

Audit Progress Report and Sector Update

Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authority
Year ending 31 March 2020

November 2019



Contents

Section	Page
Introduction	3
Progress at November 2019	4
Audit Deliverables	5
Sector Update	6

Introduction



Barrie Morris

Engagement Lead

T 0117 305 7708
M 07771 976684
E barrie.morris@uk.gt.com



Aditi Chandramouli

Engagement Manager

T 0117 305 7643
M 07920 743362
E Aditi.chandramouli@uk.gt.com

This paper provides the Audit and Performance Review 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 Performance Review 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.

PSAA Contract Monitoring

Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authority opted into the Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) Appointing Person scheme which starts with the 2018/19 audit. PSAA appointed Grant Thornton as auditors. PSAA is responsible under the Local Audit (Appointing Person) Regulations 2015 for monitoring compliance with the contract and is committed to ensuring good quality audit services are provided by its suppliers. Details of PSAA's audit quality monitoring arrangements are available from its website, www.psaa.co.uk.

Our contract with PSAA contains a method statement which sets out the firm's commitment to deliver quality audit services, our audit approach and what clients can expect from us. We have set out commitment to deliver a high quality audit service in the document at Appendix A. We hope this is helpful. It will also be a benchmark for you to provide feedback on our performance to PSAA via its survey in Autumn 2019.

Progress at November 2019

Financial Statements Audit

We issued our opinion on your 2018/19 Statement of Accounts on 30 July 2019.

We will begin 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 Authority's 2019/20 financial statements.

We will begin our interim audit in January 2020. Our interim fieldwork includes:

- Updated review of the Authority'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

Increased scrutiny, the higher regulatory burden and limited specialist audit resources being available means that we are seeking to deliver a number of our post statement audits later in the summer. We have held initial discussions with officers about the scope for delivering the audit in September 2020. There are also like to be cost considerations in relation to the additional work arising from the increased expectation on auditors and we will provide an update in our detailed audit plan. We would welcome the view of the committee on the proposed timing of the audit.

We will report our work in the Audit Findings Report together with our audit opinion.

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 Authority 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 give our Value For Money Conclusion at the conclusion of the audit.

Other areas

Meetings

We met with Finance Officers in July and October as part of our quarterly liaison meetings and continue to be in discussions with finance staff regarding emerging developments and to ensure the audit process is smooth and effective.

Events

We provide a range of workshops, along with network events for members and publications to support the Authority. Your officers attended our Financial Reporting Workshop in February, which helped to ensure that members of your Finance Team were 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 Authority are set out in our Sector Update section of this report.

Audit Deliverables

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

Sector Update

Authorities 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 Performance Review 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

HMICFRS News

HMICFRS Inspection – summary of Second Tranche

HMICFRS have inspected 16 services in the first tranche of inspections. Each inspection assesses how effective and efficient the service is, how it protects the public against fires and other emergencies and how it responds to the same. They also assess how well each service looks after the people who work there. Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authority are in the third tranche of inspections, and are scheduled for inspection in Spring 2019

The report found that most fire and rescue services showed strengths in the way they prepared for and responded to fires and other emergencies. It also said services rightly focused on prevention activities, with the best adopting innovative practices to protect those most at risk from fire.

However it warned that more than a decade of localism had led to marked differences between services: for example, in how they have determined their response standards and record them; how they identify and mitigate risk; and how they define and audit high-risk premises

In carrying out inspections of fire and rescue services in England, HMICFRS have regard to the following main questions:

1. How effective is the fire and rescue service at keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks?
2. How efficient is the fire and rescue service at keeping people safe and secure from fire and other risks?
3. How well does the fire and rescue service look after its people?

The categories of graded judgement used are: outstanding, good, requires improvement and inadequate

HMICFRS Inspection - Findings

Effectiveness

Overall, the HMICFRS judged nine services to be good and seven as requiring improvement. In arriving at the overall judgment, they examined a range of operational practices, including: fire prevention; protection through regulation; emergency response; and responding to national risks.

Specifically, the HMICFRS had concerns in relation to 'protection through regulation' in Tranche 1, and they remain concerned following their findings in Tranche 2, as most services inspected didn't have enough qualified inspectors to meet the requirements set in their risk based inspection programmes.

Efficiency

HMICFRS graded nine of the fire and rescue services they inspected as good for efficiency and seven as requiring improvement. In arriving at these judgments, they considered how well the service uses resources to manage risks; and how well the service is using resources to ensure the service it provides is affordable now and in the future

HMICFRS found that nearly all the services inspected in Tranche 2 had managed to make savings, however there was a wide variation in the scale of the savings services have been required to make. . Furthermore, they found that some fire services were using reserves without a longer-term sustainable funding plan in place, and that overall services can make better use of technology.

People

Eight services were graded as good at looking after the people who work for them; seven services were graded as requiring improvement, and one service was graded as inadequate. They considered how well services train, manage, treat and support the people who work for them

Similarly to Tranche 1, this is an area of great concern for the HMICFRS, as the inspections in Tranche 2 continued to reveal a lack of diversity within fire services, as well as a large number of unreported instances of bullying.

