

Pre-meeting questions and answers on reports being considered on the Audit & Standards Committee Agenda 9 January 2024

4. Internal Audit Progress Report: Qtr. 2 2023/24

(Report author(s): Richard Barr - Audit & Risk Manager)

Question(s) from Councillor R Dickson

Clearly a huge amount of work has gone on in the completion of these internal audits. It was especially reassuring to note that, given that the new waste collection had only recently been introduced at the time of audit, there were only five items where action was recommended. It's also noted that the delays in completion of recent external audits have led to a delay in the implementation of the previous internal audit recommendation for Treasury Management Practice.

I have two questions on the report:

1. Inevitably since many of these reports have been completed, the target dates for implementation of the recommendations have passed. Notwithstanding the comments about the seven revisions of target dates, is there reassurance available that the other dates have been met e.g. with regard to the spending on legal services?
2. With regard to IT Change Management, it's noted that the recommendation for the creation of a Change Advisory Board was rejected. Has the proposal now been included within the work of the ICT Steering Group?

Response (Richard Barr):

In response to the first one, we have to trust that the information provided by managers is correct (i.e. when they say they have done it we believe them). The exception to this is for the (rare) high priority recommendations where we require evidence (although managers are given the opportunity to provide evidence for all recommendations and some have recently done so). In addition, when we next carry out the audit, one of the first things we do is determine the state of implementation of recommendations made at the previous audit. Ultimately, therefore, we obtain evidence directly ourselves.

For the second query – that needs to be answered by the Head of Customer and Digital Services.

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5. Annual Governance Statement 2022/23 Action Plan: Review of Progress

(Report author(s): Richard Barr – Audit & Risk Manager & Graham Leach – Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer)

Question(s) from Councillor R Dickson

Given the seriousness of the concerns expressed about the workload of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the fact that the Chair's proposal will be considered in detail at the O&S meeting on January 23rd (assuming this was agreed at the December 5th because I can't see the draft Minutes have yet been published), can you please confirm that this issue will be reported back again to the A&S Committee at its meeting on 27th February?

Response (Graham Leach):

It is important to recognise that the capacity of O&S was shared concern from the Committee and Officers. Work has been underway since (July (as set out in the minutes) where the Committee were asked to develop their ideas and thoughts and bring back to December), There was a brief discussion at December as part of the work programme. This discussion has led to a draft report coming together between Councillor Milton, Councillor Armstrong, Darren Knight and myself in terms of the approach to O&S.

I am happy to feedback to their meeting in February via their work plan around this point.

9. Polling District Place and Station Review

(Report author(s): Graham Leach – Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer & Leanne Marlow - Electoral Services Manager)

Question(s) from Councillor R Dickson

In Appendix B it states that for the Polling Stations at the Kenilworth Centre there is no Parking 'conveniently (sic) located'. How can this be when Abbey End carpark is located immediately outside the building?

Response (Leanne Marlow):

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Thank you for your email and question regarding my report.

I can confirm the Polling Station Inspector in May reported this information through the polling review check list. This was based around the parking demand on the day of the election and Abbey End car park was exceptionally busy.

We used all the Polling Station Inspector feedback from May 2023 elections to help shape the initial proposals before the consultation for the future polling places. We agreed the parking is not a cause for concern due to still having parking available; albeit limited on election day in May, which is why we did not take any further action.

Question(s) from Councillor P Phillips

Included as item 9 is the Polling District Place and Station review. I had responded to the survey saying no issues with the draft proposals for the whole of Budbrooke, which did not include any change to Wasperton.

I was therefore more than startled to read in respect of Wasperton Village Hall:-

"To temporarily move Wasperton polling place to Barford due to no suitable venue for a polling place. The elections team undertook a site visit to Wasperton Village Hall and Church of St John the Baptist. Wasperton Village Hall has poor accessibility to the venue; the door width is not wide enough for a wheelchair. We have considered using a doorbell at the entrance however this puts disabled people at a substantial disadvantage compared with people who are not disabled. We will continue to work closely with the venue so we can move back to the village hall once the accessibility issues have been rectified."

This analysis has come as a complete surprise to me. I would comment as follows (if you didn't know I live in Wasperton so have very good local knowledge):

1. We are an electorate of 122 and we have just one wheelchair user in the village
2. As it happens this user has a postal vote, so no wheelchair user would actually be accessing the Polling Station on Polling Day
3. I spoke to her this morning and she accesses the Village Hall in her wheelchair via the ramp without difficulty, so she is at a loss to understand the "poor accessibility." Barford Memorial Hall is not any easier apparently for access.

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4. Of those who do use the Polling Station, I believe the turnout is unusually high (~75% from memory at 23 and 21 elections). This is largely due to the convenience of being able to walk to the Polling Station. If the Polling Station were to move to Barford, then every voter would have to go by car, likely reducing the participation rate due to the less convenient location.

I think the proposal is tilting at a problem that doesn't actually exist. Could I ask you as the Returning Officer to please reconsider this proposal and to allow Wasperton to continue to use the Village Hall as its polling station

Incidentally, there is no issue with the analysis for Sherbourne - when I went round the former Sherbourne Village Hall in December it was in a poor state undergoing refurbishment and is not usable.

