

Maidstone Borough Council Audit Committee Update

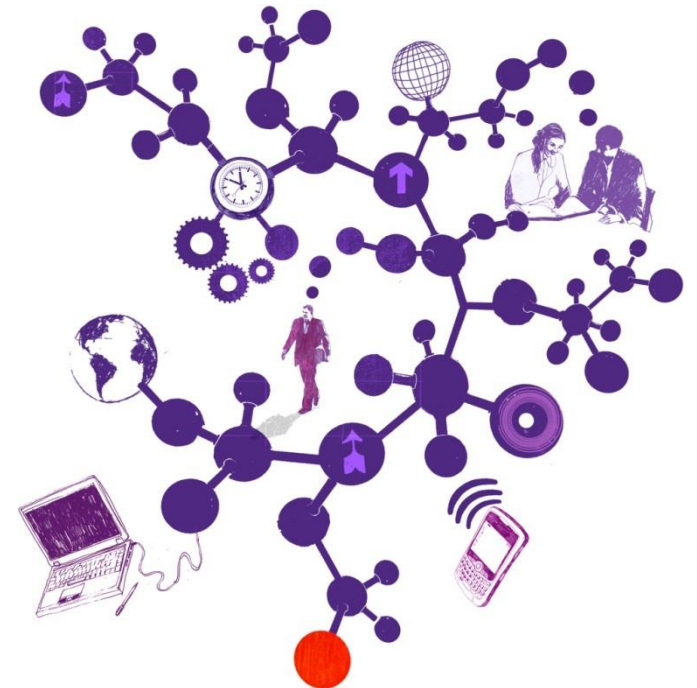
Year ended 31 March 2016

January 2016

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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 January 2016

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 £50,475.</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. 	January - March 2016	Not yet due	The findings from this work will be presented in our Audit Plan, presented to the March Committee.

Progress at January 2016 (continued)

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 	July 2016	Not yet due	The findings from this work will be presented within our Audit Findings Report, presented to the Audit 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 – July 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 January 2016 (continued)

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 and the claim was unqualified. More detail is provided in the Certification Report presented to the Audit Committee alongside this Update Report.</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

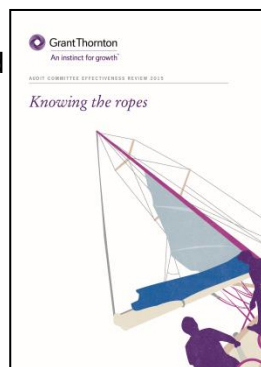
This is our first cross-sector review of audit committee effectiveness encompassing the corporate, not for profit and public sectors. It provides insight into the ways in which audit committees can create an effective role within an organisation's governance structure and understand how they are perceived 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.



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.

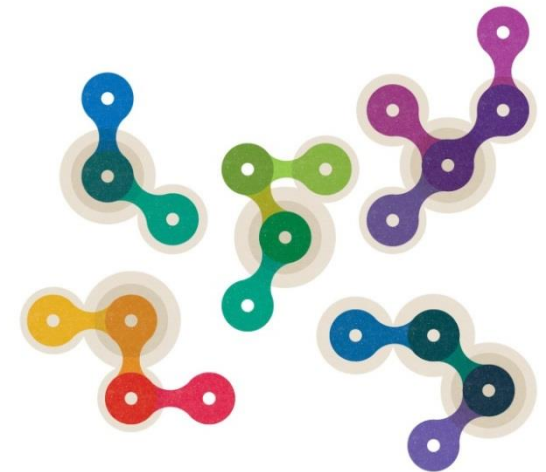
With research partner Localis we have spent recent months speaking to senior figures across local and central government to get under the bonnet of devolution negotiations and understand best practice from both local and national perspectives. We have also directly supported the development of devolution 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.

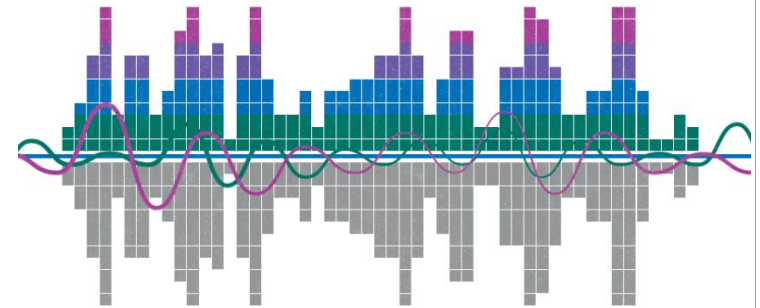


Turning up the volume: The Business Location Index

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.

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.



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