



# Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority Audit Plan

Year ending 31 March 2024

Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and  
Rescue Authority

April 2024



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Section	Page	The contents of this report relate only to the matters which have come to our attention, which we believe need to be reported to you as part of our audit planning process. It is not a comprehensive record of all the relevant matters, which may be subject to change, and in particular we cannot be held responsible to you for reporting all of the risks which may affect the Authority or all weaknesses in your internal controls. This report has been prepared solely for your benefit and should not be quoted in whole or in part without our prior written consent. We do not accept any responsibility for any loss occasioned to any third party acting, or refraining from acting on the basis of the content of this report, as this report was not prepared for, nor intended for, any other purpose.
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# Key matters

## National context

The national economic context continues to present challenges to the local government sector. There are increasing cost pressures nationally, such as a growing population and increasing demand for local government services. Combined with inflationary pressures, pay demands and energy price rises, the environment in which local authorities operate is highly challenging. Local Government funding continues to be stretched and there have been considerable reductions in the grants received by local authorities from government.

Our recent value for money work has highlighted a growing number of governance and financial stability issues at a national level, which is a further indication of the mounting pressure on audited bodies to keep delivering services, whilst also managing transformation and making savings at the same time.

In planning our audit, we have taken account of this national context in designing a local audit programme which is tailored to your risks and circumstances.

## Audit Reporting Delays

Against a backdrop of ongoing audit reporting delays, in October 2023 PSAA found that only five local government accounts had been signed by the September deadline. In June 2023 the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) also produced a report setting out their concerns over these audit reporting delays. We issued our report [About time?](#) In March 2023 which explored the reasons for delayed publication of audited local authority accounts.

As outlined on page 21, The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), working with the FRC, as incoming shadow system leader, and other system partners, has put forward proposals to address the delay in local audit.

In our view, to enable a timely sign off of the financial statements, it is critical that draft local authority accounts are prepared to a high standard and are supported by strong working papers.

# Key matters - continued

## Our Responses

- As a firm, we are absolutely committed to audit quality and financial reporting in the local government sector. Our proposed work and fee, as set out in this Audit Plan has been agreed with the Treasurer.
- To ensure close work with our local audited bodies and an efficient audit process, our preference as a firm is to work on site with you and your officers. We are happy to also adopt hybrid approach. Please confirm in writing if this is acceptable to you, and that your officers will make themselves available to our audit team. This is also in compliance with our delivery commitments in our contract with PSAA.
- We offer a private meeting with the Chief Fire Officer twice a year, and with the Treasurer Quarterly as part of our commitment to keep you fully informed on the progress of the audit.
- At an appropriate point within the audit, we would also like to meet informally with the Chair of your Standards, Audit and Performance Committee, to brief them on the status and progress of the audit work to date.
- We will consider your arrangements for managing and reporting your financial resources as part of our audit in completing our Value for Money work.
- Our Value for Money work will also consider your arrangements relating to governance and improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness. We will continue to provide you and your Standards, Audit and Performance Committee with sector updates providing our insight on issues from a range of sources and other sector commentators via our Standards, Audit and Performance Committee updates.
- We hold annual financial reporting workshops for our audited bodies to access the latest technical guidance and interpretations, to discuss issues with our experts and to facilitate networking links with other audited bodies to support consistent and accurate financial reporting across the sector.
- With the ongoing financial pressures being faced by local authorities, in planning this audit we have considered the financial viability of the Authority. We are satisfied that the going concern basis remains the correct basis behind the preparation of the accounts. We will keep this under review throughout the duration of our appointment as auditors of the Authority.
- There is an increased incentive and opportunity for organisations in the public sector to manipulate their financial statements due to ongoing financial pressures. We are required to identify a significant risk with regard to management override of controls.
- To help ensure that accounts audits can be completed on time, we have introduced an escalation policy. This policy outlines the steps we will take to address any delays in draft accounts or responding to queries and information requests. See page 20 for further details.
- As a firm, we have responded to The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) consultation on proposals to address the backlog that currently exists in local audit. See pages 21 and 22.