Response (Chris Elliott, Chief Executive):

We have an accessibility toolkit which we used to assess the premises with a member of the team connected with the Village Hall Committee. They agreed with the views that we discussed with them, highlighting their duty of accessibility to a public building generally anyway.

While I and colleagues note the small electorate and the single person with a wheelchair, this approach does not allow for any other party who may be entitled to attend the polling station and is prevented from not doing so on election day because of access.

From memory this is also potentially a temporary move while the Village Hall Committee looks at taking the appropriate remedial action.

That said this is a recommendation to the Committee for it to consider and it could come to a different conclusion, and we as officers can provide more guidance on accessibility at the meeting.

As I am sure you will note we are looking at further work in some areas anyway due to the very limited timescales we have had to complete this assessment and this location may be one where the Committee asks us to look at further work in the year ahead and make no change for now.

I hope that this is helpful.

10. Review of Elections

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(Report author(s): Graham Leach – Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer & Leanne Marlow - Electoral Services Manager)

Question(s) from Councillor R Dickson

The changes introduced by central government, at relatively short notice, in the arrangements for the local elections last year clearly presented many challenges.

In order to reassure members that WDC has the appropriate staffing structure in this area, has there been any more recent AEAEC guidance since 2004 of the recommended Electoral Services team FTE per 40,000 electors as referred to in paragraph 1.7.1? How does our staffing structure compare to that in SDC, RBC and Coventry CC?

The comments in paragraphs 1.8.7-8 are noted with particular concern. What action has the Council taken to lobby for a rate of pay for poll clerks that is above the national minimum wage?

Paragraph 1.12.1 explains how all electors with postal votes had separate packs for the District election and for parish/town elections. In addition to the confusion caused to electors - which necessitated candidates having to provide explanation - how much extra cost did this separation add to the Elections and will it be possible to have just one pack?

The comments in paragraph 1.12.7 about irregularity of postal deliveries are noted. How many postal votes were received by WDC after the polling day and what reassurance is available to members from local Royal Mail staff that there will be no delays in the 2024 elections in mail deliveries either to electors or back to WDC? Residents frequently complain to me about an increasingly unreliable postal service, especially on new housing developments.

In Paragraph 4.1 it states that 'Town Wards had been informed in May the estimated cost will be circa £19,000 per ward.' Presumably this information was sent to Town Clerks and is this the combined cost of the WDC and Town Council elections or just the Town Council element? For Kenilworth Town Council with five town wards, this would have meant a potential charge of £95,000 on the local Town Council Tax precept. Was the Council really made aware of this?

Paragraph 4.2 goes on to say that 'Officers are continuing to work on apportioning the overall costs fairly including the ability to demonstrate to each Town Council how the cost is made up of.' Given that, in early December, Town Councils were setting their budgets for 2024/25 based on forecast 2023/24 expenditure, can you confirm that in the communication sent to Town Clerks on 22nd December 2023 a full breakdown of the costs was provided? In any event this information will have arrived

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too late for Town Councils in their budget-setting process where, compared to the District Council, the cost of running elections represents a higher proportion of non-staff expenditure.

Response (Graham Leach):

Thank you for your questions ahead of the meeting.

In respect of staffing structure comparison, I will need to contact colleagues at the other authorities to verify their current position. However, Coventry have a significantly larger team due to the size of electorate.

The rates of pay being permitted are under review and proposals have been advised will be above National Living Wage, but potentially less than WDC. The issue has been raised directly with the Electoral Commission who have said it has been raised nationally, and DHLUC have advised there will be meetings with individual authorities to discuss.

In respect of separate postal packs, I will not comment on the cost aspect because of the feasibility aspect is more important. The use of two packs has been consistent by WDC in this type of election. This is because the printer needs the details of how to set the job prior to the close of nominations. As it is not known which Parish/Town areas will have election it cannot be tailored. It is important to note that, as identified as weakness to the government by the Electoral Commission) there is very limited printing capacity within this market, so a few printers are undertaking the majority of the work for the UK. Where possible though combined packs are always used, for example the current by election. This is also not possible for different types of elections (as in 2021) where the PCC had alternate vote and WCC had first past the post. However as reflected in the report improved communications on the use of two packs is required.

185 postal packs were received after election day, which is comparable to previous elections. Committee should note that WDC paid for an additional sweep of the local sorting office on election day to ensure as many in the post system were returned as possible. Talking with Royal Mail during the election this time WDC will be paying a further fee to them in 2024 to ensure a delivery time slot each day. In respect of delivery to electors WDC will have an established project plan, this will include a time window for despatch of postal votes by our supplier (agreed with the Police Area Returning Officer). Our supplier has a direct access account with royal mail to deliver them to the sorting hub. This for example has seen some postal votes being returned to WDC today (8 January) for the by election which were only despatched late last week.

Each year the Head of Finance for Warwick District Council writes to the Clerk to each Parish & Town Council's setting out the timetable for setting of precepts. This communication also sets out estimated costs for contested and uncontested elections if they were to occur.

