

The Annual Audit Letter for Maidstone Borough Council

Year ended 31 March 2019

September 2019



Contents



Your key Grant Thornton team members are:

Elizabeth Jackson

Key Audit Partner

T: 020 7728 3329

E: elizabeth.l.jackson@uk.gt.com

Tina James

Audit Manager

T: 020 7728 3307

E: tina.b.james@uk.gt.com

Section

1. Executive Summary
2. Audit of the Financial Statements
3. Value for Money conclusion

Page

- 3
5
9

Appendices

- A Reports issued and fees

Executive Summary

Purpose

Our Annual Audit Letter (Letter) summarises the key findings arising from the work that we have carried out at Maidstone Borough Council (the Council) for the year ended 31 March 2019.

This Letter is intended to provide a commentary on the results of our work to the Council and external stakeholders, and to highlight issues that we wish to draw to the attention of the public. In preparing this Letter, we have followed the National Audit Office (NAO)'s Code of Audit Practice and Auditor Guidance Note (AGN) 07 – 'Auditor Reporting'. We reported the detailed findings from our audit work to the Council's Audit, Governance and Standards Committee as those charged with governance in our Audit Findings Report on 20 July 2019 and updated on 15 August 2019 with the final findings of the audit.

Our work

Materiality	We determined materiality for the audit of the Council's financial statements to be £1,800,000, which is 2% of the Council's gross expenditure.
Financial Statements opinion	We gave an unqualified opinion on the Council's financial statements on 16 August 2019.
Whole of Government Accounts (WGA)	We completed work on the Council's consolidation return following guidance issued by the NAO.
Use of statutory powers	We did not identify any matters which required us to exercise our additional statutory powers.

Respective responsibilities

We have carried out our audit in accordance with the NAO's Code of Audit Practice, which reflects the requirements of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the Act). Our key responsibilities are to:

- give an opinion on the Council's financial statements (section two)
- assess the Council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources (the value for money conclusion) (section three).

In our audit of the Council's financial statements, we comply with International Standards on Auditing (UK) (ISAs) and other guidance issued by the NAO.

Executive Summary

Value for Money arrangements	We were satisfied that the Council put in place proper arrangements to ensure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. We reflected this in our audit report to the Council on 16 August 2019.
Certification of Grants	We also carry out work to certify the Council's Housing Benefit subsidy claim on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. Our work on this claim is not yet complete and will be finalised by 29 November 2019. We will report the results of this work to the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee separately.
Certificate	We certified that we have completed the audit of the financial statements of Maidstone Borough Council in accordance with the requirements of the Code of Audit Practice on 16 August 2019.

Working with the Council

During the year we have delivered a number of successful outcomes with you:

- Understanding your operational health – through the value for money conclusion we provided you with assurance on your operational effectiveness.

- Sharing our insight – we provided regular audit committee updates covering best practice.

We would like to record our appreciation for the assistance and co-operation provided to us during our audit by the Council's staff.

Grant Thornton UK LLP
September 2019

Audit of the Financial Statements

Our audit approach

Materiality

In our audit of the Council's financial statements, we use the concept of materiality to determine the nature, timing and extent of our work, and in evaluating the results of our work. We define materiality as the size of the misstatement in the financial statements that would lead a reasonably knowledgeable person to change or influence their economic decisions.

We determined materiality for the audit of the Council's financial statements to be £1,800,000, which is 2% of the Council's gross expenditure. We used this benchmark as, in our view, users of the Council's financial statements are most interested in where the Council has spent its revenue in the year.

We set a lower threshold of £90,000, above which we reported errors to the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee in our Audit Findings Report.

The scope of our audit

Our audit involves obtaining sufficient evidence about the amounts and disclosures in the financial statements to give reasonable assurance that they are free from material misstatement, whether caused by fraud or error. This includes assessing whether:

- the accounting policies are appropriate, have been consistently applied and adequately disclosed;
- the significant accounting estimates made by management are reasonable; and
- the overall presentation of the financial statements gives a true and fair view.

