

Audit Progress Report and Sector Update

City of Wolverhampton Council
Year ending 31 March 2020

20 January 2020



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Introduction

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This paper provides the Audit and Risk Committee with a report on progress in delivering our responsibilities as your external auditors.

The paper also includes:

- a summary of emerging national issues and developments that may be relevant to you as a local authority; and
- includes a number of challenge questions in respect of these emerging issues which the Committee may wish to consider (these are a tool to use, if helpful, rather than formal questions requiring responses for audit purposes)

Members of the Audit and Risk Committee can find further useful material on our website, where we have a section dedicated to our work in the public sector. Here you can download copies of our publications

www.grantthornton.co.uk.

If you would like further information on any items in this briefing, or would like to register with Grant Thornton to receive regular email updates on issues that are of interest to you, please contact either your Engagement Lead or Engagement Manager.

Progress at January 2020

Financial Statements Audit

We issued our opinion on your 2018/19 Statement of Accounts on 31 July 2019.

At that time we were unable to certify closure of the audit as we are required to give an opinion on the consistency of the pension fund financial statements of the Authority included in the Pension Fund Annual Report (which had not been produced at that time) with the pension fund financial statements included in the Statement of Accounts. We have now issued our report on the consistency of the pension fund financial statements and therefore have been able to certify closure of the audit.

We began our planning for the 2019/20 audit in December and will issue a detailed audit plan, setting out our proposed approach to the audit of the Council's 2019/20 financial statements.

However, an indicative audit plan identifying the significant risks we have identified to date (based upon our work from last year, discussions with officers and review of Council reports) is shown on page 6.

We will begin our interim audit in January 2020 with follow up visits in February and March. Our interim fieldwork includes:

- Updated review of the Council's control environment
- Updated understanding of financial systems
- Review of Internal Audit reports on core financial systems
- Early work on emerging accounting issues
- Early substantive testing

We will report our work in the Audit Findings Report and aim to give our opinion on the Statement of Accounts by the statutory accounts publication date of 31 July 2020.

Value for Money

The scope of our work is set out in the guidance issued by the National Audit Office. The Code requires auditors to satisfy themselves that; "the Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources".

The guidance confirmed the overall criterion as: "in all significant respects, the audited body had proper arrangements to ensure it took properly informed decisions and deployed resources to achieve planned and sustainable outcomes for taxpayers and local people".

The three sub criteria for assessment to be able to give a conclusion overall are:

- Informed decision making
- Sustainable resource deployment
- Working with partners and other third parties

Details of our initial risk assessment to determine our approach will be included in our Audit Plan.

We will report our work in the Audit Findings Report and aim to give our Value For Money Conclusion by the statutory accounts publication date of 31 July 2020.

Progress at January 2020 (cont.)

Other areas

Certification of claims and returns

We certify the Council's annual Housing Benefit Subsidy claim in accordance with procedures agreed with the Department for Work and Pensions. The certification work for the 2018/19 has been completed and submitted by the 30 November deadline. There were no exceptions or errors in our report.

We did make an observation in our report to the DWP in relation to an underpayment being made in one case sampled. As there is no eligibility to subsidy for benefit which has not been paid, the underpayment did not affect subsidy, and was not, therefore, classified as an error for subsidy purposes. Because errors of this type could have resulted in an overpayment, all cases in the population were tested. No errors were identified and no further underpayments identified.

The Council also appointed us to undertake the reporting accountant's role in relation to its Teachers Pension Return which was submitted on 10 October (ahead of the deadline of 29 November) which confirmed that no amendments were made to the return and no exceptions were identified in our testing.

The Council have also appointed us to undertake the reporting accountant's role in relation to its Pooling of Housing Capital Receipts return. This work is not due to commence until the new year.

Meetings

We met with Finance Officers in September for an audit debrief and to commence planning for next year to ensure the audit process is smooth and effective. In particular we are in dialogue to bring forward work in relation to valuation of the Council's Land and Buildings. We attended the finance team's closedown workshop in November to support officers in working to continue to achieve a smooth closedown. Your finance team have been provided with a checklist to consider from our review of local authority accounts from 2018/19, in the preparation of their 2019/20 financial statements.