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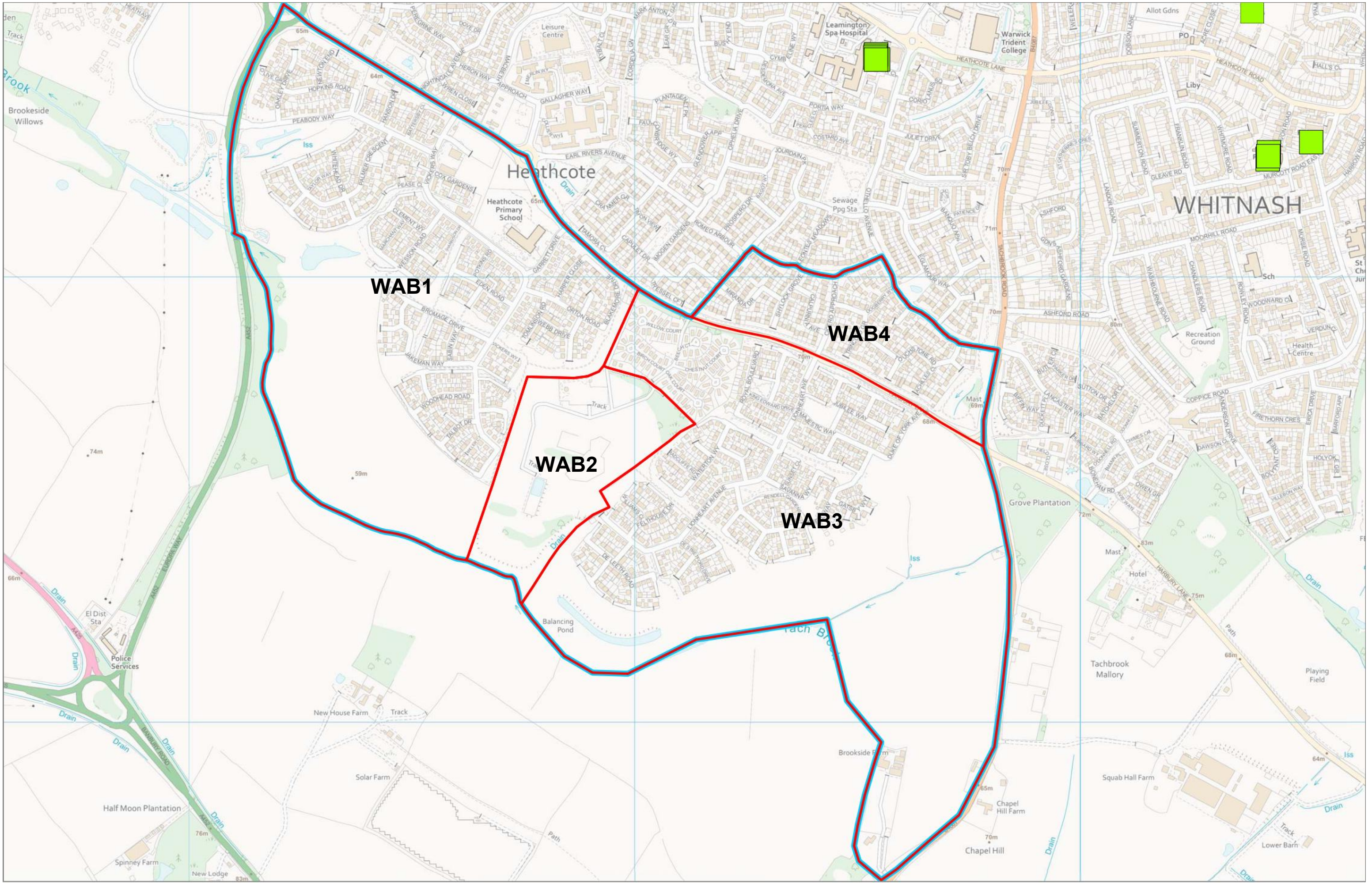
You will appreciate that the costs for individual wards can vary significantly based on a number of factors, such as electorate, number and type of polling station, number of postal votes and level of staffing required. Based on this more recently Warwick District Council has tried to present a worst-case scenario of the cost of a contested election for a Town Ward. The quotes £19,000 is this worst-case scenario based on current estimates that the town or parish council would be liable for. I understand advice is also provided to create a reserve to pay for election costs in case they occur (as WDC does).

It is also a significant exercise to seek fair apportionment of the costs and ensuring all the relevant costs are included, as explained in the report for nationally funded elections it is expected this work is completed in six months from the election. This is for a straight election not, as in this instance, where there were 39 contested elections all on the same day and the cost detail needs to be broken down to ward level.

I will not publish the figures quoted to each of the Town Council's as the final detailed breakdown has not been provided to them but all have come in (in total) less than £10k per ward.

Item 9. Polling District Place and Station Review

It was identified that a map had been missed off the Appendix 3 published with the agenda. Please see below the map that should have been included:



Proposed New Polling Districts - Dec 2023



Scale: 1:7500 @A3 Drawn By: GIS

Riverside House, Milverton Hill, Royal Leamington Spa, Warwickshire. CV32 5HZ

Date: 01/12/2023

