

FOI Reference Number: FOI/440/1819

Date: 14 February 2019

Request:

Under the Freedom of Information Act, I would like to request a copy of the NI Audit Office's most recent 'report to those charged with governance' sent to the council.

If it is not possible to disclose the whole document, please disclose the section which relates to paying for a table at the constituency dinner of DUP MP Ian Paisley.

To be clear, I am not seeking a copy of the 'annual audit letter' which is already public, but instead the fuller 'report to those charged with governance'.

Response:

Thank you for your information request which Mid and East Antrim Borough Council received on 09 January 2019.

Please find below, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council's response to the information you requested in relation to a NI Audit Office report.

Please note, we have been unable to provide the report in its entirety due to Section 41 of the Freedom of Information Act. Section 41 states – (1) Information is exempt information if –

(a) it was obtained by the public authority from any other person (including another public authority), and,

(b) the disclosure of the information to the public (otherwise than under this Act) by the public authority holding it would constitute a breach of confidence actionable by that or any other person.

In relation to the second part of your request, please find the following:

Report to those charged with Governance

<p>1 North Antrim Business and Community Dinner (28 September 2017)</p> <p>The Chief Executive received a verbal invitation in early August 2017 from the MP for North Antrim for the council to attend an event at which Michael Gove would speak. The council meeting on 8th August was then informed that the MP for the area had secured a visit to the Borough from the Minister of Agriculture and this was an opportunity for the Council to have a meeting with him. Approval was sought to take a table at an event involving a presentation by the Minister followed by a question and answer session. The event was also described as a seminar and a round table discussion. The cost was not specifically mentioned other than it was to be met from existing budgets.</p> <p>The actual invitation letter was received by the Chief Executive on 5 September 2017 from the MP for North Antrim which said that the event was his 'annual constituency dinner' which would include a keynote speech from Michael Gove MP and would cost £1,500 for a table of 10 persons. At this stage the September council meeting had already been held.</p> <p>Subsequent to this there has been considerable coverage and debate about the dinner and whether it could be viewed as a political fundraiser. This is currently the subject of investigation by the Electoral Commission.</p> <p>The Council has a policy on attending Gala dinners and events with a normal limit of £500 on attendance in any one event. The</p>	<p>2</p>	<p>While we agree that this was an opportunity to meet with the Minister and try to influence policy on agri-food issues in line with the Council's economic strategy we have a number of recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If an event is to be approved by Councillors then it is important that the most accurate and up to date information is provided including costs. If the information later changes (as it did in this case from a seminar /discussion to a dinner) then Councillors should, where possible, be notified of the change so they have the chance to amend their decision. • The Council should consider amending its policy on attendance at Gala dinner and events to clarify the position on attending this type of business event, especially where the event is perceived as having a particular networking benefit; • Before agreeing to attend future events, the possibility that costs may include an element of political funding should be considered. 	<p>Recommendation accepted</p> <p>Council's policy on attendance at Gala Dinner and Events will be reviewed. This will include ensuring the most accurate and up to date information is provided, including costs. The review will also include consideration of events which have networking benefits and possibility of political funding associated with an event.</p> <p>As an innovative and ambitious organisation, Council wants to ensure opportunities for networking and promotion of Mid and East Antrim can be secured, therefore in reviewing the policy, Council will consider the approach taken by similar organisations and benchmark against best practice.</p> <p><u>Target date</u> February 2019</p>
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Report to those charged with Governance

<p>Council did not assess its attendance at the dinner in line with this policy.</p>			
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If you are dissatisfied with the handling of part of your request, you have the right to ask for an internal review. Internal review requests should be submitted within two months of the date of receipt of the response to your original letter and should be addressed to the Chief Executive at the Braid Ballymena Town Hall, 1-29 Bridge Street, Ballymena, BT43 5EJ.

Please remember to quote the reference number FOI/440/1819 in any future communications.

If you are not content with the outcome of an internal review, you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF.

Please be advised that Mid and East Antrim Borough Council may release the response to this information request into the public domain via our website at <https://www.midandeantrim.gov.uk/>.

If we publish our response to your request, your personal data will be removed to protect your privacy.