# Introduction and headlines

## Purpose

This document provides an overview of the planned scope and timing of the statutory audit of Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority ('the Authority') for those charged with governance.

## Respective responsibilities

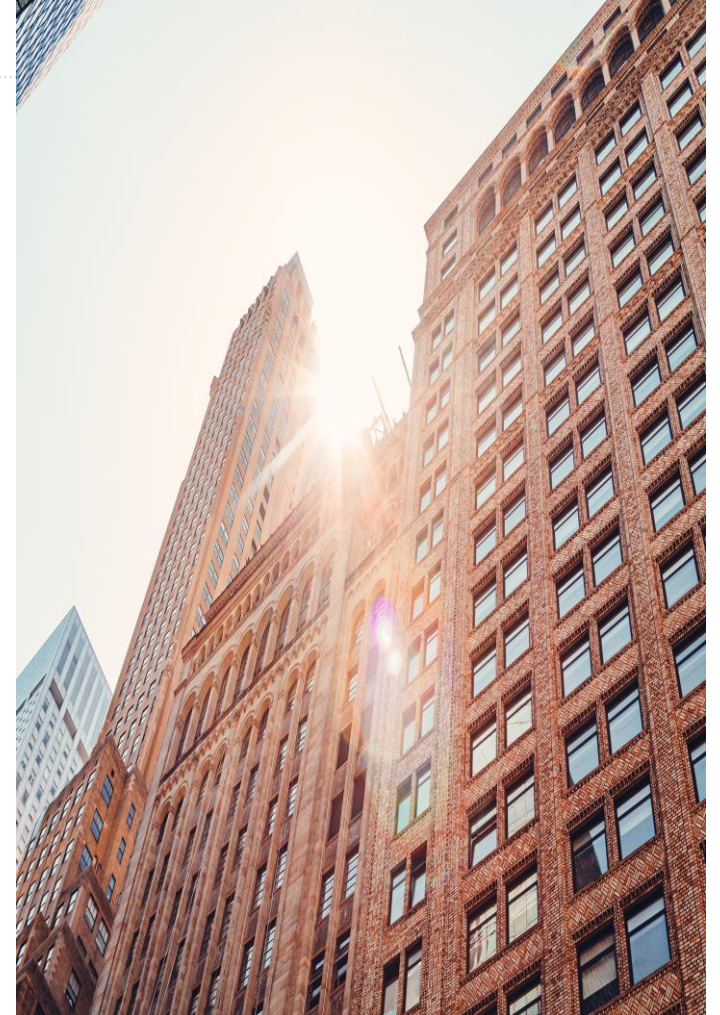
The National Audit Office ('the NAO') has issued a document entitled Code of Audit Practice ('the Code'). This summarises where the responsibilities of auditors begin and end and what is expected from the audited body. Our respective responsibilities are also set out in the agreed Terms of Appointment and Statement of Responsibilities issued by Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA), the body responsible for appointing us as auditor of the Authority. We draw your attention to these documents.

## Scope of our audit

The scope of our audit is set in accordance with the Code and International Standards on Auditing (ISAs) (UK). We are responsible for forming and expressing an opinion on the Authority's financial statements that have been prepared by management with the oversight of those charged with governance (the Standards, Audit and Performance Committee); and we consider whether there are sufficient arrangements in place at the Authority for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in your use of resources. Value for money relates to ensuring that resources are used efficiently in order to maximise the outcomes that can be achieved.

The audit of the financial statements does not relieve management or the Standards, Audit and Performance Committee of your responsibilities. It is the responsibility of the Authority to ensure that proper arrangements are in place for the conduct of its business, and that public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for. We have considered how the Authority is fulfilling these responsibilities.

Our audit approach is based on a thorough understanding of the Authority's business and is risk based.



# Introduction and headlines

## Significant risks

Those risks requiring special audit consideration and procedures to address the likelihood of a material financial statement error have been identified as:

- Management over-ride of controls
- Valuation of land and buildings (PPE)
- Valuation of the pension fund net liability

We will communicate significant findings on these areas as well as any other significant matters arising from the audit to you in our Audit Findings (ISA 260) Report.