We also read the remainder of the financial statements and the narrative report, annual governance statement published alongside the financial statements to check it is consistent with our understanding of the Council and with the financial statements included in the Annual Report on which we gave our opinion.

We carry out our audit in accordance with ISAs (UK) and the NAO Code of Audit Practice. We believe that the audit evidence we have obtained is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for our opinion.

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

We identified key risks and set out overleaf the work we performed in response to these risks and the results of this work.

Audit of the Financial Statements

Significant Audit Risks

These are the significant risks which had the greatest impact on our overall strategy and where we focused more of our work.

Risks identified in our audit plan	How we responded to the risk	Findings and conclusions
<p>Valuation of land and buildings</p> <p>The Council revalues its land and buildings on a rolling five-yearly basis. This valuation represents a significant estimate by management in the financial statements due to the size of the numbers involved and the sensitivity of this estimate to changes in key assumptions. Additionally, management will need to ensure the carrying value in the Council financial statements is not materially different from the current value at the financial statements date, where a rolling programme is used</p> <p>We 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>As part of our audit work we completed;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> evaluating management's processes and assumptions for the calculation of the estimate, the instructions issued to valuation experts and the scope of their work evaluating the competence, capabilities and objectivity of the valuation expert discussing with the valuer the basis on which the valuation was carried out challenging the information and assumptions used by the valuer to assess completeness and consistency with our understanding testing revaluations made during the year to see if they had been input correctly into the Council's asset register evaluating the assumptions made by management for those assets not revalued during the year and how management has satisfied themselves that these are not materially different to current value at year end. 	<p>Our work identified an error totalling £905k due to the Council's treatment of the depreciation charged in the year on assets that have been revalued in the year. The draft accounts included the 10 months of depreciation charged between April 2018 and January 2019 as part of the NBV of the assets. The Code requires this amount to be removed from the NBV as the revaluation should remove the accumulated depreciation as the new value is added to the asset register.</p> <p>Our work did not identify any other findings in relation to the valuation of assets.</p>
<p>Management override of internal controls</p> <p>Under ISA (UK) 240 there is a non-rebuttable presumed risk that the risk of management over-ride of controls is present in all entities. The Council 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, which was one of the most significant assessed risks of material misstatement.</p>	<p>As part of our audit work we completed;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> evaluating the design effectiveness of management controls over journals analysing the journals listing and determine the criteria for selecting high risk unusual journals testing unusual journals recorded during the year and after the draft accounts stage for appropriateness and corroboration gaining an understanding of the accounting estimates and critical judgements applied made by management and consider their reasonableness with regard to corroborative evidence evaluating the rationale for any changes in accounting policies, estimates or significant unusual transactions. 	<p>Our audit work has not identified any issues in respect of management override of controls.</p>

Audit of the Financial Statements

Significant Audit Risks - continued

These are the risks which had the greatest impact on our overall strategy and where we focused more of our work.

Risks identified in our audit plan	How we responded to the risk	Findings and conclusions
<p>Valuation of pension fund net liability</p> <p>The Council'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 net liability is considered a significant estimate due to the size of the numbers involved (£77 million in the Council's balance sheet) and the sensitivity of the estimate to changes in key assumptions.</p> <p>We therefore identified valuation of the Council's pension fund net liability as a significant risk, which was one of the most significant assessed risks of material misstatement.</p>	<p>As part of our audit work we completed;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • updating our understanding of the processes and controls put in place by management to ensure that the Council's pension fund net liability is not materially misstated and evaluate the design of the associated controls; • evaluating the instructions issued by management to their management expert (an actuary) for this estimate and the scope of the actuary's work; • assessing the competence, capabilities and objectivity of the actuary who carried out the Council's pension fund valuation; • assessing the accuracy and completeness of the information provided by the Council to the actuary to estimate the liability; • testing 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; and • undertaking procedures to confirm the reasonableness of the actuarial assumptions made. 	<p>We reviewed the potential impact of the McCloud judgement on the pension fund net liability. We are satisfied that this has not resulted in a material difference in the 2018/19 accounts.</p> <p>Our audit work has not identified any other issues in respect of the valuation of the pension fund net liability.</p>

Audit of the Financial Statements

Audit opinion

We gave an unqualified opinion on the Council's financial statements on 16 August 2019.

