

**MINUTES OF THE GREATER MANCHESTER COMBINED AUTHORITY
AUDIT COMMITTEE, HELD ON THURSDAY 30TH NOVEMBER 2021
AT THE GMCA OFFICES, TOOTAL BUILDINGS, MANCHESTER**

PRESENT:

Councillor Sarah Russell	Manchester City Council (Chair)
Councillor Mary Whitby	Bury Council
Councillor Chris Boyes	Trafford Council
Gwyn Griffiths	Independent Member
Catherine Scivier	Independent Member
Susan Webster	Independent Member
Grenville Page	Independent Member

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillor Tom McGee	Stockport Council and Deputy GMCA Portfolio Lead Member for Resources and Investment
Mark Dalton	Mazars External Auditor
Daniel Watson	Mazars External Auditor

OFFICERS:

Steve Wilson	GMCA Treasurer
Rachel Rosewell	GMCA Deputy Treasurer
Sarah Horseman	GMCA Head of Audit and Assurance
Nicola Ward	GMCA Governance and Scrutiny

AC/62/21 WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES

RESOLVED /-

Apologies for absence were received and noted from Councillor Colin McLaren, Oldham Council, Councillor Tracy Kelly (Substitute) Salford Council and Councillor Christine Roberts (Substitute) Wigan Council.

Apologies were also received from Councillor David Molyneux, GMCA Portfolio Lead Member for Resources and Investment.

AC/63/21 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS AND ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair noted that there had been a late report circulated in support of item 8 – Audit Outcomes – GMCA Corporate Services.

AC/64/21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

RESOLVED /-

There were no interests declared in relation to any item on the agenda, by any Member of the Committee.

AC/65/21 MINUTES OF THE GMCA AUDIT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 30 SEPTEMBER 2021

RESOLVED/-

That the minutes of the meeting of the GMCA Audit Committee held on 30 September 2021 be approved as a correct record.

AC/66/21 MINUTES OF THE GMCA/GMP JOINT AUDIT PANEL HELD ON 27 OCTOBER 2021

RESOLVED/-

That the minutes of the Joint Audit Panel held on 27 October 2021 be noted.

AC/67/21 STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2020/21

The GMCA Treasurer introduced a report which summarised the position in relation to the GMCA accounts for 2020/21 and detailed the work undertaken to address several points raised by Mazars through their external audit activities.

This included an unadjusted misstatement relating to fire fighter pension liability, as this remained an estimated figure and as the timescales for these changes remained unknown so could therefore result in a repeated adjustment with no impact on the bottom line. A second unadjusted misstatement was in relation to a correction of a treatment of downward valuation of assets as although there had been a charge to the income and expenditure account in year rather than the re-evaluation reserve there was no change to the overall accounts.

The report also included two amended misstatements in relation to correcting the accounting treatment of the senior officer remuneration in the Group accounts following a correction to the GMP accounts, and a change to a disclosure that it was TfGM who had received the Light Rail Grant in 2020/21 not the GMCA. The final adjustment to the accounts was in relation to the classification of Northwest Evergreen Holding to a short-term debtor. Members questioned the wording of this re-adjustment as if it was felt that 'debit cash and credit debtors' was counter intuitive, Mazars offered to check the wording with officers from the GMCA to ensure it did was accurate.

In relation to the group balance sheet, Members noted that the £10.8bn pensions liability figure was significant and questioned as to whether there were any short-term financial implications or long-term sustainability issues as a result from this liability. Officers agreed that this was a notable feature on the balance sheet, however reported that the assessment of concerns and cash flow management were regularly updated to ensure the risk remained in view. However, there was no immediate cause for concern as the GMCA's reserves and current cash positions were healthy.

Once these issues have been addressed completely, officers of the GMCA would write a final letter of representation to the Auditors to give closure to the process.