## Materiality

We have determined planning materiality to be £620k (PY £580k) for the Authority, which equates to 2% of your prior year gross operating costs. We are obliged to report uncorrected omissions or misstatements other than those which are 'clearly trivial' to those charged with governance. Clearly trivial has been set at £31k (PY £29k).

## Value for Money arrangements

Our risk assessment regarding your arrangements to secure value for money has not identified any risks of significant weakness. We will continue to update our risk assessment until we issue our Auditor's Annual Report.

## Audit logistics

Our planning visit will take place in February, our interim visit will take place in March and our final visit will take place in October to December. Our key deliverables are this Audit Plan, our Audit Findings Report and our Auditor's Annual Report.

Our preference is for all our work to take place on site alongside your officers. We are happy to also adopt hybrid approach.

Our proposed fee for the audit will be £92,644 for the Authority, subject to the Authority delivering a good set of financial statements and working papers and no significant new financial reporting matters arising that require additional time and/or specialist input.

We have complied with the Financial Reporting Council's Ethical Standard (revised 2019) and we as a firm, and each covered person, confirm that we are independent and are able to express an objective opinion on the financial statements.

# Significant risks identified

Significant risks are defined by ISAs (UK) as risks that, in the judgement of the auditor, require special audit consideration. In identifying risks, audit teams consider the nature of the risk, the potential magnitude of misstatement, and its likelihood. Significant risks are those risks that have a higher risk of material misstatement.

Risk	Reason for risk identification	Key aspects of our proposed response to the risk
The revenue cycle includes fraudulent transactions (rebutted)	<p>Under ISA (UK) 240, there is a rebuttable presumed risk that revenue may be misstated due to the improper recognition of revenue.</p> <p>This presumption can be rebutted if the auditor concludes that there is no risk of material misstatement due to fraud relating to revenue recognition.</p> <p>As external auditors in the public sector, we are also required to give regard to Practise Note 10, which interprets the ISA in a public sector context and directs us to consider whether the assumption also applies to expenditure.</p>	<p>Having considered the risk factors set out in ISA 240 and the nature of the revenue streams at the Authority, we have determined that the risk of fraud arising from revenue and expenditure recognition can be rebutted, because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- there is little incentive to manipulate revenue and expenditure recognition</li> <li>- opportunities to manipulate revenue and expenditure recognition are very limited; and</li> <li>- the culture and ethical frameworks of local authorities, including Shropshire &amp; Wrekin Fire Rescue Authority, mean that all forms of fraud are seen as unacceptable.</li> </ul> <p>Therefore we do not consider this to be a significant risk for Shropshire &amp; Wrekin Fire Rescue Authority.</p>
Management over-ride of controls	<p>Under ISA (UK) 240, there is a non-rebuttable presumed risk that management override of controls is present in all entities. The Authority faces external scrutiny of its spending and this could potentially place management under undue pressure in terms of how they report performance.</p> <p>We therefore identified management override of control, in particular journals, management estimates and transactions outside the course of business as a significant risk of material misstatement.</p>	<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate the design effectiveness of management controls over journals;</li> <li>• Analyse the journals listing and determine the criteria for selecting high risk unusual journals;</li> <li>• Test unusual journals recorded during the year and after the draft accounts stage for appropriateness and corroboration;</li> <li>• Gain an understanding of the accounting estimates and critical judgements applied by management and consider their reasonableness with regard to corroborative evidence; and</li> <li>• Evaluate the rationale for any changes in accounting policies, estimates or significant unusual transactions.</li> </ul>

‘Significant risks often relate to significant non-routine transactions and judgmental matters. Non-routine transactions are transactions that are unusual, due to either size or nature, and that therefore occur infrequently. Judgmental matters may include the development of accounting estimates for which there is significant measurement uncertainty.’ [ISA (UK) 315]