Preparation of the financial statements

The Council presented us with draft financial statements in accordance with the national deadline, however amendments were made by the Council to this initial draft prior to the start of the audit fieldwork.

Issues arising from the audit of the financial statements

We reported the key issues from our audit to the Council's Audit, Governance and Standards Committee on 30 July 2019.

Annual Governance Statement and Narrative Report

We are required to review the Council's Annual Governance Statement and Narrative Report.

Both documents were prepared in line with the CIPFA Code and relevant supporting guidance. We confirmed that both documents were consistent with the financial statements prepared by the Council and with our knowledge of the Council.

Whole of Government Accounts (WGA)

We carried out work on the Council's Data Collection Tool in line with instructions provided by the NAO . We issued an assurance statement which confirmed the Council was below the audit threshold/did not identify any issues for the group auditor to consider on 16 August 2019.

Other statutory powers

We also have additional powers and duties under the Act, including powers to issue a public interest report, make written recommendations, apply to the Court for a declaration that an item of account is contrary to law, and to give electors the opportunity to raise questions about the Council's accounts and to raise objections received in relation to the accounts.

Certificate of closure of the audit

We certified that we have completed the audit of the financial statements of Maidstone Borough Council in accordance with the requirements of the Code of Audit Practice on 16 August 2019.

Value for Money conclusion

Background

We carried out our review in accordance with the NAO Code of Audit Practice, following the guidance issued by the NAO in November 2017 which specified the criterion for auditors to evaluate:

In all significant respects, the audited body takes properly informed decisions and deploys resources to achieve planned and sustainable outcomes for taxpayers and local people.

Key findings

Our first step in carrying out our work was to perform a risk assessment and identify the risks where we concentrated our work.

The risks we identified and the work we performed are set out overleaf.

Overall Value for Money conclusion

We are satisfied that in all significant respects the Council put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources for the year ending 31 March 2019.

Value for Money conclusion

Value for Money Risks

Risks identified in our audit plan	How we responded to the risk	Findings and conclusions
<p>Overall Financial Position – Medium Term Financial Strategy</p> <p>Whilst the Council has been able to set a balanced budget over the short term, currently there is a requirement for a considerable level of savings of the life of the current Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).</p>	<p>As part of our work we have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reviewed the assumptions behind the latest MTFS, covering the period up to March 2024; • considered the 2018/19 budget outturn, and any implications this may have for the MTFS, along with the latest outturn against the 2019/20 budget; and • reviewed the savings proposals which have been identified to date in respect of the savings requirements, along with the plans that the Council has to identify the additional savings currently required for the life of the MTFS. 	<p>The Council presented three budget scenarios as part of their Medium Term Financial Strategy – ‘adverse’, ‘neutral’ and ‘favourable’. The ‘neutral’ budget includes circa £1.17m of savings in 2019/20 and cumulative savings of £5.2m by 2023/24.</p> <p>We have analysed your detailed breakdown of the reductions in income and increased expenditure budgeted for 2019/20. We discussed the key items with management and looked at the assumptions behind these and concluded that they were realistically and prudently estimated but remain challenging.</p> <p>We have discussed with management the assumptions and estimates which underlie their estimates of the additional revenue which you plan to generate and the savings plans. We found the estimates were reasonable. The Council has a very good track record in setting budgets which are accurate and very close to the reality shown in the outturn position.</p> <p>For the short to medium term, the Council’s reserves level provides it with a sufficient cushion to weather the on-going financial challenges that you face over the next few years due to reductions in central government funding and forecast increases in demand for your core services. However, you only have finite reserves available and it is important that you continue to maintain appropriate budgetary controls on spending and ensure that savings plans are fully delivered.</p> <p>On the basis of this work, we have concluded that the risk was sufficiently mitigated.</p>