RESOLVED/-

1. That the final statement of accounts for 2020/21 be approved, once the group accounts adjustment (as detailed below) has been checked
2. That the changes to the accounts during the audit period be noted.
3. That the unadjusted misstatements contained in the report be approved.
4. That Mazars and GMCA Finance Team would review the wording of the amendment in the group accounts relating to the Northwest Evergreen Holding Debtor to ensure it did not result in a double entry to the accounts.
5. That authority be delegated to the Chair of the Audit Committee to approve the final accounts should there be any further changes.

AC/68/21 AUDIT COMPLETION REPORT AND ANNUAL AUDIT LETTER

Mark Dalton (Mazars) reported that the external audit of the GMCA accounts was substantially complete subject to final review and quality control procedures and that overall, the outcomes of the process were positive and sign off was imminent.

Daniel Watson (Mazars) took Members through the Audit Completion Report in detail and drew attention to page 229 which highlighted a small number of working areas that had now been addressed including the cash flow statement and the signing off of group accounts. Further assurance was given in relation to significant risks, management override of controls and the value of property and equipment which had all been reviewed as appropriate. With reference to the outstanding legal case in relation to fire fighter pensions, although there was a significant estimate against this, the external audit had resolved that the assurances in place were adequate. Finally, in relation to the standard adjustments to the accounts, there were no further reported concerns.

In relation to the internal control recommendations, Members questioned as to whether the March 2022 deadline was obtainable in ensuring compliance against a disaster recovery test and a backup data policy. Officers confirmed that there was a cyber security solution being developed to address a number of these issues which would enhance back up data systems and deal with potential disaster recovery scenarios that was anticipated to be delivered by March 2022. However, Members were further assured that current processes were adequate and that the challenge from external audit was in relation to a formal policy relating to the formal backup of data.

The risk in relation to segregation of duties was also highlighted as potentially significant, however Officers gave assurances that this was only in relation to the raising of invoices within accounts receivable and therefore there was no immediate risk as the process was well managed. It was noted that Internal Audit were also reviewing the accounts receivable function which would further mitigate any risk.

Specifically to the internal control recommendations in relation to Change Management Policies for ICT, Members asked what would be defined as a 'good' policy. Officers confirmed that the current change management process for ICT within the GMCA was strong, but that this would be shared with colleagues at Mazars to ensure that expectations were well communicated.

Members also asked under what circumstances the GMCA would be required to deal with petty cash. The GMCA Treasurer informed the Committee that this was a legacy issue from Greater Manchester Fire Service and was subject to a strict exception policy. Within the next six months there would also be a further review of the use of petty cash and recommendations made as to its future use.

It was suggested that any external audit recommendations be picked up within the monitoring of internal audit recommendations to ensure that these are progressed and integrated into one process.

In relation to the Value for Money report, Members questioned as to whether there were any planned changes to the local government approach to ensure that this successfully assessed whether outcomes were being delivered rather than the traditional transactional approach. Colleagues from Mazars reported that there would be a change of approach seen within the 2021/21 Value for Money Commentary which was due for publication within the next three months, designed to be less transactional and more useful for Audit Committee Members as it evolves into regular practice.

Members asked that there be a standard approach to the placements of decimal points in figures to ensure consistency across reports.

In respect of the Annual Audit Letter for 2019/20, colleagues from Mazars reported that this was the final step in the closing of the accounts from the 2019/20 audit year, in which the agreed fees were detailed following discussion, challenge and agreement from GMCA senior officers. Further to this, it was reported that Central Government had provided £15m to support local authorities and combined authorities because of the upward pressure on audit fees, of which the GMCA had received £14,000.

On the subject of increased fees, although Members generally supported the increase, there were questions raised as to those fees which were a one off and those which were recurring. Mazars confirmed that the increase in fees was as a result of enhanced audit quality going forward and that the proposed fees for 2019/20 set in March 2019 were not in line with the scaled fee approved by PSAA (Public Sector Audit Appointments) which was amended as a result of regulatory changes.

In follow up, Members reported that as part of a regulatory environment PSAA were conducting an ongoing consultation which may impact the role and responsibilities of Independent Members who sit on Audit Committees. It was suggested that the GMCA be informed of any implications once this is finalised, specifically in relation to future appointments to the Committee. Officers agreed to provide this in due course as this was strongly linked to PSAA's national procurement of external auditors and the Committee's consideration as to whether the GMCA should be recommended to choose to appoint from this national process or re-tender for their own external auditors.