# Significant risks identified - continued

Risk	Reason for risk identification	Key aspects of our proposed response to the risk
Valuation of land and buildings (PPE)	<p>The Authority revalues its land and buildings on an annual basis.</p> <p>This valuation represents a significant estimate by management in the financial statements due to the size of the numbers involved (approximately £24m in the prior period) and the sensitivity of this estimate to changes in key assumptions. .</p> <p>We have therefore identified valuation of land and buildings, particularly revaluations and impairments, as a significant risk, which was one of the most significant assessed risks of material misstatement.</p>	<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate management’s processes and assumptions for the calculation of the estimate, the instructions issued to valuation experts and the scope of their work;</li> <li>• Evaluate the competence, capabilities and objectivity of the valuation expert;</li> <li>• Write to the valuer to confirm the basis on which the valuation was carried out to ensure that the requirements of the CIPFA code are met;</li> <li>• Challenge the information and assumptions used by the valuer to assess completeness and consistency with our understanding;</li> <li>• Test revaluations made during the year to see if they had been input correctly into the Authority’s balance sheet</li> </ul>
Valuation of the pension fund net liability	<p>The Authority’s pension fund net liability, as reflected in its balance sheet as the net defined benefit liability, represents a significant estimate in the financial statements.</p> <p>The pension fund liability is considered a significant estimate due to the size of the numbers involved (approximately £185m m as at 31 March 2023, including both the Firefighters’ and LGPS schemes) and the sensitivity of the estimate to changes in key assumptions.</p> <p>We therefore identified valuation of the Authority’s pension fund net liability as a significant risk, which was one of the most significant assessed risks of material misstatements.</p>	<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Update our understanding of the processes and controls put in place by management to ensure that the Authority’s pension fund net liability is not materially misstated and evaluate the design of the associated controls;</li> <li>• Evaluate the instructions issued by management to their management expert (an actuary) for this estimate and the scope of the actuary’s work;</li> <li>• Assess the competence, capabilities and objectivity of the actuary who carried out the Authority’s pension fund valuation;</li> <li>• Assess the accuracy and completeness of the information provided by the Authority to the actuary to estimate the liability;</li> <li>• Test the consistency of the pension fund asset and liability and disclosures in the notes to the core financial statements with the actuarial report from the actuary;</li> <li>• Undertake procedures to confirm the reasonableness of the actuarial assumptions made by reviewing the report of the consulting actuary (as auditor’s expert) and performing any additional procedures suggested within the report; and</li> <li>• Obtain assurances from the auditor of Shropshire Pension Fund as to the controls surrounding the validity and accuracy of membership data, contributions data and benefits data sent to the actuary by the LGPS pension fund and the fund assets valuation in the pension fund financial statements. This relates to the local government pension fund liability only.</li> </ul>

Management should expect engagement teams to challenge areas that are complex, significant or highly judgmental. This may be the case for accounting estimates and similar areas. Management should also expect to provide engagement teams with sufficient evidence to support their judgments and the approach they have adopted for key accounting policies, with reference to accounting standards or changes thereto.

Where estimates are used in the preparation of the financial statements management should expect teams to challenge management’s assumptions and request evidence to support those assumptions.



# Other matters

## Other work

In addition to our responsibilities under the Code of Practice, we have a number of other audit responsibilities, as follows:

- We read your Narrative Report and Annual Governance Statement and any other information published alongside your financial statements to check that they are consistent with the financial statements on which we give an opinion and our knowledge of the Authority.
- We carry out work to satisfy ourselves that disclosures made in your Annual Governance Statement are in line with requirements set by CIPFA.
- We carry out work on your consolidation schedules for the Whole of Government Accounts process in accordance with NAO group audit instructions.
- We consider our other duties under legislation and the Code, as and when required, including:
  - giving electors the opportunity to raise questions about your financial statements, consider and decide upon any objections received in relation to the financial statements;
  - issuing a report in the public interest or written recommendations to the Authority under section 24 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the Act);
  - application to the court for a declaration that an item of account is contrary to law under section 28 or a judicial review under section 31 of the Act;
  - issuing an advisory notice under section 29 of the Act.
- We certify completion of our audit.

