

Agenda Item No: 8
Report To: Audit Committee
Date: 1 December 2015
Report Title: External Auditor's Update
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Paul Naylor – covering report (Deputy Chief Executive)



Summary: The attached report is the latest general update from our external auditors, Grant Thornton UK LLP.

The report contains details on the progress of audit work at Ashford. In this regard there is one update to the audit of the Housing Benefit Grant Claim. This was recently completed, following further quality review testing, and we understand will be signed off and completed by the auditors as Unqualified without adjustment. This is a most welcome conclusion and testimony to the data processing and verification work undertaken by the service in processing several thousand housing benefit claims and changes of circumstances over the year.

Grant Thornton's report also contains summary updates from its national work and of relevant statutory changes to accounting and auditing matters. Most documents referred to have either been received by the council or are available on the internet.

Not all issues mentioned in the update are directly for the Audit Committee, but a good number will be of interest.

There is a report elsewhere on the agenda providing an update of the position with 'Local Public Audit' following a recent government announcement. It is suggested this matter is further reported to the Committee at its March meeting.

Pre- audit committee briefing sessions are a good opportunity to brief on some of these topics, but with their number limited officers can provide more advice in topical briefings that can be circulated to the committee between meetings.

Key Decision: Not applicable

Affected Wards: none specifically

Recommendations: The Committee is asked to note the External Auditor's update report and agree that the Committee should receive further briefings on the topical matters raised either at appropriate committee pre-briefings or in written briefings between meetings.

Policy Overview: External audit is a statutory requirement and the work of the auditors, including the advice papers received forms an important part of the council's governance and ongoing development.

Financial Implications: none specifically

Other Material Implications: The matters referred to in Grant Thornton's national reports will help to inform officers future reports and members' decisions over the coming months

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Ashford Borough Council Audit Committee Update

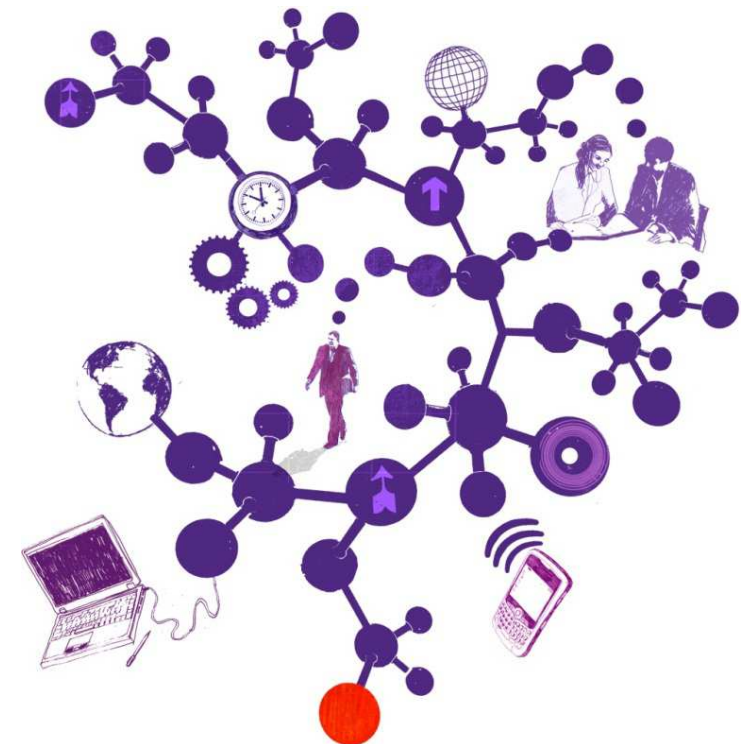
Year ended 31 March 2016

December 2015

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Introduction

This paper provides the Audit 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; and
- a number of challenge questions in respect of these emerging issues which the Committee may wish to consider.

Members of the Audit Committee can find further useful material on our website www.grant-thornton.co.uk, where we have a section dedicated to our work in the public sector (<http://www.grant-thornton.co.uk/en/Services/Public-Sector/>). Here you can download copies of our publications including:

- Making devolution work: A practical guide for local leaders
- Spreading their wings: Building a successful local authority trading company
- Easing the burden, our report on the impact of welfare reform on local government and social housing organisations
- All aboard? our local government governance review 2015

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 Audit Manager.