Value for Money conclusion

Value for Money Risks

Risks identified in our audit plan	How we responded to the risk	Findings and conclusions
<p>Brexit</p> <p>With the UK due to leave the European Union on 29 March 2019, there will be national and local implications resulting from Brexit that will impact on the Authority and which it will need to plan for.</p>	<p>As part of our work we have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> reviewed your arrangements and plans to mitigate any risks on Brexit. Our review will focus on areas such as workforce planning, supply chain analysis, regulatory impact and impacts on finances including investments. 	<p>At the time of writing our audit plan, the UK was due to exit from the EU on 29 March 2019. This was delayed and Brexit is now expected to happen on a revised date of 31 October 2019. Therefore the expected risk related to the impact of Brexit has not materialised within the period covered by this report. However we have considered the level of preparedness and planning undertaken by the Council.</p> <p>The Council is part of the Kent Resilience Forum and work undertaken to assess the risk and prepare for Brexit have included work undertaken with in the Council as part of a multi agency approach. The overall approach has involved considering the risk from a no-deal scenario and the areas which it would impact;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-ordination of the approach and risk assessment across the county through the Kent Resilience Forum. Through this body the Council has participated in exercises to test plans related to identified risks such as transport Brexit briefings have been provided to the Council in order keep members informed of progress. The Council has tested the ability of its systems to cope with staff working from home and the ability of sufficient staff to get to work for customer facing roles and to ensure the continuing provision of key Council services such as waste collection. The Council's website also provides helpful links to where residents and businesses can get the most up to date advice including government's official source for a wide-range of information for residents and businesses about the UK leaving the EU. <p>On the basis of this work, we have concluded that the risk was sufficiently mitigated based on the information the Council has had in order to prepare for the impact of Brexit at this time.</p>

A. Reports issued and fees

We confirm below our final reports issued and fees charged for the audit and provision of non-audit services.

Reports issued

Report	Date issued
Audit Plan	18 March 2019
Audit Findings Report	30 July 2019 15 August 2019
Annual Audit Letter	15 September 2019

Fees

	Planned £	Actual fees £	2017/18 fees £
Statutory audit	38,866	44,866	50,475
Housing Benefit Grant Certification 2017/18	10,000	20,000	11,418
Total fees	48,866	64,866	68,193

Audit fee variation

As outlined in our audit plan, the 2018-19 scale fee published by PSAA of £38,866 assumes that the scope of the audit does not significantly change. There are a number of areas where the scope of the audit has changed, which has led to additional work. These are set out in the following table.

Area	Reason	Fee proposed
Assessing the impact of the McCloud ruling	The Government's transitional arrangements for pensions were ruled discriminatory by the Court of Appeal last December. The Supreme Court refused the Government's application for permission to appeal this ruling. As part of our audit we have reviewed the revised actuarial assessment of the impact on the financial statements along with any audit reporting requirements.	£800
Pensions – IAS 19	The Financial Reporting Council has highlighted that the quality of work by audit firms in respect of IAS 19 needs to improve across local government audits. Accordingly, we have increased the level of scope and coverage in respect of IAS 19 this year to reflect this.	£1,200
PPE Valuation – work of experts	As above, the Financial Reporting Council has highlighted that auditors need to improve the quality of work on PPE valuations across the sector. We have increased the volume and scope of our audit work to reflect this.	£2,400
Finalisation of 2018/19 audit and review of revised accounts	The completion process for the 2018/19 included review of multiple versions of the accounts due to the identification of audit adjustments. This resulted in additional resource being required to finalise the audit.	£1,600
Total		£6,000

Fee variations are subject to PSAA approval.

Our commitment to our local government clients

- Senior level investment
- Local presence enhancing our responsiveness, agility and flexibility.
- High quality audit delivery
- Collaborative working across the public sector
- Wider connections across the public sector economy, including with health and other local government bodies
- Investment in Health and Wellbeing, Social Value and the Vibrant Economy
- Sharing of best practice and our thought leadership.
- Invitations to training events locally and regionally – bespoke training for emerging issues
- Further investment in data analytics and informatics to keep our knowledge of the areas up to date and to assist in designing a fully tailored audit approach

Our relationship with our clients– why are we best placed?