## Other material balances and transactions

Under International Standards on Auditing, 'irrespective of the assessed risks of material misstatement, the auditor shall design and perform substantive procedures for each material class of transactions, account balance and disclosure'. All other material balances and transaction streams will therefore be audited. However, the procedures will not be as extensive as the procedures adopted for the risks identified in this report.

# Our approach to materiality

The concept of materiality is fundamental to the preparation of the financial statements and the audit process and applies not only to the monetary misstatements but also to disclosure requirements and adherence to acceptable accounting practice and applicable law.

Matter	Description	Planned audit procedures
1	<p><b>Determination</b></p> <p>We have determined financial statement materiality based on a proportion of the gross expenditure of the Authority for the financial year. Materiality at the planning stage of our audit is £620k, which equates to 2% of your draft gross expenditure for the period.</p>	<p>We determine planning materiality in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– establish what level of misstatement could reasonably be expected to influence the economic decisions of users taken on the basis of the financial statements;</li> <li>– assist in establishing the scope of our audit engagement and audit tests;</li> <li>– determine sample sizes and</li> <li>– assist in evaluating the effect of known and likely misstatements in the financial statements.</li> </ul>
2	<p><b>Reassessment of materiality</b></p> <p>Our assessment of materiality is kept under review throughout the audit process.</p>	<p>We reconsider planning materiality if, during the course of our audit engagement, we become aware of facts and circumstances that would have caused us to make a different determination of planning materiality.</p>

# Our approach to materiality

The concept of materiality is fundamental to the preparation of the financial statements and the audit process and applies not only to the monetary misstatements but also to disclosure requirements and adherence to acceptable accounting practice and applicable law.

Matter	Description	Planned audit procedures
3	<p data-bbox="257 526 1019 646"><b>Other communications relating to materiality we will report to the Standards, Audit and Performance Committee</b></p> <p data-bbox="257 654 1019 1216">Whilst our audit procedures are designed to identify misstatements which are material to our opinion on the financial statements as a whole, we nevertheless report to the Standards, Audit and Performance Committee any unadjusted misstatements of lesser amounts to the extent that these are identified by our audit work. Under ISA 260 (UK) ‘Communication with those charged with governance’, we are obliged to report uncorrected omissions or misstatements other than those which are ‘clearly trivial’ to those charged with governance. ISA 260 (UK) defines ‘clearly trivial’ as matters that are clearly inconsequential, whether taken individually or in aggregate and whether judged by any quantitative or qualitative criteria.</p>	<p data-bbox="1052 526 2110 646">We report to the Standards, Audit and Performance Committee any unadjusted misstatements of lesser amounts to the extent that these are identified by our audit work.</p> <p data-bbox="1052 654 2110 1216">In the context of the Authority, we propose that an individual difference could normally be considered to be clearly trivial if it is less than £31k (PY £29k). If management have corrected material misstatements identified during the course of the audit, we will consider whether those corrections should be communicated to the Standards, Audit and Performance Committee to assist it in fulfilling its governance responsibilities.</p>

# IT audit strategy

In accordance with ISA (UK) 315 Revised, we are required to obtain an understanding of the relevant IT and technical infrastructure and details of the processes that operate within the IT environment. We are also required to consider the information captured to identify any audit relevant risks and design appropriate audit procedures in response. As part of this we obtain an understanding of the controls operating over relevant Information Technology (IT) systems i.e., IT general controls (ITGCs). Our audit will include completing an assessment of the design and implementation of relevant ITGCs.

We plan to rely on the operation of application controls whether automated / IT dependent and will therefore carry out an extended ITGC assessment on the IT systems that support the operation of those controls. This is to gain assurance that the relevant controls have been operating effectively throughout the period.

The following IT systems have been judged to be in scope for our audit and based on the planned financial statement audit approach we will perform the indicated level of assessment:

IT system	Audit area	Spend/Income
Agresso	Financial reporting	Detailed ITGC assessment (design effectiveness only)



# Value for Money arrangements

## Approach to Value for Money work for the period ended 31 March 2024.

The National Audit Office issued its latest Value for Money guidance to auditors in January 2023. The Code expects auditors to consider whether a body has put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. Auditors are expected to report any significant weaknesses in the body's arrangements, should they come to their attention. In undertaking their work, auditors are expected to have regard to three specified reporting criteria. These are as set out below:



### 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.



### 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.

We have not identified any risks of significant weaknesses from our initial planning work. We will continue our review of your arrangements, including reviewing your Annual Governance Statement, before we issue our auditor's annual report.