Progress at December 2015

Work	Planned date	Complete?	Comments
<p>Fee Letter We are required to issue a planned fee letter for 2015/16 by the end of April 2015.</p>	April 2015	Complete	<p>The Audit Commission published the work programme and scales of fees for the audit of the 2015/16 accounts of principal audited bodies, including the lists of fees for individual bodies before it's closure. This included reduced scale audit fees for Councils by 25%. There are no changes to the work programme for 2015/16.</p> <p>The fee letter confirmed the 2015/16 scale audit fees as £60,311.</p> <p>After the Commission's closure, the 2015/16 work programme and fees is accessible from the PSAA website.</p>
<p>Accounts Audit Plan and interim audit We are required to issue a detailed accounts Audit Plan setting out our proposed approach to give an opinion on the Council's 2015/16 financial statements.</p> <p>Our interim fieldwork visit will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	November 2015 - March 2016	Not yet due	The findings from this work will be presented in our Audit Plan, presented to the March Committee.

Progress at December 2015

Work	Planned date	Complete?	Comments
<p>Final accounts audit Including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • audit of the 2015-16 financial statements • proposed opinion on the Council's accounts 	June 2016	Not yet due	The findings from this work will be presented within our Audit Findings Report, presented to the Committee.
<p>Value for Money (VfM) conclusion The scope of our work to inform the 2015/16 VfM conclusion has recently been subject to consultation from the National Audit Office (NAO). The consultation closed at the end of September and finalised Auditor guidance has recently been issued and is available on the NAO website.</p> <p>Auditor's are required to consider whether a body has proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources with reference to the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informed decision making • Sustainable resource deployment • Working with partners and other third parties. 	Jan 2016 – June 2016	Not yet due	<p>Our planned approach will be set out in the Audit Plan.</p> <p>The findings from this work will be presented within our Audit Findings Report, presented to the Committee.</p>

Progress at December 2015

Work	Planned date	Complete?	Comments
<p>Housing Benefits</p> <p>We are required to certify the Housing Benefit Claim in accordance with HBCOUNT approach as agreed between the Audit Commission and the Department for Work and Pensions.</p>	<p>August 2016 – October 2016</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>We certified the 2014/15 claim by end November 2015 deadline with no amendments or qualification letter.</p>
<p>Other activity undertaken</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audit of Local Authority Trading Companies • Certification of pooling of capital receipts return as required by the CLG • Discussed our report "Growing Healthy Communities: The Health and Wellbeing Index" with officers 	<p>-</p>	<p>-</p>	<p>We would always be happy to discuss any other ways in which Grant Thornton can support the Council.</p>

Code of Audit Practice

Accounting and audit issues

Under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 the National Audit Office are responsible for setting the Code of Audit Practice which prescribes how local auditors undertake their functions for public bodies, including local authorities.

The NAO have published the Code of Audit Practice which applies for the audit of the 2015/16 financial year onwards. This is available at <https://www.nao.org.uk/code-audit-practice/wp-content/uploads/sites/29/2015/03/Final-Code-of-Audit-Practice.pdf>

The Code is principles based and will continue to require auditors to issue:

- Opinion on the financial statements
- Opinion on other matters
- Opinion on whether the Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources (the VfM conclusion).

The NAO plan to supplement the new Code with detailed auditor guidance in specific areas. The published draft audit guidance for consultation on the auditor's work on value for money arrangements in August 2015, which has been finalised in November 2015 and is available on the NAO website. Under the final guidance auditor's are required to consider whether a body has proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources with reference to the following criteria:

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

The new guidance will be applicable to the 2015/16 audit.

New local audit framework – length of transitional period

Audit and accounting issues

The implementation of the new local audit framework under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the 2014 Act) is subject to transitional arrangements which include measures taken to ensure that the audit contracts originally let by the Audit Commission can continue under saved duties and powers that are exercised on behalf of the Secretary of State by Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd (PSAA).

The existing contracts could be extended by one, two or three by decision of the relevant government departments which determines when local appointment should come into effect and so when the transitional period should come to an end.

The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) have announced the the Secretary of State's decision about the timetable for local government bodies.