- We work closely with our clients to ensure that we understand their financial challenges, performance and future strategy.
- We deliver robust, pragmatic and timely financial statements and Value for Money audits
- We have an open, two way dialogue with clients that support improvements in arrangements and the audit process
- Feedback meetings tell us that our clients are pleased with the service we deliver. We are not complacent and will continue to improve further
- Our locally based, experienced teams have a commitment to both our clients and the wider public sector
- We are a Firm that specialises in Local Government, Health and Social Care, and Cross Sector working, with over 25 Key Audit Partners, the most public sector specialist Engagement Leads of any firm
- We have strong relationships with CIPFA, SOLCAE, the Society of Treasurers, the Association of Directors of Adult Social Care and others.

New opportunities and challenges for your community

The Local Government economy

Local authorities face unprecedented challenges including:

- Financial Sustainability – addressing funding gaps and balancing needs against resources
- Service Sustainability – Adult Social Care funding gaps and pressure on Education, Housing, Transport
- Transformation – new models of delivery, greater emphasis on partnerships, more focus on economic development
- Technology – cyber security and risk management

At a wider level, the political environment remains complex:

- The government continues its negotiation with the EU over Brexit, and future arrangements remain uncertain.
- We will consider your arrangements for managing and reporting your financial resources as part of our work in reaching our Value for Money conclusion.
- We will keep you informed of changes to the financial reporting requirements for 2018/19 through on-going discussions and invitations to our technical update workshops.

Delivering real value through:

- Early advice on technical accounting issues, providing certainty of accounting treatments, future financial planning implications and resulting in draft statements that are 'right first time'
- Knowledge and expertise in all matters local government, including local objections and challenge, where we have an unrivalled depth of expertise.
- Early engagement on issues, especially on ADMs, housing delivery changes, Children services and Adult Social Care restructuring, partnership working with the NHS, inter authority agreements, governance and financial reporting
- Implementation of our recommendations have resulted in demonstrable improvements in your underlying arrangements, for example accounting for unique assets, financial management, reporting and governance, and tax implications for the Cornwall Council companies
- Robust but pragmatic challenge – seeking early liaison on issues, and having the difficult conversations early to ensure a 'no surprises' approach – always doing the right thing
- Providing regional training and networking opportunities for your teams on technical accounting issues and developments and changes to Annual Reporting requirements
- An efficient audit approach, providing tangible benefits, such as releasing finance staff earlier and prompt resolution of issues.

Grant Thornton in Local Government

Our client base and delivery



- We are the largest supplier of external audit services to local government
- We audit over 150 local government clients
- We signed 95% of our local government opinions in 2017/18 by 31 July
- In our latest independent client service review, we consistently score 9/10 or above. Clients value our strong interaction, our local knowledge and wealth of expertise.

Our connections



- We are well connected to MHCLG, the NAO and key local government networks
- We work with CIPFA, Think Tanks and legal firms to develop workshops and good practice
- We have a strong presence across all parts of local government including blue light services
- We provide thought leadership, seminars and training to support our clients and to provide solutions

Our people



- We have over 25 engagement leads accredited by ICAEW, and over 250 public sector specialists
- We provide technical and personal development training
- We employ over 80 Public Sector trainee accountants

Our quality



- Our audit approach complies with the NAO's Code of Audit Practice, and International Standards on Auditing
- We are fully compliant with ethical standards
- Your audit team has passed all quality inspections including QAD and AQRT

Our technical support



- We have specialist leads for Public Sector Audit quality and technical
- We provide national technical guidance on emerging auditing, financial reporting and ethical areas
- Specialist audit software is used to deliver maximum efficiencies





© 2019 Grant Thornton UK LLP. All rights reserved.

'Grant Thornton' refers to the brand under which the Grant Thornton member firms provide assurance, tax and advisory services to their clients and/or refers to one or more member firms, as the context requires.

Grant Thornton UK LLP is a member firm of Grant Thornton International Ltd (GTIL). GTIL and the member firms are not a worldwide partnership. GTIL and each member firm is a separate legal entity. Services are delivered by the member firms. GTIL does not provide services to clients. GTIL and its member firms are not agents of, and do not obligate, one another and are not liable for one another's acts or omissions.