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Dear All,

Draft Management Letter on Audit Review of Thames Valley Fire Control Service

In accordance with the approved 2015/16 Internal Audit Plan, we have carried out a review of the governance arrangements in place for the Thames Valley Fire Control Service (TVFCS).

A decision was made at an extraordinary meeting of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire and Rescue Authority (BMKFRA) on 31 October 2012 to join the TVFCS.

At this time, the TVFCS programme was well established between Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) and Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Authority with many key decisions taken that framed the delivery of the joint control function for these two authorities.

As such, BMKFRA were not “full” partners during the delivery phase of the programme but worked alongside - and in parallel with - the TVFCS in order to deliver BMKFRA into the programme at the point of migration into the joint control service.

BMKFRA were then invited to join TVFCS as a “full” partner in steady state, and a legal agreement was signed by the three authorities on 22 April 2015.

The objective for this high level review was to provide an evaluation of the adequacy and effectiveness of the governance arrangements in place to provide BMKFRA with assurance.

As part of the audit work the adequacy of controls for mitigating the following risks were reviewed:

If the governance arrangements surrounding the TVFCS are inadequate there is a risk that responsibilities are not defined or monitored leading to poor decision making, and necessary actions not being undertaken.

The audit was undertaken by discussion with key officers and a desktop examination of relevant documentation, including:

- Joint Committee – Terms of Reference, agendas, minutes, actions;
- Risk registers and escalation – TVFRS and BMKFRA ;
- Co-Ordination Group Meeting – agendas, minutes and actions; and
- Control Manager Monthly Reports.

The audit review found that governance arrangements for the TVFCS were robust. The monthly Control Managers Report is thorough and covers operational performance (including establishment, absence rates, staff performance), system performance (system failures, response time to remedy faults), as well as detailed performance reporting on key measures, including trends to provide a direction of travel.

The Joint Co-Ordination Group, attended by the three Heads of Service Delivery, meet monthly and a review of agendas/minutes confirmed that key control areas such as budget monitoring, risk registers and contract monitoring are discussed. Actions are noted, assigned to an owner and followed up at the next meeting. The Chair for the meeting is rotated between the three authorities which demonstrates good and equal partnership working.

The Joint Committee meets on a quarterly basis and its membership includes the Chief Fire Officers and two elected members from each authority. The meetings are public and a review of agendas and minutes confirmed that this committee provides a strong scrutiny function.

An independent Gateway Review was undertaken by a group made up of other Fire Services in January 2016. The review covered key areas such as programme management, culture, procurement and governance. At the time of the internal audit the findings from the report were being presented to the stakeholders for discussion and had not been finalised. Internal Audit will monitor progress of implementation of the key findings through future planned audit activity for the TVFCS.

Based on the limited work undertaken it is our opinion that reasonable assurance can be provided that relevant risks are effectively identified, managed and controlled, and that governance arrangements are robust.

Although we have not raised any issues I would be grateful if you could respond to this draft management letter with any comments by 23 August 2016 in order to facilitate finalising it. The contents of the final management letter will feed into Internal Audit reporting to Overview and Audit Committee.

Yours sincerely,

Maggie Gibb
Internal Audit Manager