Smaller local government bodies (such as parish and town councils) will move to local appointment for the reviews of 2017/18 annual returns. We understand that progress is being made towards establishing a sector-led body to procure and appoint auditors on behalf of smaller authorities. Larger local government bodies, including fire and rescue authorities, police bodies and other local government bodies, will move to local appointment for the audits of the 2018/19 accounts, extending the current contract by one year. At present, it is not clear yet whether there will be a sector-led body to carry out procurements and appointments of auditors on behalf of local government bodies, but the longer timescale allows more time to establish such arrangements.

CIPFA has been asked by DCLG to prepare guidance for local government bodies on developing local auditor panels.

Knowing the Ropes – Audit Committee Effectiveness Review

Accounting and audit issues

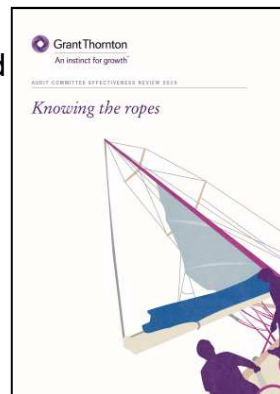
This is our first cross-sector review of audit committee effectiveness encompassing the corporate, not for profit and public sectors. It provides insight into the ways in which audit committees can create an effective role within an organisation's governance structure and understand how they are perceived more widely. It is available at <http://www.grantthornton.co.uk/en/insights/knowning-the-ropes--audit-committee-effectiveness-review-2015/>

The report is structured around four key issues:

- What is the status of the audit committee within the organisation?
- How should the audit committee be organised and operated?
- What skills and qualities are required in the audit committee members?
- How should the effectiveness of the audit committee be evaluated?

It raises key questions that audit committees, board members and senior management should ask themselves to challenge the effectiveness of their audit committee.

Our key messages are summarised opposite.



Size: 3-5 members is an ideal size for an audit committee

Relevance: audit committee members should be selected based on the skills and experience they bring

Communication: papers should strike the balance between detail and length

Ability: training should be provided for audit committee members

Frequency: meetings should be regular and the length should adapt to content

Clarity: the role of the audit committee and its relationship with other committees, should be clearly defined

Evolution: audit committees should continually develop

The two key things that audit committee members should be asking are:

- 1 What is expected of the audit committee and does it reflect the specific nature of the industry in which the organisation sits?
- 2 Does the audit committee have clear terms of reference in place? Audit committees should set themselves targets for what they want to achieve and define how these will be measured to ensure they are operating effectively.

Growing healthy communities: The Health and Wellbeing index

Grant Thornton market insight

It has long been recognised that the health of a population is strongly linked to the circumstances in which people live. Our index assesses 33 key health determinants and outcomes of health for the 324 English local authorities, to provide a coherent, national story on health and wellbeing. It highlights the scale and nature of inequality across the country and reiterates the need for a local, place-based approach to tackling health outcomes.

The purpose of this report is to help stakeholders – NHS providers and clinical commissioning groups (CCGs), local authorities, health and social care providers, housing associations, fire authorities and the police – to improve collaboration through a better understanding of the correlation between the economic, social and environmental health determinants and the health outcomes within their locality. It includes a concluding checklist of questions to help facilitate discussions in the light of joint service needs assessments.

The data behind the index also allows segmentation which reveals areas around the country with similar health determinants, but better outcomes. This underscores the need to work in collaboration with peers that may not be 'next door' if there is an opportunity to learn from 'others like us'.

Hard copies of our report are available from your Engagement Lead and Audit Manager.



Making devolution work: A practical guide for local leaders

Grant Thornton market insight

Our latest report on English devolution is intended as a practical guide for areas and partnerships making a case for devolved powers or budgets.

The recent round of devolution proposals has generated a huge amount of interest and discussion and much progress has been made in a short period of time. However, it is very unlikely that all proposals will be accepted and we believe that this the start of an iterative process extending across the current Parliament and potentially beyond.