# Audit logistics and team



## Audited Entity responsibilities

Where audited bodies do not deliver to the timetable agreed, we need to ensure that this does not impact on audit quality or absorb a disproportionate amount of time, thereby disadvantaging other audited bodies. Where the elapsed time to complete an audit exceeds that agreed due to an entity not meeting its obligations we will not be able to maintain a team on site. Similarly, where additional resources are needed to complete the audit due to an entity not meeting their obligations we are not able to guarantee the delivery of the audit to the agreed timescales. In addition, delayed audits will incur additional audit fees.

## Our requirements

To minimise the risk of a delayed audit, you need to :

- ensure that you produce draft financial statements of good quality by the deadline you have agreed with us, including all notes, the Annual Report and the Annual Governance Statement
- ensure that good quality working papers are available at the start of the audit, in accordance with the working paper requirements schedule that we have shared with you. We are planning to provide these via inflo, and have provided access to your team on inflo to facilitate this.
- ensure that the agreed data reports are cleansed, are made available to us at the start of the audit and are reconciled to the values in the accounts, in order to facilitate our selection of samples for testing
- ensure that all appropriate staff are available on site throughout (or as otherwise agreed) the planned period of the audit (as per our responses to key matters set out on slide 4)
- respond promptly and adequately to audit queries.

## Allison Thomas, Audit In-charge

Key audit contact responsible for the day to day management and delivery of the audit work

## Willem Smit, Audit Manager

Provides effective and clear reports and oversees Allison. Further also attends meetings with Richard.

## Richard Anderson, Key Audit Partner

Provides oversight of the delivery of the audit including regular engagement with the Standards, Audit and Performance Committees and senior officers

# Audit fees and updated Auditing Standards

Audit fees are set by PSAA as part of their national procurement exercise. In 2017, PSAA awarded a contract of audit for Shropshire & Wrekin Fire Rescue Authority to begin with effect from 2018/19. This contract was re-tendered in 2023 and Grant Thornton have been re-appointed as your auditors. The scale fee set out in the PSAA contract for the 2023/24 audit is £87,624.

This contract sets out four contractual stage payments for this fee, with payment based on delivery of specified audit milestones:

- Production of the final auditor's annual report for the previous Audit Year (exception for new clients in 2023/24 only)
- Production of the draft audit planning report to Audited Body
- 50% of planned hours of an audit have been completed
- 75% of planned hours of an audit have been completed

Any variation to the scale fee will be determined by PSAA in accordance with their procedures as set out here <https://www.psa.co.uk/appointing-auditors-and-fees/fee-variations-overview/>

## Assumptions

In setting these fees, we have assumed that the Authority will:

- prepare a good quality set of accounts, supported by comprehensive and well-presented working papers which are ready at the start of the audit
- provide appropriate analysis, support and evidence to support all critical judgements and significant judgements made during the course of preparing the financial statements
- provide early notice of proposed complex or unusual transactions which could have a material impact on the financial statements
- maintain adequate business processes and IT controls, supported by an appropriate IT infrastructure and control environment.

## Updated Auditing Standards

The FRC has issued updated Auditing Standards in respect of Quality Management (ISQM 1 and ISQM 2). It has also issued an updated Standard on quality management for an audit of financial statements (ISA 220). We confirm we will comply with these standards.

# Audit fees

	Proposed fee 2023/24
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Rescue Authority Scale Fee	£87,624
ISA 315	£5,020
Total audit fees (excluding VAT)	£92,644

The additional work required to comply with the revised auditing standard, ISA 315, was not included in the PSAA fees.

## Previous year

In 2022/23 the scale fee set by PSAA was £ 27,310. The final audit fee was £41,610, including a fee variation of £15,300 which has been submitted to the PSAA, to bring the total fee to be charged to £42,610.

