

REPORT REFERENCE NO.	DSFRA/16/25
MEETING	DEVON AND SOMERSET FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY
DATE OF MEETING	19 DECEMBER 2016
SUBJECT OF REPORT	CHANGES TO ARRANGEMENTS FOR APPOINTMENT OF EXTERNAL AUDITORS
LEAD OFFICER	Treasurer to the Authority
RECOMMENDATIONS	<i>That the Authority agrees to “opt-in” to Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd (PSAA) for the procurement of future external audit provision (Option 3).</i>
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	<p>The contract relating to the appointment of our current external auditors, Grant Thornton, covers up to and including the completion of the 2017-18 audit. The auditors are currently working under a contract originally let by the Audit Commission with the contract being novated to Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) following the closure of the Audit Commission. When the current transitional arrangements come to an end on 31 March 2018, the Authority will be able to move to the local appointment of the auditor. There are a number of routes by which this can be achieved, each with varying risks and opportunities.</p> <p>This report outlines three potential options available to the Authority one of which is to “opt-in” to a sector-wide procurement conducted by PSAA.</p> <p>If the Authority is to take advantage of the national scheme for appointing auditors to be operated by PSAA for the subsequent years, it needs a decision to be taken by a meeting of the Fire Authority to enable it to accept the invitation by early March 2017.</p>
RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS	As indicated in the report.
EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT	An initial assessment has not identified any equality issues emanating from this report.
APPENDICES	None.
LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS	None.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. The Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 brought to a close the Audit Commission and established transitional arrangements for the appointment of external auditors, and the setting of audit fees for all local government and NHS bodies in England. On 5 October 2015 the Secretary of State Communities and Local Government (CLG) determined that the transitional arrangements for local government bodies would be extended by one year, to also include the audit of the accounts for 2017-18.
- 1.2. The Authority's current external auditor is Grant Thornton, this appointment having been made under a contract let by the Audit Commission. Following closure of the Audit Commission, the contract is currently managed by Public Sector Audit Appointments Limited (PSAA), the transitional body set up by the Local Government Association (LGA) with delegated authority from the Secretary of State. Over recent years the Authority has benefited from a reduction in fees of around 50%. This has been the result of a combination of factors including new contracts negotiated nationally with the firms of accountants, and savings from closure of the Audit Commission. The Authority's current external audit fees are £33,820 per annum.
- 1.3. When the current transitional arrangements come to an end on 31 March 2018, the Authority will be able to move to the local appointment of the auditor. There are a number of routes by which this can be achieved, each with varying risks and opportunities.
- 1.4. Current fees are based on discounted rates offered by the firms in return for substantial market share. When the contracts were last negotiated nationally by the Audit Commission they covered NHS and local government bodies and offered maximum economies of scale.
- 1.5. The scope of the audit will still be specified nationally. The National Audit Office (NAO) is responsible for writing the Code of Audit Practice which all firms appointed to carry out authorities' audits must follow. Not all accounting firms will be eligible to compete for the work; they will need to demonstrate that they have the required skills and experience and be registered with a Registered Supervising Body approved by the Financial Reporting Council. The registration process has not yet commenced and so the number of firms is not known, but it is reasonable to expect that the list of eligible firms may include the top ten or twelve firms in the country, including the Authority's current auditor. It is unlikely that small local independent firms will meet the eligibility criteria.

2. OPTIONS FOR LOCAL APPOINTMENT OF EXTERNAL AUDITORS

- 2.1 There are three broad options open to the Authority under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the Act):
Option 1 - To make a stand-alone appointment
- 2.2 In order to make a stand-alone appointment the Authority will need to set up an Auditor Panel. The members of the panel must be wholly or a majority of independent members as defined by the Act. Independent members for this purpose are independent appointees, this excludes current and former Authority Members (or officers) and their close families and friends. This means that Authority Members will not have a majority input to assessing bids and choosing which firm of accountants to award a contract for the Authority's external audit. A new independent auditor panel established by the Authority will be responsible for selecting the auditor.

Advantages/benefits

- 2.3 Setting up an auditor panel allows the Authority to take maximum advantage of the new local appointment regime and have local input to the decision.

Disadvantages/risks

- 2.4 There will be costs associated with the recruitment and servicing of the Auditor Panel, running the bidding exercise and negotiating the contract; in addition, on-going expenses and allowances will be incurred.
- 2.5 The Authority will not be able to take advantage of reduced fees that may be available through joint or national procurement contracts.
- 2.6 The assessment of bids and decision on awarding contracts will be taken by independent appointees and not solely by Authority Members.

