

Audit Committee – 12 April 2011

Scrutiny of Council Payments: Over £500 Payments List

Summary of report

This report summarises items which have been queried / scrutinized from the publicized over £500 payments list, together with the council's response for members' information.

Recommendation

1. **To note the contents of this report.**



James Walsh
Assistant Director Finance
23 March 2011

Resource and legal considerations

The key role of the Audit Committee is to provide independent assurance on the adequacy of the council's risk management framework and the internal control and reporting environment. Inspection of Council expenditure assists in the Committee discharging this duty.

Governance issues / Citizen impact

Scrutiny of the council's payment systems strengthens assurance about the council's general reporting and governance and particularly about systems used to control expenditure.

Performance and risk management issues

Inspection of payment systems helps to ensure that risk and performance standards are being applied in the management of Council expenditure.

Equality implications

Assurance reporting encompasses key equality and diversity implications.

Consultation

Appropriate advice has been taken from financial services and procurement in preparing this report.

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Background

At its meeting of 1 September 2010, Audit Committee discussed the new requirement for local authorities to publish spending of over £500. This requirement followed the Prime Minister and CLG Ministers wish to see local authorities publish local spending data; to drive the open data agenda from January 2011.

Audit Committee expressed interest in options available to them in scrutinising Council payments and contracts. Options to meet the Committee's request on this matter were presented in a report to the 25 October 2010 meeting and Committee resolved:

- (1) That a list setting out what people have been scrutinising from the payments list be submitted to Audit Committee on a quarterly or half-yearly basis for the Committee's perusal, as deemed appropriate;
- (2) That a working group be set up comprising of Councillor Flower, Councillor Chambers and Rebecca Neill to devise a process on how to achieve this and what information should be included as well as investigating the relationship between the remit of Audit Committee and Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Panel regarding the scrutiny of Council payments.

The Working Group which met on 30 November 2010, reported back to Audit Committee on 28 February 2011 that:

1. Members receive training on how to access the payments list prior to the start of the next meeting of the Audit Committee; and that a laptop is set up in the Committee Room prior to that Audit Committee to allow members to review the payments list should they wish to.
2. A half yearly report on items which have been scrutinized from the payments list, together with the council's response, is presented to Audit Committee.

At this Committee, Members have received access to a laptop, training and a guidance note on how to access the open data site for future reference.

The following details items which have been queried / scrutinized from the publicized over £500 payments list, together with the council's response for the September 2010 to February 2011.

Over £500 Payments List Activity

Over 200,000 people have looked at the open data website.

Requests for information in respect of the open data web site were sent to the open data shared email or directly to Walsall Council communications team. The month the request was received, summary of the request and council's response are detailed in the table below.

Date	Request	Response
Aug 2010	Local Press query: why has the council published information ahead of the January 2011 deadline?	The communication team provided the following response: The council wanted to be proactive. The Government was keen to be more transparent and to that end, Walsall Council was eager to

Date	Request	Response
		publish this information ahead of the January 2011 deadline.
November 2010	Local Press query: why is there was an invoice listed for Ace Karting?	<p>These payments were made by 2 Walsall schools, as part of school initiatives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frank F Harrison – in respect of Year 11 pupils who had shown excellent attendance, punctuality, met target grades and completed course work. • Sneyd School - using funding from the extended schools grant disadvantaged subsidy budget.
December 2010	Councillor query: a number of items were queried including the number of payments made to Starting Point.	The finance team provided information in response, together with an update for the Councillor of improvements made to the Starting Point invoice process.
February 2011	Query from another Council: Are 'spot purchases' of foster care payments included in Walsall Council's data?	This finance team confirmed that these payments were included, but redacted as they constituted personal data.

Spending over £500

This instruction provides information about how to get access to Walsall Council spending transparency information.

The reports list the total payments to suppliers with a cumulative value over £500. Publication of these lists forms part of the council's commitment to be open and transparent with its residents.

Getting to the data

1. The information is held on our Walsall Council microsite – Opendata. This can be accessed by one of three ways.
 - a. Clicking on the button on the homepage www.walsall.gov.uk or
 - b. Directly by entering the web address in the website navigation panel.
<http://opendata.walsall.org.uk/>
 - c. By entering Walsall Open Data in a google search engine
www.google.co.uk
2. Once you have access the site, you click on the datasets heading in the left-hand side navigation bar. This includes a list of all of our current open data – including the spending data.
3. The spending data is listed at the top of the list of datasets. It is called Spending Transparency.
4. Click on the heading Spending Transparency. This will then give you access to the latest spreadsheet of the data. Click on the link and you will be able to access the data.
5. Previous editions are also available below the most recent edition.
6. Other data sets include a useful list of service numbers, addresses for libraries, a list of the latest road works and contact information for councillors.

Spending Transparency Data explained

There are two types of spreadsheet in the file. An Excel spreadsheet (XLS) and a CSV format which can be used by users that want to use this data in another dataset/database.

1. Both spreadsheets contain the same data but the Excel spreadsheet is easier to look at.
2. The data contains a number of columns
 - a. Code – Unique list of numbers to assist officers location information from the original data supplied by the Finance team.
 - b. Vendor name – the name of the supplier in alphabetical order.
 - c. Proclass level – this is a list of categories used by the procurement industry.
 - d. Trade classification – Thomson. This alternative list is a bit more relevant to suppliers and the public.
 - e. Accounting date
 - f. Directorate – this is the directorate at Walsall Council responsible for the spend.
 - g. Net invoice total
 - h. Revenue/Capital – identifies whether the invoice was a capital or revenue invoice.
 - i. Local/non local – this identifies WS or WV postcodes.
 - j. Redacted – this means that a piece of information has been removed from publication. This can be for a number of reasons set out by Government. This could be because the information is personal data and could identify an individual, such as a foster carer, a location of a women's refuge, a council tax benefit recipient or could be information that is commercially confidential.