## Relevant professional standards

In preparing our fees, we have had regard to all relevant professional standards, including paragraphs 4.1 and 4.2 of the FRC's [Ethical Standard \(revised 2019\)](#) which stipulate that the Engagement Lead (Key Audit Partner) must set a fee sufficient to enable the resourcing of the audit with partners and staff with appropriate time and skill to deliver an audit to the required professional and Ethical standards.



# Independence and non-audit services

## Auditor independence

Ethical Standards and ISA (UK) 260 require us to give you timely disclosure of all significant facts and matters that may bear upon the integrity, objectivity and independence of the firm or covered persons relating to our independence. We encourage you to contact us to discuss these or any other independence issues with us. We will also discuss with you if we make additional significant judgements surrounding independence matters.

We confirm that there are no significant facts or matters that impact on our independence as auditors that we are required or wish to draw to your attention. We have complied with the Financial Reporting Council's Ethical Standard and we as a firm, and each covered person, confirm that we are independent and are able to express an objective opinion on the financial statements. Further, we have complied with the requirements of the National Audit Office's Auditor Guidance Note 01 issued in May 2020 which sets out supplementary guidance on ethical requirements for auditors of local public bodies.

We confirm that we have implemented policies and procedures to meet the requirements of the Ethical Standard. For the purposes of our audit we have made enquiries of all Grant Thornton UK LLP teams providing services to the Authority.

# Communication of audit matters with those charged with governance

Our communication plan	Audit Plan	Audit Findings
Respective responsibilities of auditor and management/those charged with governance	•	
Overview of the planned scope and timing of the audit, form, timing and expected general content of communications including significant risks and Key Audit Matters	•	
Confirmation of independence and objectivity of the firm, the engagement team members and all other indirectly covered persons	•	•
A statement that we have complied with relevant ethical requirements regarding independence. Relationships and other matters which might be thought to bear on independence. Details of non-audit work performed by Grant Thornton UK LLP and network firms, together with fees charged. Details of safeguards applied to threats to independence	•	•
Significant matters in relation to going concern	•	•

ISA (UK) 260, as well as other ISAs (UK), prescribe matters which we are required to communicate with those charged with governance, and which we set out in the table here.

This document, the Audit Plan, outlines our audit strategy and plan to deliver the audit, while the Audit Findings will be issued prior to approval of the financial statements and will present key issues, findings and other matters arising from the audit, together with an explanation as to how these have been resolved.

We will communicate any adverse or unexpected findings affecting the audit on a timely basis, either informally or via an audit progress memorandum.

# Communication of audit matters with those charged with governance

Our communication plan	Audit Plan	Audit Findings
Significant findings from the audit		•
Significant matters and issue arising during the audit and written representations that have been sought		•
Significant difficulties encountered during the audit		•
Significant deficiencies in internal control identified during the audit		•
Significant matters arising in connection with related parties		•
Identification or suspicion of fraud( deliberate manipulation) involving management and/or which results in material misstatement of the financial statements		•
Non-compliance with laws and regulations		•
Unadjusted misstatements and material disclosure omissions		•
Expected modifications to the auditor's report, or emphasis of matter		•

## Respective responsibilities

As auditor we are responsible for performing the audit in accordance with ISAs (UK), which is directed towards forming and expressing an opinion on the financial statements that have been prepared by management with the oversight of those charged with governance.

The audit of the financial statements does not relieve management or those charged with governance of their responsibilities.

# Escalation policy

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities are proposing to introduce an audit backstop date on a rolling basis to encourage timelier completion of local government audits in the future.

As your statutory auditor, we understand the importance of appropriately resourcing audits with qualified staff to ensure high quality standards that meet regulatory expectations and national deadlines. It is the Authority's responsibility to produce true and fair accounts in accordance with the CIPFA Code by the 31 May 2024 and respond to audit information requests and queries in a timely manner.