Events

We provide a range of workshops, along with network events for members and publications to support the Council. Your officers will be invited to our Financial Reporting Workshop to be held early in the New Year, which will help to ensure that members of your Finance Team will be up to date with the latest financial reporting requirements for local authority accounts.

Further details of the publications that may be of interest to the Council are set out in our Sector Update section of this report.

Audit Fees

During 2017, PSAA awarded contracts for audit for a five year period beginning on 1 April 2018. 2019/20 is the second year of that contract. Since that time, there have been a number of developments within the accounting and audit profession. Across all sectors and firms, the Financial Reporting Council (FRC) has set out its expectation of improved financial reporting from organisations and the need for auditors to demonstrate increased scepticism and challenge and to undertake additional and more robust testing.

Our work in the Local Government sector in 2018/19 has highlighted areas where financial reporting, in particular, property, plant and equipment and pensions, needs to improve. There is also an increase in the complexity of Local Government financial transactions and financial reporting. This combined with the FRC requirement that all Local Government audits are at or above the "few improvements needed" (2A) rating means that additional audit work is required.

We are currently reviewing the impact of these changes on both the cost and timing of audits. We will discuss this with your s151 Officer including any proposed variations to the Scale Fee set by PSAA Limited, before communicating fully with the Audit and Risk Committee.

As a firm, we are absolutely committed to meeting the expectations of the FRC with regard to audit quality and local government financial reporting.

Indicative Audit Plan

We will report our formal comprehensive Audit Plan to Audit and Risk Committee in March 2020 along with the findings from our interim audit work. However, in the meantime, the summary below is the results of our initial planning which are the risks we have identified to date, which will drive the focus of our audit. Risk assessment is an iterative process and we will revisit our assessment on an ongoing basis bringing any new risks to your attention if and when they arise.

Financial Statements

We place significant audit effort on those areas of the accounts which are subjective and which involve estimation uncertainty. In particular this leads us to focus on the valuation of land and buildings, as well as the valuation of the net pension liability. This is because these figures are large and are driven by a number of different factors and assumptions all of which need to be considered for reasonableness. For that reason, we are likely to continue to deem the valuation of land and buildings and valuation of the net pension liability to be significant risks for our 2019/20 audit.

Value for Money

Our work in 2018/19 identified the following matters, which we determined were worthy of further consideration and were therefore designated as 'significant risks':

- Financial Resilience
- Strategic Asset Management
- Civic Halls refurbishment

As we were content that Strategic Asset Management was no longer a residual risk to our Value for Money conclusion in the prior year, it is unlikely to be designated a significant risk for 2019/20 but we will follow up on the Council's actions in this area.

Financial resilience continues to be a challenge facing the public sector as a whole, and local government is no exception. We therefore anticipate financial resilience being a significant risk in our 2019/20 Audit Plan.

On the basis that our Value for Money conclusion last year concluded that the management arrangement for the Civic Halls were not adequate and that therefore a qualified "except for" value for money conclusion was given, we anticipate that we will follow this work up for 2019/20.

Emerging Developments

These are issues we are aware of and will be maintaining a watching brief over:

- While implementation of IFRS 16 Leases is delayed in the public sector until 1 April 2020, there will nevertheless be disclosure requirements that apply in 2019/20 for standards issued but not yet adopted. We will review the progress made by the authority in identifying leases expected to be in place on 1 April 2020 and assessing the potential impact of IFRS 16 on its financial statements.
- Whether the authority analysed the impact of recently announced increase in PWLB loan rates on its treasury management activities and forecasts and potential plans for investment.