RESOLVED/-

1. That the Audit Completion Report and Annual Audit Letter be noted.
2. That officers would check with the ICT team regarding the level of confidence in attaining the March 2022 deadline for delivery of the organisation's cyber security software and report back to the Committee.

3. That the GMCA would work with external audit to determine what a 'good' ICT Change Management Policy should look like in advance of next year's audit.
4. That any ongoing external audit recommendations be integrated with the internal audit recommendation monitoring to ensure their delivery.
5. That there be a standard approach to the placement of decimal points in figures reported to the Committee for consistency.
6. That the GMCA be informed of the implications to the Independent Members of the Audit Committee following the publication of the regulatory guidelines in relation to external audit.
7. That linked to this, a future report be brought to the Committee following the PSAA's national procurement exercise in relation to external auditors.

AC/69/21 AUDIT OUTCOMES – GMCA CORPORATE SERVICES

The GMCA Treasurer presented a report on behalf of the GMCA Deputy Chief Executive regarding a number of audit actions which were still to be completed, some of which had been addressed since the last Committee meeting including those linked to employee expenses and car mileage.

In relation to the items with an approval date of the 29 November, officers agreed to provide an update to Members. With regards to expenses, it was confirmed that the first report had been taken to the senior leadership team this week and was well accepted, however this process would be kept under review.

RESOLVED/-

1. That a further update on the audit outcomes be brought to the next meeting.
2. That Andrew Lightfoot, Deputy Chief Executive be invited to attend Audit Committee meetings going forward to address non-finance issues.
3. That officers would check that those actions with due dates that have passed, specifically in relation to policy development and spend reporting, have been completed and provide an update to Members.

AC/70/21 TREASURY MANAGEMENT REPORT

The GMCA Treasurer introduced a report which provided an update on activities of the GMCA during the first six months of 2021/22 within prudential borrowing. It was noted that the GMCA had not been required to externally borrow this year, however there was a short-term small borrowing at the end of 2019/20 to manage cash flow over the year end.

The most significant issue for treasury management this year had been in relation to the use of deposit balances, and the report proposed to increase deposits with a number of low-risk sectors. There were ongoing discussions with treasury advisors as to how to make best use of the deposits available to the GMCA, including a proposal regarding the duration of lodgings to increase the level of return.

Members welcomed the thorough report, however sought assurances as to the risks associated with loans to Local Authorities in the current climate where many were facing financial difficulties. Officers reported that these loans were assessed by the

treasury management team who were fully aware of any Local Authority aggressive investment policies and potential reputational issues.

It was noted that the police capital spend was significantly larger than anticipated in 2021/22 and Members sought further clarity. Officers reported that there was an assumed level of slippage built into this year's budget that would not be realised as spend has been brought forward into this year. There were also unforeseen capital purchases including new fleet vehicles which had been highlighted with senior officers and a long-term capital plan was currently being developed. Members were concerned with the number of response vehicles purchased over the last year, but were assured that this would enable significant improvements within the service.

In relation to the proposed GMP budget for 2022/23, Officers confirmed that following consultation this would be considered by the Police and Crime Panel in early 2022. If proposals were rejected, then the Mayor would be required to return to the Panel with an alternative proposal.

RESOLVED/-

That the report be noted.

AC/71/21 WORK PROGRAMME 2021/22

The Chair presented the draft Work Programme for comment and suggested that a summary of the Committee's recommendations were on the agenda for each forthcoming meeting in order for Members to monitor their delivery.

A request was made for further training sessions for Members in relation to areas including Treasury Management & GM Fire and Rescue Service and relevant site visits which would enhance their understanding of the organisation.

RESOLVED/-

1. That the Work Programme be noted.
2. That training sessions be arranged for Members of the Committee in due course.

AC/72/21 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

RESOLVED/-

That it be noted that the GM Audit Committee would next meet on Friday 21 January 2022.