To help ensure that accounts audits can be completed on time in the future, we have introduced an escalation policy. This policy outlines the steps we will take to address any delays in draft accounts or responding to queries and information requests. If there are any delays, the following steps should be followed:

## **Step 1 - Initial Communication with Treasurer (within one working day of statutory deadline for draft accounts or agreed deadline for working papers)**

We will have a conversation with the Treasurer to identify reasons for the delay and review the Authority's plans to address it. We will set clear expectations for improvement.

## **Step 2 - Further Reminder (within two weeks of deadline)**

If the initial conversation does not lead to improvement, we will send a reminder explaining outstanding queries and information requests, the deadline for responding, and the consequences of not responding by the deadline.

## **Step 3 - Escalation to Chief Fire Officer (within one month of deadline)**

If the delay persists, we will escalate the issue to the Chief Fire Officer, including a detailed summary of the situation, steps taken to address the delay, and agreed deadline for responding.

## **Step 4 - Escalation to the Standards, Audit and Performance Committee (at next available committee meeting or in writing to Committee Chair within 6 weeks of deadline)**

If senior management is unable to resolve the delay, we will escalate the issue to the Standards, Audit and Performance committee, including a detailed summary of the situation, steps taken to address the delay, and recommendations for next steps.

## **Step 5 – Consider use of wider powers (within two months of deadline)**

If the delay persists despite all efforts, we will consider using wider powers, e.g. issuing a statutory recommendation. This decision will be made only after all other options have been exhausted. We will consult with an internal risk panel to ensure appropriateness.

By following these steps, we aim to ensure that delays in responding to queries and information requests are addressed in a timely and effective manner, and that we are able to provide timely assurance to key stakeholders including the public on the Authority's financial statements.



# Addressing the local audit backlog - consultation

## Consultation

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), working with the FRC, as incoming shadow system leader, and other system partners, has put forward proposals to address the delay in local audit. The proposals consist of three phases:

**Phase 1: Reset** involving clearing the backlog of historic audit opinions up to and including financial year 2022/23 by 30 September 2024.

**Phase 2: Recovery** from Phase 1 in a way that does not cause a recurrence of the backlog by using backstop dates to allow assurance to be rebuilt over multiple audit cycles.

**Phase 3: Reform** involving addressing systemic challenges in the local audit system and embedding timely financial reporting and audit.

The consultation ran until 7 March 2024. Full details of the consultation can be seen on the following pages:

- FRC landing page - [Consultations on measures to address local audit delays \[frc.org.uk\]](https://www.frc.org.uk/consultations)
- DLUHC landing page - [Addressing the local audit backlog in England: Consultation - GOV.UK \[www.gov.uk\]](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/addressing-the-local-audit-backlog-in-england)
- NAO landing page - [Code of Audit Practice Consultation - National Audit Office \[NAO\]](https://www.nao.org.uk/consultations/code-of-audit-practice)

## Our response to the consultation

Grant Thornton responded to the consultation on 5 March 2024. In summary, we recognise the need for change, and support the proposals for the introduction of a backstop date of 30 September 2024. The proposals are necessarily complex and involved. We believe that all stakeholders would benefit from guidance from system leaders in respect of:

- the appropriate form of reporting for a backstopped opinion
- the level of audit work required to support a disclaimer of opinion
- how to rebuild assurance in terms of opening balances when previous years have been disclaimed.

We believe that both auditor and local authority efforts will be best served by focusing on rebuilding assurance from 2023/24 onwards. This means looking forwards as far as possible, and not spending 2023/24 undertaking audit work which was not carried out in previous years. We look for guidance from systems leaders to this effect.

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# Preparing for the backstop

For 2023/24, authorities should:

- Agree a timetable and working paper requirements with the auditor
- Put project planning and key milestones in place
- Consider the implications of CIPFA consultation (property valuation and pensions)
- Ensure the Standards, Audit and Performance Committee is properly briefed and prepared

As your auditor we will:

- Keep you updated on all national developments
- Set out clear expectations of the information we will require to conclude our work
- Agree a plan for the delivery of our work programme with a commitment to key milestones

## Next steps

We await the government's response to the consultation. We will discuss next steps including any implications for your audit once we have further information.



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