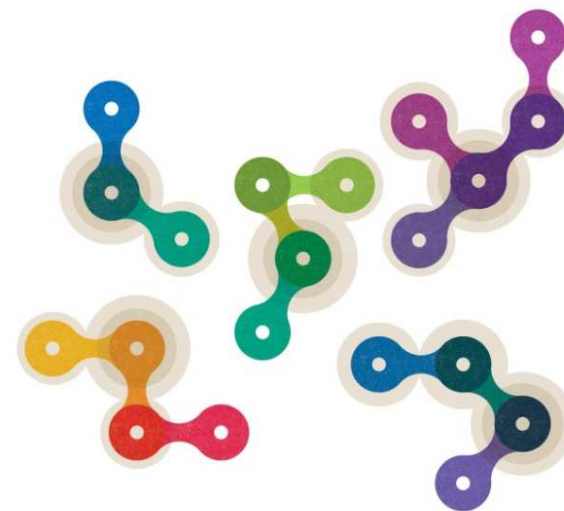
With research partner Localis we have spent recent months speaking to senior figures across local and central government to get under the bonnet of devolution negotiations and understand best practice from both local and national perspectives. We have also directly supported the development of devolution proposals. In our view there are some clear lessons to learn about how local leaders can pitch successfully in the future.

In particular, our report seeks to help local leaders think through the fundamental questions involved:

- what can we do differently and better?
- what precise powers are needed and what economic geography will be most effective?
- what governance do we need to give confidence to central government

The report 'Making devolution work: A practical guide for local leaders' can be downloaded from our website: <http://www.grantthornton.co.uk/en/insights/making-devolution-work/>

Hard copies of our report are available from your Engagement Lead and Audit Manager.

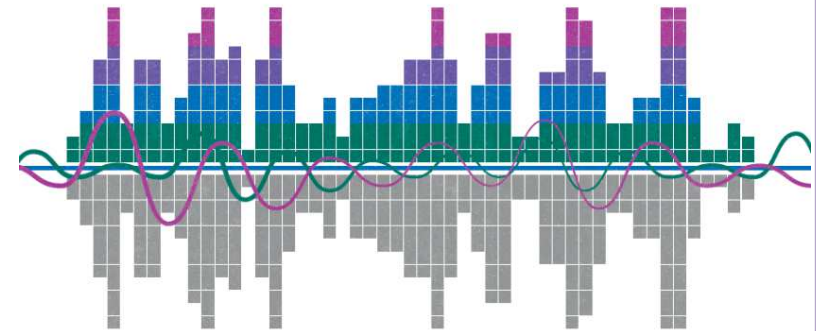


Turning up the volume: The Business Location Index

Grant Thornton market insight

Inward investment is a major component of delivering growth, helping to drive GDP, foster innovation, enhance productivity and create jobs, yet the amount of inward investment across England is starkly unequal.

The Business Location Index has been created to help local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, central government departments and other stakeholders understand more about, and ultimately redress, this imbalance. It will also contribute to the decision-making of foreign owners and investors and UK firms looking to relocate.



Based on in-depth research and consultation to identify the key factors that influence business location decisions around economic performance, access to people and skills and the environmental/infrastructure characteristics of an area, the Business Location Index ranks the overall quality of an area as a business location. Alongside this we have also undertaken an analysis of the costs of operating a business from each location. Together this analysis provides an interesting insight to the varied geography that exists across England, raising a number of significant implications for national and local policy makers.

At the more local level, the index helps local authorities and local enterprise partnerships better understand their strengths and assets as business locations. Armed with this analysis, they will be better equipped to turn up the volume on their inward investment strategy, promote their places and inform their devolution discussions.

The report 'Turning up the volume: The Business Location Index' can be downloaded from our website:

<http://www.grantthornton.co.uk/globalassets/1.-member-firms/united-kingdom/pdf/publication/2015/business-location-index-turning-up-the-volume.pdf>

Hard copies of our report are available from your Engagement Lead and Audit Manager

Supporting members in governance

Grant Thornton and the Centre for Public Scrutiny

We have teamed up with the Centre for Public Scrutiny to produce a member training programme on governance. Elected members are at the forefront of an era of unprecedented change, both within their own authority and increasingly as part of a wider local public sector agenda. The rising challenge of funding reductions, the increase of alternative delivery models, wider collaboration with other organisations and new devolution arrangements mean that there is a dramatic increase in the complexity of the governance landscape.

