from Ernst & Young (EY), the Council's External Auditors, on the progress of the 2025/26 audit and the work being undertaken to rebuild assurance following previous years disclaimed audit opinions. The update also covered the national position on local authority audits, audit readiness and the anticipated timeline towards achieving an unqualified audit opinion.

Following the disclaimed opinions issued in recent years, EY shared they were aiming to progress to a qualified opinion for 2025/26, with an unqualified opinion potentially achievable in a subsequent year, subject to the successful completion of audit procedures and the rebuilding of assurance over historic balances.

In response to questions and comments from the Committee, the External Auditors noted that:

- The reserve risk assessment work required by the MHCLG sat outside the standard audit scope and scale fee. Any work required to rebuild assurance over historic balances would also be subject to additional fees.
- Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) was not expected to significantly affect the audit opinion although it would form part of their value for money considerations. Any delay to LGR would provide additional time to rebuild assurance over reserve balances.
- Some artificial intelligence tools were used to support analysis and review work, but outputs were always subject to professional judgement and oversight by auditors.
- The national audit backlog had largely been addressed. However, many local authority opinions had been disclaimed due to the statutory backstop arrangements. This reflected broader sector issues, including the abolition of the Audit Commission, capacity pressures following the pandemic and increasing complexity within financial reporting requirements.
- Both usable and unusable reserves formed part of the audit assessment. While usable reserves were important in assessing financial resilience, assurance work was also required on certain unusable reserves due to their cumulative nature and relationship with other balances within the financial statements.

RESOLVED that the update be noted.

(7.00pm to 7.29pm)

7. Annual Health and Safety Report 2025/26

The Committee received a report from the Public Health and Protection Services Manager providing the 2025/26 annual health and safety update. The report summarised activity over the last 12 months, including training, analysis of accidents, and audit activity, with support from external advisors in higher risk service areas.

The Committee heard that a significant amount of health and safety training had been delivered during the year, with 1,854 training places completed. This represented a substantial increase compared with previous years, largely due to the introduction of additional e-learning courses and the requirement for all employees to undertake fire awareness training. Members noted that the Council continued to invest in staff training and maintained a comprehensive programme appropriate to the differing risks associated with individual roles.

Members noted that there had been 87 employee accidents during the year, a reduction compared with the previous year. There had also been a reduction in RIDDOR reportable incidents from 13 to 11. Whilst accidents involving members of

the public had increased from 39 to 45, officers advised that accident levels remained low relative to the volume of services and activities provided by the Council.

Of the 11 RIDDOR reportable accidents recorded during the year, 5 occurred within Waste Collection Services. Nine were reportable because they resulted in employees being absent from work for more than seven days. The number of accidents within Waste Services remained low when considered against the scale and frequency of the activities undertaken by the service. Employee accidents had reduced compared with the previous year. Slips, trips and impact injuries continued to be the most common causes of accidents. The increase in recorded acts of violence included incidents involving wasp stings and animal bites.

The Committee was informed that a programme of audits had been undertaken by Peninsula, the Council's external health and safety auditors. Most audit actions had been completed with only a small number of higher-risk actions remaining outstanding, predominantly relating to fire safety matters. Officers advised that progress continued to be made in addressing these issues.

In response to questions, it was noted that:

- Following the audit of the Museum of Chelmsford, a number of the 13 outstanding actions had already been addressed and officers did not anticipate the actions escalating to high-risk matters.
- Manual handling training was provided and refresher training formed part of the Council's ongoing approach to reducing manual handling incidents.
- Whilst there was no mandatory stress management training programme, the Council provided support through other training packages and resources. A stress management policy was also being developed and measures were in place to support staff where required. Information relating to stress management support could be circulated to Members.
- Staff exit interviews continued to be undertaken and monitored to identify any recurring issues. To date, no significant concerns relating to employee wellbeing had been identified through that process.

RESOLVED that the update be noted.

(7.29pm to 7.48pm)

8. Updated Internal Audit Plan 2026

The Committee received a report from the Audit Services Manager presenting the Updated Internal Audit Plan 2026 covering the period October 2026 to March 2027. It was explained that the Council continued to operate a six-month rolling audit programme to ensure that internal audit resources remained focused on the highest risk areas and could respond to emerging issues.

Members were advised that the plan had been developed through consideration of the Corporate Plan, Principal Risk Register, Fraud Risk Register, Annual Governance Statement Action Plan and discussions with senior management. The programme included reviews covering areas such as cyber security, business

continuity, temporary accommodation, safeguarding, procurement and contract management, building control and community grants.

The Committee heard that contingency capacity had also been built into the plan to allow for advisory work and unplanned audit activity arising during the year. Follow-up reviews would continue to be undertaken where necessary to ensure that agreed actions were implemented.

RESOLVED that the update be noted.

(7.48pm to 7.50pm)

9. Risk Management Report

The Committee received a report from the Audit Services Manager providing an update on corporate risk management and the Principal Risk Register. Members heard that a comprehensive refresh of the register had been undertaken during July and August 2026 to ensure that it reflected the Council's current risk profile and risk appetite.

Members were advised that the Council continued to receive support from Basildon Council in relation to risk management. The report highlighted the key strategic risks, including Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), cyber security, homelessness and the Local Plan. Members were advised that, despite the Government's announcement that LGR had been suspended indefinitely, the risk remained relevant and continued to be regarded as the Council's highest rated risk.

In response to questions and comments from the Committee, it was noted that:

- The succession planning risk relating to HR and workforce had previously been recorded as a stand-alone principal risk. However, this had been merged into the LGR risk. Officers shared they would review whether succession planning should again be reported as a separate risk or remain with the LGR workstream.
- The risks associated with the Climate & Ecological Emergency Strategy periods of hot weather and fires were currently assessed as medium risks with a static direction of travel. Officers advised that the risk scores would be reviewed and updated as part of the ongoing risk management process to reflect changing circumstances such as the recent periods of hot weather and wildfires.

RESOLVED that the report be noted

(7.50pm to 7.57pm)

10. Work Programme

The Committee was updated on the rolling work programme of future reports and work for the next series of meetings.

It was noted that some date changes may be required to align with external audit deadlines and that members would be advised of any changes.

It was noted that the meeting scheduled for 2nd December 2026 would be rearranged to a date later in December 2026 or January 2027. This date was to be shared with Members once agreed by the Chair/Vice-Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee.

RESOLVED that the work programme be agreed.

(7.57pm to 7.59pm)

11. Urgent Business

There was no urgent business.

The meeting closed at 8.02pm.

Chair