Audit Deliverables

2018/19 Deliverables	Planned Date	Status
<p>Audit Findings Report</p> <p>The Audit Findings Report was reported to the July Audit and Risk Committee.</p>	July 2019	Complete
<p>Auditors Report</p> <p>This is the opinion on your financial statement, annual governance statement and value for money conclusion.</p>	July 2019	Complete
<p>Annual Audit Letter</p> <p>This letter communicates the key issues arising from our work.</p>	August 2019	Complete
2019/20 Deliverables	Planned Date	Status
<p>Fee Letter</p> <p>Confirming audit fee for 2018/19.</p>	April 2019	Complete
<p>Accounts Audit Plan</p> <p>We are required to issue a detailed accounts audit plan to the Audit and Risk Committee setting out our proposed approach in order to give an opinion on the Council's 2019-20 financial statements.</p>	March 2020	Not yet due
<p>Interim Audit Findings</p> <p>We will report to you the findings from our interim audit and our initial value for money risk assessment within our Progress Report.</p>	March 2020	Not yet due
<p>Audit Findings Report</p> <p>The Audit Findings Report will be reported to the July Audit and Risk Committee.</p>	July 2020	Not yet due
<p>Auditors Report</p> <p>This is the opinion on your financial statement, annual governance statement and value for money conclusion.</p>	July 2020	Not yet due
<p>Annual Audit Letter</p> <p>This letter communicates the key issues arising from our work.</p>	August 2020	Not yet due

Sector Update

Councils are tackling a continuing drive to achieve greater efficiency in the delivery of public services, whilst facing the challenges to address rising demand, ongoing budget pressures and social inequality.

Our sector update provides you with an up to date summary of emerging national issues and developments to support you. We cover areas which may have an impact on your organisation, the wider NHS and the public sector as a whole. Links are provided to the detailed report/briefing to allow you to delve further and find out more.

Our public sector team at Grant Thornton also undertake research on service and technical issues. We will bring you the latest research publications in this update. We also include areas of potential interest to start conversations within the organisation and with Audit and Risk Committee members, as well as any accounting and regulatory updates.

- [Grant Thornton Publications](#)
- [Insights from local government sector specialists](#)
- [Reports of interest](#)
- [Accounting and regulatory updates](#)

More information can be found on our dedicated public sector and local government sections on the Grant Thornton website by clicking on the logos below:

Public Sector

Local
government

CIPFA – CFO confidence survey

In July, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) reported the results of their annual confidence survey.

The survey found that the majority of local government finance officers have lost confidence in their future financial positions over the last year.

Seventy per cent of respondents said they were either slightly less or much less confident in their financial position this year compared to 2018-19.

The survey also found that 68% said they were either slightly less or much less confident in their ability to deliver services in 2020-21. Sixty-two per cent expressed equal confidence in their financial position for 2019-20 as they had last year.

CIPFA found that the area of greatest pressure for top tier authorities was children's social care, with the number of authorities rating it as the biggest pressure rising by six percentage points.

For districts the greatest pressures were housing, cultural services and environmental services.

Rob Whiteman, CIPFA chief executive, said: "Local government is facing greater demand pressures than ever before, with particularly pressures in adults' and children's social care and housing. Local authorities also lack certainty about their future financial positions, so it's unsurprising to see confidence on the decline.

"We have repeatedly pointed out that local government is in need of a sustainable funding solution, but meeting this demand requires more than pennies and pounds. The sector as a whole must come together to address the challenges of effective service delivery."

CIPFA's survey received a total of 119 responses from authorities in the UK - 56 top tier authorities, 47 English districts, 12 Scottish authorities, and 4 Welsh authorities.



On the same theme, a Local Government Association (LGA) survey, also reported in July, found that almost two-thirds of councils believe cash for services like adult social care, child protection and preventing homelessness will dry up by 2024-25.

The survey got responses from 141 of the 339 LGA member councils in England and Wales.

It also found that 17% of councils were not confident of realising all of the savings they had identified this year (2019-20).

The LGA said that councils needed a guarantee they will have enough money to meet growing demand pressures in particular in adult social care, children's services, special educational needs, homelessness support and public health.



Financial confidence



Challenge question:

How confident over its' financial position is your Authority? Has this changed from previous years?

MHCLG – Independent probe into local government audit

In July, the then Communities secretary, James Brokenshire, announced the government is to examine local authority financial reporting and auditing.

At the CIPFA conference he told delegates the independent review will be headed up by Sir Tony Redmond, a former CIPFA president.

The government was “working towards improving its approach to local government oversight and support”, Brokenshire promised.

“A robust local audit system is absolutely pivotal to work on oversight, not just because it reinforces confidence in financial reporting but because it reinforces service delivery and, ultimately, our faith in local democracy,” he said.