Option 2 - Set up a Joint Auditor Panel/local joint procurement arrangements

- 2.7 The Act enables the Authority to join with others to establish a joint auditor panel. Again this will need to be constituted of wholly or a majority of independent appointees (members). Further legal advice will be required on the exact constitution of such a panel, having regard to the obligations of each authority under the Act, and the Authority's requirement to liaise with other local authorities to assess the appetite for such an arrangement.

Advantages/benefits

- 2.8 The costs of setting up the panel, running the bidding exercise and negotiating the contract will be shared across a number of authorities.
- 2.9 There is greater opportunity for negotiating some economies of scale by being able to offer a larger combined contract value to the firms.

Disadvantages/risks

- 2.10 The decision making body will be further removed from local input. There will be potentially no input from Authority Members where a wholly independent auditor panel is used or limited input where only one Authority Member is appointed to the joint panel to represent the Authority.
- 2.11 The choice of auditor could be complicated where individual authorities have independence issues. An independence issue occurs where the auditor has recently or is currently carrying out work such as consultancy or advisory work for the Authority. Where this occurs, some auditors may be prevented from being appointed by the terms of their professional standards. There is a risk that if the joint auditor panel choose a firm that is conflicted for this Authority, then a separate appointment, with all the attendant costs and loss of economies possible through joint procurement, may still be required.
- 2.12 It also requires a willing partner or partners of sufficient size to give the exercise a chance of being financially favourable. Indications are that most of our potential partners are opting for 3 below.

Option 3 - Opt-in to a Sector Led Body

- 2.13 In response to the consultation on the new arrangement, the LGA successfully lobbied for authorities to be able to 'opt-in' to a Sector Led Body, appointed by the Secretary of State under the Act. A Sector Led Body would have the ability to negotiate contracts with the firms nationally, maximising the opportunities for the most economic and efficient approach to procurement of external audit on behalf of the whole sector.

- 2.14 2.5 On 22 July 2016, the LGA confirmed that Public Service Appointments Ltd (PSAA) had been approved by the Government to become the body which is authorised to make future audit appointments on behalf of principal local authorities. The first appointments will commence in relation to the financial year 2018-19.

Advantages/benefits

- 2.15 The costs of setting up the appointment arrangements and negotiating fees would be shared across all opt-in authorities.
- 2.16 By offering large contract values the firms would be able to offer better rates and lower fees than are likely to result from local negotiation.
- 2.17 Any conflicts at individual authorities would be managed by the Sector Led Body who would have a number of contracted firms to call upon.
- 2.18 The Authority would not need to set up an Auditor Panel and therefore locally appointed independent members would not be required. Instead, a separate body would be set up to act in the collective interests of the 'opt-in' authorities.

Disadvantages/risks

- 2.19 Individual Authority Members will have less opportunity for direct involvement in the appointment process other than through the LGA and/or stakeholder representative groups.
- 2.20 In order for the Sector Led Body to be viable and to be placed in the strongest possible negotiating position, authorities would be required to indicate their intention to opt-in before final contract prices are known.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1. Current external fee levels are likely to increase when the current contracts end in 2018.
- 3.2. The cost of establishing a local or joint Auditor Panel outlined in options 1 and 2 above would need to be estimated and included in the Authority's budget from 2017-18. This would include the cost of recruiting independent appointees (members), servicing the Panel, running a bidding and tender evaluation process, letting a contract and any agreed payments to Panel members.
- 3.3. Opting-in to a national Sector Led Body provides maximum opportunity to limit the extent of any increases by entering into a large scale collective procurement arrangement and would remove the costs of establishing an auditor panel. There will be no fee to join the sector led arrangements.
- 3.4. The audit fees that opted-in bodies will be charged by the sector led body will cover the costs of appointing auditors. The LGA believes that audit fees achieved through block contracts will be lower than the costs that individual authorities will be able to negotiate.

4. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATION

- 4.1. The Authority has until 31 December 2017 to make an audit appointment, (Section 7 Local Government and Accountability Act 2014). In practical terms this means that one of the options outlined in this report will need to be in place by spring 2017 in order that the contract negotiation process can be carried out during 2017.

- 4.2. 4.2 Authorities that wish to “opt in” to the PSAA arrangements have been asked to confirm this to PSAA by early March 2017, and this decision has to be made by a meeting of the Full Authority.
- 4.3. 4.3 In practice it would appear that Option 2 is not feasible as there are unlikely to be many partners, therefore it is a choice between Option 1 and Option 3. On balance the benefits of Option 3 outweigh Option 1, and in adopting that approach the Authority would be consistent with most other bodies in Devon and Somerset and most other Fire and Rescue Authorities.
- 4.4. The Authority is asked to approve option 3 and therefore to “opt-in” to the PSAA arrangements.

KEVIN WOODWARD
Treasurer to the Authority