

Title of report: 2023/24 Statement of Accounts

Meeting: Audit and Governance Committee

Meeting date: Wednesday 18 September 2024

Report by: Chief Accountant

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose

To approve the 2023/24 Statement of Accounts and associated letter of representation from Grant Thornton, the external auditors.

Recommendation(s)

That:

- a) **The 2023/24 Statement of Accounts (at Appendix 1) be approved; and**
- b) **The letter of representation (at Appendix 2) be signed by the chairperson of the committee and the Chief Finance Officer.**

Alternative options

1. To not provide a Statement of Accounts. This is not an option. The Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 requires the council to produce a Statement of Accounts in accordance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations (England) 2015 (as amended). The process requires the final accounts to be approved by the Audit and Governance Committee.

Key considerations

2. The council is required to prepare an annual Statement of Accounts and to arrange for them to be audited and reported in accordance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 and the 2023/24 Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom, issued by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). The Statement of Accounts presents the overall financial position of the council and comprises: a narrative report and annual governance statement, comprehensive income and expenditure statement, balance sheet, movement in reserves statement, cash flow statement, collection fund statement, group accounts and supporting notes.
3. The council prepared draft Statement of Accounts for 2023/24 and published them on 31 May 2024, in line with the statutory deadline determined by the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 and provided accounts to the external auditors on this date. These draft, unaudited accounts were presented to this committee at its meeting on 11 June 2024.
4. The financial statements are prepared in accordance with international financial reporting standards. The S151 Officer is satisfied that the Statement of Accounts present a true and fair view of the financial position of the council and its group as at 31 March 2024 and its income and expenditure for the year ended 31 March 2024.
5. The financial outturn position reported for 2023/24 is an overspend of £8.7 million against a net budget of £193.3 million (4.5%). The net deficit on the provision of services presented in the comprehensive income and expenditure statement is £7.0 million; this represents the accounting deficit after financial accounting adjustments including pension actuarial costs and capital costs allowable under International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS). These accounting adjustments are explained in note 8 to the accounts: Expenditure and funding analysis.
6. The general fund balance has remained at £9.6 million and earmarked reserves have decreased from £81.8 million to £73.2 million. These figures include balances of £9.9 million held for individual maintained schools.
7. The cumulative dedicated schools grant (DSG) deficit brought forward from last financial year of £1.1 million has increased by £5.0 million, representing the deficit in 2023/24, to £6.1 million. In line with the School and Early years Finance (England) Regulations 2020, the deficit reserve is classified as an unusable reserve instead of an earmarked reserve.
8. The council instructed external valuers Wilks Head & Eve LLP to carry out the land and buildings asset valuations in 2023/24 in line with the rolling programme of valuations. Valuations were completed in accordance with the professional standards of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) as per the planned timetable and revaluations have been processed to update carrying values at 31 March 2024 which are reflected in the 2023/24 Statement of Accounts.
9. The group accounts consolidate the performance of the council with its subsidiary undertaking: Hoople Ltd. The impact of the consolidation is an increase in the group reserves of £3.3 million, which includes reserves applicable to the minority interest of £0.7 million
10. The external audit has identified a small number of presentation and disclosure adjustments and where appropriate these have been reflected in the accounts. Changes to the Statement of Accounts following the external audit are listed in the External Audit Findings Report.
11. The approved 2023/24 Annual Governance Statement will be added to the Statement of Accounts attached at Appendix 1.

12. Attached at Appendix 2 is the council's Letter of Representation confirming that, to the best of the council's knowledge and belief, the financial statements, at Appendix 1, give a true and fair view in accordance with the CIPFA Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2023/24 and applicable law.

Community impact

13. Publication of the Statement of Accounts in accordance with statutory requirements helps the council to achieve its code of corporate governance commitment to behave with integrity, demonstrate strong commitment to ethical values, and respect the rule of law. The council is accountable for how it uses the resources under its stewardship, including accountability for outputs and outcomes achieved. In addition the council has an overarching responsibility to serve the public interest in adhering to the requirements of legislation and government policies.

Environmental Impact

14. Herefordshire Council provides and purchases a wide range of services for the people of Herefordshire. Together with partner organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors we share a strong commitment to improving our environmental sustainability, achieving carbon neutrality and to protect and enhance Herefordshire's outstanding natural environment.
15. Whilst this is a decision on back office functions and will have minimal environmental impacts, consideration has been made to minimise waste and resource use in line with the Council's Environmental Policy. For example, the external audit on the draft accounts has been completed remotely, reducing travel impact and paper usage.

Equality duty

16. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to –

- a. eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - b. advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - c. foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
17. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services. As this is a decision on back office functions, we do not believe that it will have an impact on our equality duty.

Resource implications

18. There are no new resource implications from this report.

Legal implications

19. Regulation 9 of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 requires the following:
 - a. The S151 officer to sign and date the Statement of Accounts, and confirm that they are satisfied that it presents a true and fair view of the financial position of the council at the end of the financial year to which it relates together with the income and expenditure for that financial year; and
 - b. A period of time to allow the public to inspect the accounts. This commenced on 1 June 2024 and lasted for six weeks; and
 - c. Following the conclusion of the period for inspection, the committee must approve the statement of accounts by a resolution and ensure that the statement of accounts is signed and dated by the person presiding at the committee. In order for the committee to do so the S151 officer has re-confirmed that they are satisfied that the statement of accounts presents a true and fair view.

Risk management

20. The external auditors have issued an unqualified opinion on the statement of accounts, as per the External Audit Findings Report included in today's agenda.
21. The council is required to make arrangements for the proper administration of its financial affairs and to secure that the Chief Financial Officer has the responsibility for the administration of those affairs. The council is also required to secure economic, efficient and effective use of resources for which Grant Thornton provide a Value for Money opinion, this report is included on today's agenda.

Consultees

22. The Statement of Accounts was made available for public inspection for a six week period commencing 1 June 2024. No objections were received.

Appendices

- Appendix 1: Statement of Accounts 2023/24
- Appendix 2: Letter of representation for 2023/24

Background papers

None identified.