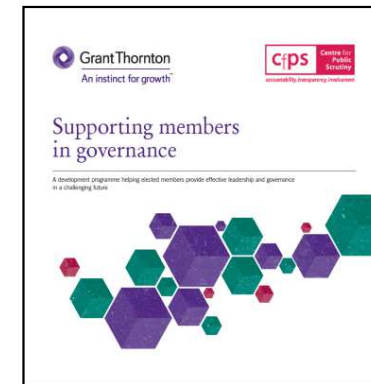
Members at local authorities – whether long-serving or newly elected – need the necessary support to develop their knowledge so that they achieve the right balance in their dual role of providing good governance while reflecting the needs and concerns of constituents.

To create an effective and on-going learning environment, our development programme is based around workshops and on-going coaching. The exact format and content is developed with you, by drawing from three broad modules to provide an affordable solution that matches the culture and the specific development requirements of your members.

- Module 1 – supporting members to meet future challenges
- Module 2 – supporting members in governance roles
- Module 3 – supporting leaders, committee chairs and portfolio holders

The development programme can begin with a baseline needs assessment, or be built on your own understanding of the situation.

Further details are available from your Engagement Lead and Audit Manager



George Osborne sets out plans for local government to gain new powers and retain local taxes

Local government issues

The Chancellor unveiled the "devolution revolution" on 5 October involving major plans to devolve new powers from Whitehall to Local Government. Local Government will now be able to retain 100 per cent of local taxes and business rates to spend on local government services; the first time since 1990. This will bring about the abolition of uniform business rates, leaving local authorities with the power to cut business rates in order to boost enterprise and economic activity within their areas. However, revenue support grants will begin to be phased out and so local authorities will have to take on additional responsibility. Elected Mayors, with the support of local business leaders in their Local Enterprise Partnerships, will have the ability to add a premium to business rates in order to fund infrastructure, however this will be capped at 2 per cent.

There has been a mixed reaction to this announcement. Some commentators believe that this will be disastrous for authorities which are too small to be self-sufficient. For these authorities, the devolution of powers and loss of government grants will make them worse off. It has also been argued that full devolution will potentially drive up council's debt as they look to borrow more to invest in business development, and that this will fragment the creditworthiness of local government.

Councils must deliver local plans for new homes by 2017

Local government issues

The Prime Minister announced on 12 October that all local authorities must have plans for the development of new homes in their area by 2017, otherwise central government will ensure that plans are produced for them. This will help achieve government's ambition of 1 million more new homes by 2020, as part of the newly announced Housing and Planning Bill.

The government has also announced a new £10 million Starter Homes fund, which all local authorities will be able to bid for. The Right to Buy Scheme has been extended with a new agreement with Housing Associations and the National Housing Federation. The new agreement will allow a further 1.3 million families the right to buy, whilst at the same time delivering thousands of new affordable homes across the country. The proposal will increase home ownership and boost the overall housing supply. Housing Association tenants will have the right to buy the property at a discounted rate and the government will compensate the Housing Associate for their loss.

Improving efficiency of council tax collection

Local government issues

DCLG have published "Improving Efficiency for Council Tax Collection", calling for consultation on the proposals to facilitate improvements in the collection and enforcement processes in business rates and council tax. The consultation is aimed specifically at local authorities, as well as other government departments, businesses and any other interested parties. The consultation document states that council tax collection rates in 2014-15 are generally high (at 97 per cent), however the government wishes to explore further tools for use by local authorities and therefore seeks consultation from local authorities on DCLG's proposals. The consultation closed on 18 November.

The Government proposes to extend the data-sharing gateway which currently exists between HMRC and local authorities. Where a liability order has been obtained, the council taxpayer will have 14 days to voluntarily share employment information with the council to enable the council to make an attachment to earnings. If this does not happen, the Government proposes to allow HMRC to share employment information with councils. This would help to avoid further court action, would provide quicker access to reliable information, and would not impose any additional costs on the debtor. The principle of this data-sharing is already well-established for council taxpayers covered by the Local Council Tax Support scheme, and it would make the powers applying to all council tax debtors consistent. Based on the results of the Manchester/HMRC pilot, Manchester estimate that £2.5m of debt could potentially be recouped in their area alone.

Slide 17

EH7

Did a bit of reordering f slides to make flow better

Emily Hill, 22/11/2015



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