

Explanation of 'No' Response to Annual Governance Statement Assertion

Axminster Town Council

Assertion 5. We carried out an assessment of the risks facing this authority and took appropriate steps to manage those risks, including the introduction of internal controls and/or external insurance cover where required.

Reason for 'No' Response

Whilst there has not been a meeting of the Risk & Emergency Planning Committee this year, each Town Council meeting is incorporating consideration of risk, evidenced by the standing item on the agenda which is read out by the Chairman at every meeting i.e. c) To ensure that their discussions include full consideration of the points set out in the Town Council's risk management strategy.

The risk management strategy has been embedded into the Council culture, however, Councillor training has commenced but was not completed during the financial year (a date of 31 July 2021 is set for completion). This was a COVID-related complication and was due to the training set for 26 Mar 2020 having to be cancelled (due to the first lockdown), and that provider subsequently no longer being able to provide the training, meant the council had to source another trainer which took some time.

Future Risk Arrangements

Whilst the council has significantly strengthened its approach to risk management, there are still items which need to be carried out. To that end, they resolved to do the following:

- Council resolved at the June 2019 meeting, that strategic risk assessment will be incorporated into Town Council meetings at least once annually, with more detailed, specific risk assessments being carried out by relevant committees/Risk & EP Committee. However, until Councillors have completed their training, this has been difficult. With a date now set, the Council are hopeful that during the current financial year they will make good strides towards achieving this objective.

Nevertheless, individual staff have received training on carrying out operational risk assessments to advise Council so they can incorporate that into decision making. In addition, Councillors have received a briefing note which outlines the trajectory of their risk management journey.

Also, the office technology has been improved to ensure the compliance with GDPR and safeguard against loss of data. This also enabled employees to work from home, where appropriate to their role, ensuring business continuation during the pandemic.

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Assertion 7. We took appropriate action on all matters raised in reports from internal and external audit.

Reason for 'No' Response

Because the work required on assertion 5 was raised again in the interim audit report by the internal auditor, and is not yet complete, the Council had to answer 'no' to this assertion. In November 2020, the auditor said:

"A selection of council minutes from the website has been reviewed. Although Covid-19 related issues are no doubt taking up a great deal of council time, there is still an obligation to review the significant financial risks and non-financial risks and ensure that adequate arrangements to manage these risks are in place. This should be done before 1 March 2021 and clearly minuted."

Due to the delay in training on risk management, the Councillors, many of which are new to being a Councillor, were not confident to undertake this exercise, and so it has been postponed until after the training is completed in July 2021.

To compound matters, the tragic sudden and unexpected death of the Town Mayor in December 2020 meant that a new Mayor/Chairman had to be appointed in January 2021. The Mayor is now Cllr. Jill Farrow, and Cllr. Farrow has duly countersigned the 2020-21 AGAR form in that capacity.