HMICFRS News

HMICFRS Inspection – Recommendations from Second Tranche

As a result of the second tranche of inspections, HMICFRS have raised two recommendations. They state that until they inspect all the fire services, they will not have a full national picture, however some themes have emerged following the inspection of two thirds (30 of 45) of fire and rescue services in England. These are: the need for greater consistency in approach and the need for the sector to be supported in its quest to reform through enhanced capacity and capability. These are matters on which there is little, if any, dissent across the sector.

Recommendation 1

The report states that here are four priority areas where there will be immediate benefits to the public if a consistent approach is adopted by all fire and rescue services across England, namely:

1. identifying and determining risk as part of the IRMP process;
2. identifying and measuring emergency response standards and approaches;
3. defining what are high-risk premises for the purposes of fire protection; and
4. setting an expectation for how frequently high-risk premises, and parts of those premises, should be audited for compliance with fire safety legislation.

The recommendation concludes that as soon as is practicable, the Home Office, National Fire Chiefs Council and Local Government Association, in consultation with the Fire Standards Board and Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, should establish a programme of work that will result in consistency in the four priority areas above.

Recommendation 2

The Tranche 2 report states that the past few years have seen significant reform and transformation across the fire and rescue sector in England. There have been many factors behind this, such as the Government's fire reform programme, austerity, the new inspectorate and the consequences of and response to the tragic events at Grenfell Tower. Further sector-wide change is likely to be needed after the conclusion of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry (the first report is due this autumn). While the National Fire Chiefs Council has some full-time resources, it mainly relies on fire and rescue services to provide staff, often on a part-time basis, to carry out national programmes on behalf of the sector. A similar model is being used by the newly formed Fire Standards Board.

The fire and rescue service nationally has very limited resources and access to the skills and expertise it needs to bring about change. Without access to this support, the Government's fire reform programme might be in jeopardy.

The recommendation concludes that as part of the next Spending Review, the Home Office, in consultation with the Fire and Rescue Sector should address the deficit in the fire sector's national capacity and capability to support change.

The full report can be accessed by clicking on the cover



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 authorities 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 authorities in England and Wales.

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

The LGA said that authorities 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 local government authorities 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 \(pdf – 256KB\)](#)

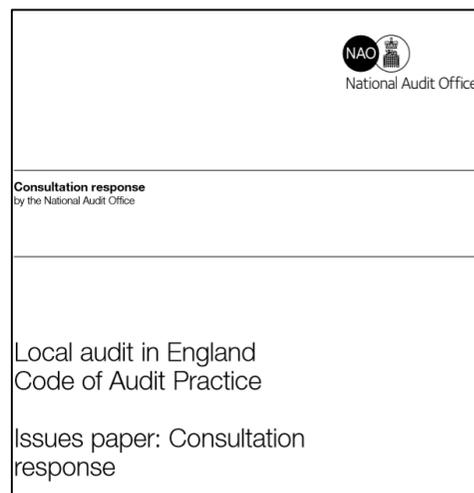
Stage 2 of the consultation involves consulting on the draft text of the new Code. To support stage 2, the NAO has published a consultation document, which highlights the key changes to each chapter of the draft Code. The most significant changes are in relation to the Value for Money arrangements. Rather 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/>



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 authorities can deliver social value through their commercial activity.

Through 'key questions' to ask, the guidance supports authorities 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, authorities 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 authorities 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 authorities 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' authorities 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?

MHCLG – Brexit preparations

Authorities should be fully prepared to leave the European Union by the end of October, the Communities and Local Government Secretary announced on 3 August as he ramped up preparations.

Mr Jenrick thanked authorities for all the work they have already done, but said they must step up vital preparations and committed £20 million for authorities across England to prepare for delivering Brexit on 31 October, whatever the circumstances.

He has asked each Authority to designate a Brexit lead to work with central government and oversee teams in every community who will work with stakeholders in their area to plan intensively for Brexit.

The new funding comes in recognition of the central role authorities will play to make sure their residents are ready for Brexit, and is expected to support a range of activity including communications, training and the recruitment of staff.



The Secretary of State said:

“From Whitehall to town halls – everyone needs to be ready to fulfil our democratic mandate to leave the European Union by the end of October.

Local government has a vital role in helping to make Brexit a success and it is absolutely right that together we intensify preparations in every community.

And to do this successfully I have asked every Authority to appoint a Brexit lead to work with government. We’ll be providing £20 million for authorities to support the major step up in preparations.

I want all of us – central and local government – to be fully prepared for leaving the EU on 31 October whatever the circumstances. I know that we can achieve this, by continuing to work side by side with renewed national focus and intensity.”

Brexit preparations



Challenge question:

Who is your Brexit lead and how is your authority supporting Brexit preparations?

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 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 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 authorities. 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 authorities.
- 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>

