

TOPLIS ASSOCIATES LTD.

STREETHAY LODGE
STREETHAY
LICHFIELD
STAFFORDSHIRE WS13 8LR

TEL: 01543-419202

25 May, 2023

Cllr C Steel - Chairman
Essington Parish Council
Essington Community Centre
Hobnock Road
Essington
Staffordshire WV11 2AE

Dear Councillor Steel

Conclusion of Internal Audit of your Parish Council For the year ended 31st March 2023

Following the completion of my work for the above year we are writing to inform the Council that having carried out the year-end review I have been able to sign the Annual Governance and Accountability Return Form 3 ("AGAR") without any qualification.

Your council is to be commended on the excellent quality of the financial and governance records and associated record keeping.

The independent internal examination of the Councils governance, financial affairs and certification of the 2022-23 AGAR to the External Auditor was carried out in accordance with the standards laid out in the Accounts and Audit Regulations, 2015 and embodied in the Joint Panel on Accountability and Governance Practitioners Guide March 2022.

In summary, we covered the following areas in our examination:

- Proper Bookkeeping
- Financial Regulations, Standing Orders and Payment Controls
- Risk Management and Insurance arrangements
- Budgetary Controls
- Income Controls
- Payroll Controls
- Asset Control
- Bank Accounts and Reconciliation
- Year End Procedures.

Registered Office as above
Registered in England No 3219234

This year we have carried out a review of your web site to evaluate its conformance to the Local Government Transparency Code 2015 which is to be viewed as a minimum standard. We confirm your web site meets this requirement.

We carried out two reviews during the fiscal year and were accorded with full co-operation by your Clerk. Any issues which we raised with the Clerk and Finance Officer during the conduct of our work have either been satisfactorily rectified or are noted below.

A copy of our Annual Internal Audit certification (page 3 of the AGAR) for 2022-23 is attached.

We would wish to draw your attention to the "Publication Requirements" on page 1 of the AGAR

We would also wish to draw your council's attention to the following matters:

1. We note that your general reserves cover (after the exclusion of properly voted earmarked funds of £122,409) is 0.59 years. We consider this to be a comfortable level of general reserves balance at the year end. You will appreciate I am not allowed to instruct you on this matter but we have taken the liberty of attaching page 38 of the Practitioners Guide 2021 which in para 5.32 gives guidance on General Reserves;

In respect of the new Council year we make the following additional observations and recommendations for your consideration:

1. We recommend that during the fiscal year your council should review the Risk Assessment to ensure that it still reflects the current environment. Your council should then minute its ratification;
2. During the fiscal year your council should review your Standing Orders and Financial Regulations to ensure that they still reflect the current environment. Your council should then minute that ratification. Please note that it is important that your Financial Regulations meet the standard set by those published by NALC in July 2019. The Model Financial Regulations templates were produced by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) in July 2019 and contain a number of important legal changes;
3. Copies of both your current Standing Orders, Finance Regulations and Risk Assessment should be displayed on your councils web site and must show the latest date of revision and ratification;
4. You are reminded that when the council discusses, amends or ratifies significant documents copies should be made available on your web site for

- members of the public to view. These documents should be either appendices to published minutes and agenda papers or as separate documents on the web site (preferably with a hypertext link to facilitate ease of searching):
5. You must discuss the appointment of your internal auditor and ratify and minute the appointment during the current financial year. We were pleased to have been your internal auditor during 2022-23 and offer ourselves for re-appointment. You may use either our company name or refer to Alan Toplis & Kim Squires by name in the minutes;
 6. If your council wishes to carry forward earmarked funds at the yearend these must have been ratified by your council. This is best done at the time you draw up the next budget or at final meeting of the fiscal year.

It is your Council's responsibility to note these comments and to consider what action should be taken.

Can we take this opportunity to remind you that when the AGAR comes back from the External Auditor you do have a duty to display the accompanying notice of Completion of Audit on each of your usual notice boards and on your council's website.

The complete AGAR and any auditor's comments or qualifications should also be displayed on your web site to allow electors to see the complete card and read the External Auditors comments if they wish to do so.

In accordance with Regulation 13 (of the Audit and Accounts Regulations), after the conclusion of the period for the exercise of public rights, the authority must publish (including on its website) the annual governance statements, statement of accounts, and the external auditor's certificate and report – Sections 1, 2 and 3 of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return. Authorities must keep copies of these documents for purchase by a person at a reasonable sum and ensure that they remain available for public access for 5 years

Please do remember to retain a copy of the notice on file as proof that you have followed the requirements of the Local Government Act. You should also minute the External Auditors approval of the AGAR and any qualification or comments made and resolve to take action where necessary.

We will make our next visit in October/November but please do not hesitate to contact me should you require advice in the meantime.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be a name followed by a surname, written in a cursive style.

Reserves:

- 5.30. As with any financial entity, it is essential that authorities have sufficient reserves (general and earmarked) to finance both their day-to-day operations and future plans.
- 5.31. Smaller authorities have no specific right to accumulate funds via the precept. All reserves should be reviewed and justified regularly (i.e. at least annually). It is good practice to transparently publish both the level and rationale of all reserves.

General reserves:

- 5.32. The general reserve of an authority comprises its cash flow and contingency funds to cover unexpected inflation, unforeseen events and unusual circumstances.
- 5.33. 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.
- 5.34. The reason for the wide range is to cater for the large variation in activity level between individual authorities. The smaller the authority, the closer the figure may be to 12 months expenditure, the larger the authority, the nearer to 3 months. In practice, any authority with income and expenditure in excess of £200,000 should plan towards 3 months equivalent general reserve.
- 5.35. In all of this it is important that each authority adopt, as a general reserve policy, the level appropriate to their size, situation, risks and plan their budget so as to ensure that the adopted level is maintained. Consideration of the minimum level of reserves requires not only consideration of level of income and expenditure but also the risks to that income.
- 5.36. Authorities with significant self-generated income (other than the precept or levy) should take into account situations that may lead to a loss in revenue as well as increased costs and adapt their general reserve accordingly.

Earmarked and other reserves:

- 5.37. None of the above in any way affects the level of earmarked and/or capital receipts reserves that an authority may or should hold.
- 5.38. There is, in practice, no upper or lower limit to EMR/CRRs save only that they must be held for genuine and identifiable purposes and projects, and their level should be subject to regular review and justification (at least annually and at budget setting), and should be separately identified and enumerated. Significant levels of EMRs in particular may give rise to enquiries from internal and/or external auditors.