“There are potentially far-reaching consequences when audits aren’t carried out properly and fail to detect significant problems.”

The review will look at the quality of local authority audits and whether they are highlighting when an organisation is in financial trouble early enough.

It will also look at whether the public has lost faith in auditors and whether the current audit arrangements for councils are still “fit for purpose”.

On the appointment of Redmond, CIPFA chief executive Rob Whiteman said: “Tony Redmond is uniquely placed to lead this vital review, which will be critical for determining future regulatory requirements.

“Local audit is crucial in providing assurance and accountability to the public, while helping to prevent financial and governance failure.”

He added: “This work will allow us to identify what is needed to make local audit as robust as possible, and how the audit function can meet the assurance needs, both now and in the future, of the sector as a whole.”

In the question and answer session following his speech, Brokenshire said he was not looking to bring back the Audit Commission, which appointed auditors to local bodies and was abolished in 2015. MHCLG note that auditing of local authorities was then taken over by the private, voluntary and not-for-profit sectors.

He explained he was “open minded”, but believed the Audit Commission was “of its time”.

Local authorities in England are responsible for 22% of total UK public sector expenditure so their accounts “must be of the highest level of transparency and quality”, the Ministry of Housing, Local Government and Communities said. The review will also look at how local authorities publish their annual accounts and if the financial reporting system is robust enough.

Redmond, who has also been a local authority treasurer and chief executive, is expected to report to the communities secretary with his initial recommendations in December 2019, with a final report published in March 2020. Redmond has also worked as a local government boundary commissioner and held the post of local government ombudsman.



National Audit Office – Code of Audit Practice

The Code of Audit Practice sets out what local auditors of relevant local public bodies are required to do to fulfil their statutory responsibilities under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. ‘Relevant authorities’ are set out in Schedule 2 of the Act and include local councils, fire authorities, police and NHS bodies.

Local auditors must comply with the Code of Audit Practice.

Consultation – New Code of Audit Practice from 2020

Schedule 6 of the Act requires that the Code be reviewed, and revisions considered at least every five years. The current Code came into force on 1 April 2015, and the maximum five-year lifespan of the Code means it now needs to be reviewed and a new Code laid in Parliament in time for it to come in to force no later than 1 April 2020.

In order to determine what changes might be appropriate, the NAO is consulting on potential changes to the Code in two stages:

Stage 1 involves engagement with key stakeholders and public consultation on the issues that are considered to be relevant to the development of the Code.

This stage of the consultation is now closed. The NAO received a total of 41 responses to the consultation which included positive feedback on the two-stage approach to developing the Code that has been adopted. The NAO state that they have considered carefully the views of respondents in respect of the points drawn out from the [Issues paper](#) and this will inform the development of the draft Code. A summary of the responses received to the questions set out in the [Issues paper](#) can be found below.

[Local audit in England Code of Audit Practice – Consultation Response \(pdf – 256KB\)](#)

Stage 2 of the consultation involves consulting on the draft text of the new Code. To support stage 2, the NAO has published a consultation document, which highlights the key changes to each chapter of the draft Code. The most significant changes are in relation to the Value for Money arrangements. Rather than require auditors to focus on delivering an overall, binary, conclusion about whether or not proper arrangements were in place during the previous financial year, the draft Code requires auditors to issue a commentary on each of the criteria. This will allow auditors to tailor their commentaries to local circumstances. The Code proposes three specific criteria:

- Financial sustainability: how the body plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services;
- Governance: how the body ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks; and
- Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness: how the body uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services.

The consultation document and a copy of the draft Code can be found on the NAO website. The consultation is open until 22 November 2019. The new Code will apply from audits of local bodies’ 2020-21 financial statements onwards.

Link to NAO webpage for the Code consultation:

<https://www.nao.org.uk/code-audit-practice/code-of-audit-practice-consultation/>


<p>Consultation response by the National Audit Office</p>
<p>Local audit in England Code of Audit Practice</p>
<p>Issues paper: Consultation response</p>

Local Government Association – Profit with a purpose – delivering social value through commercial activity

The Local Government Association (LGA) report 'Profit with a purpose' focuses on some of the practicalities of how councils can deliver social value through their commercial activity.

Through 'key questions' to ask, the guidance supports councils to face the challenge of how to undertake commercial activity and achieve greater value for the public purse in ways that better meet society's needs and outcomes for people and communities.

In addition, the publication features a number of short case studies highlighting some of the innovative commercial practice already achieving results for communities.

The LGA comments that the best approaches ensure the generation of social value is the primary factor driving commercial activity; from the initial decision to develop a commercial vision to how the approach is developed, and implemented, councils which are pulling ahead ensure social value is placed centre stage.

The guidance starts with an overview of what the LGA understands by 'profit with a purpose', the guidance explores different types of social value and the role of councils in driving social value alongside their commercial ambition.

The guidance then looks at how consideration and delivery of social value should be practically considered when deciding on whether to embark on commercial activity, the need for social value to be prioritised alongside financial return and the key questions councils should consider when embarking on a commercial initiative.

Following on from this, there are specific chapters on; embedding social value in governance of alternative service delivery vehicles, the role of procurement in contracting services that deliver social value and finally how to contract and performance manage social value through your service providers.

Each chapter outlines the factors that need to be considered and the 'key questions' councils should be asking themselves.

In addition, a number of short case studies are provided to highlight some of the innovative commercial practice already achieving results for communities.

The report can be downloaded from the LGA website:

<https://www.local.gov.uk/profit-purpose-delivering-social-value-through-commercial-activity>



Profit with a purpose

Delivering social value through commercial activity

Profit with a purpose



Challenge question:

If your Authority is looking at commercial activity, have you considered the LGA report?

Public Accounts Committee – Local Government Governance and Accountability

The Public Accounts Committee has found that the Government has not done enough to ensure that, at a time when local authority budgets are under extreme pressure, governance systems are improved.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (the Department) is responsible for: ensuring that this framework contains the right checks and balances, and changing the system if necessary. The Secretary of State also has powers to intervene in cases of perceived governance failure. The framework includes: officers with statutory powers and responsibilities; internal checks and balances such as Audit and Risk Committees and internal audit; and external checks and balances such as external audit and sector-led improvement overseen by the Local Government Association. These arrangements represent a significant reduction in the level of central oversight in recent years following the government's decision to abolish the Audit Commission and the Standards Board for England as part of a broader reform of local audit, inspection and reporting.

The Public Accounts Committee report summary notes “Local authorities have a good overall track record with governance arrangements generally robust across the sector, and there is evidence that local authority governance compares favourably to that of the health sector. However, this is not universal and in some authorities governance is under strain, as funding reduces and responsibilities and exposure to commercial pressures change. We are worried to hear about Audit and Risk Committees that do not provide sufficient assurance, ineffective internal audit, weak arrangements for the management of risk in local authorities' commercial investments, and inadequate oversight and scrutiny. This is not acceptable in the more risky, complex and fast-moving environment in which local authorities now operate.

The Department has been reactive and ill-informed in its approach to oversight of the local governance system. However, the Department has now recognised that the network of bodies with responsibility for the local governance framework is fragmented and lacking the leadership needed to drive change. Encouragingly, the Department has now committed to enhancing its oversight role and producing a proactive work programme to deliver this change. We urge the Department to ensure that this activity leads to concrete actions and outcomes on a timely basis. When a local authority fails this has a significant impact on local people and the Department has a responsibility to work with local government to ensure that problems are caught early and that it can pinpoint at-risk councils. Since the abolition of the Audit Commission and other changes culminating in the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 there is no central assessment of value for the money, which means the Department's work is fundamental.”

The report makes five conclusions, with associated recommendations:

- 1) The Department is not yet providing effective leadership of the local governance system.
- 2) The Department does not know why some local authorities are raising concerns that external audit is not meeting their needs.
- 3) The Department lacks reliable information on key governance risks, or relies on weak sources of information, meaning it has no way of pinpointing the at-risk councils.
- 4) The Department's monitoring is not focused on long-term risks to council finances and therefore to services.
- 5) There is a complete lack of transparency over both the Department's informal interventions in local authorities with financial or governance problems and the results of its formal interventions.

The Government response is available on the website below:

<https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/public-accounts/Gov-response-to-Public-Accounts-on-the-93-98-reports.pdf>



