



# Sefton Council audit plan

Year ending 31 March 2024

May 2024



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The contents of this report relate only to the matters which have come to our attention, which we believe need to be reported to you as part of our audit planning process. It is not a comprehensive record of all the relevant matters, which may be subject to change, and in particular we cannot be held responsible to you for reporting all of the risks which may affect the Council or all weaknesses in your internal controls. This report has been prepared solely for your benefit and should not be quoted in whole or in part without our prior written consent. We do not accept any responsibility for any loss occasioned to any third party acting, or refraining from acting on the basis of the content of this report, as this report was not prepared for, nor intended for, any other purpose.

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# Key matters

## National context

The national economic context continues to present challenges to the local government sector. There are increasing cost pressures nationally, such as a growing population and increasing demand for local government services, especially in adult and children's social care. Combined with inflationary pressures, pay demands and energy price rises, the environment in which local authorities operate is highly challenging. Local Government funding continues to be stretched and there have been considerable reductions in the grants received by local authorities from government.

Recently, we have seen the additional strain on some councils from equal pay claims, and there has been a concerning rise in the number of councils issuing s.114 notices. These are issued when a council's Chief Financial Officer does not believe the council can meet its expenditure commitments from its income. Additionally, the levels of indebtedness at many councils is now highly concerning, and we have seen commissioners being sent in to oversee reforms at a number of entities.

Our recent value for money work has highlighted a growing number of governance and financial stability issues at a national level, which is a further indication of the mounting pressure on audited bodies to keep delivering services, whilst also managing transformation and making savings at the same time.

As your new auditor, in planning our audit, we have taken account of this national context in designing a local audit programme which is tailored to your risks and circumstances.

## Audit Reporting Delays

Against a backdrop of ongoing audit reporting delays, in October 2023 PSAA found that only five local government accounts had been signed by the September deadline. In June 2023 the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) also produced a report setting out their concerns over these audit reporting delays. We issued our report [About time?](#) in March 2023 which explored the reasons for delayed publication of audited local authority accounts.

In our view, to enable a timely sign off of the financial statements, it is critical that draft local authority accounts are prepared to a high standard and are supported by strong working papers.

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# Key matters - continued

## Our Responses

- As a firm, we are absolutely committed to audit quality and financial reporting in the local government sector. Our proposed work and fee, as set out in this Audit Plan, has been agreed with the Executive Director of Corporate Resources and Customer Services.
- To ensure close work with our local audited bodies and an efficient audit process, our preference as a firm is work on site with you and your officers. Please confirm in writing if this is acceptable to you, and that your officers will make themselves available to our audit team. This is also in compliance with our delivery commitments in our contract with PSAA.
- We offer a private meeting with the Chief Executive twice a year, and with the Director of Finance Quarterly as part of our commitment to keep you fully informed on the progress of the audit.
- At an appropriate point within the audit, we would also like to meet informally with the Chair of your Audit and Governance Committee, to brief them on the status and progress of the audit work to date.
- We will consider your arrangements for managing and reporting your financial resources as part of our audit in completing our Value for Money work.
- Our Value for Money work will also consider your arrangements relating to governance and improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
- We will continue to provide you and your Audit and Governance Committee with sector updates providing our insight on issues from a range of sources and other sector commentators via our Audit and Governance Committee updates.
- We hold annual financial reporting workshops for our audited bodies to access the latest technical guidance and interpretations, to discuss issues with our experts and to facilitate networking links with other audited bodies to support consistent and accurate financial reporting across the sector.

# Introduction and headlines

## Purpose

This document provides an overview of the planned scope and timing of the statutory audit of Sefton Council ('the Council') for those charged with governance.

## Respective responsibilities

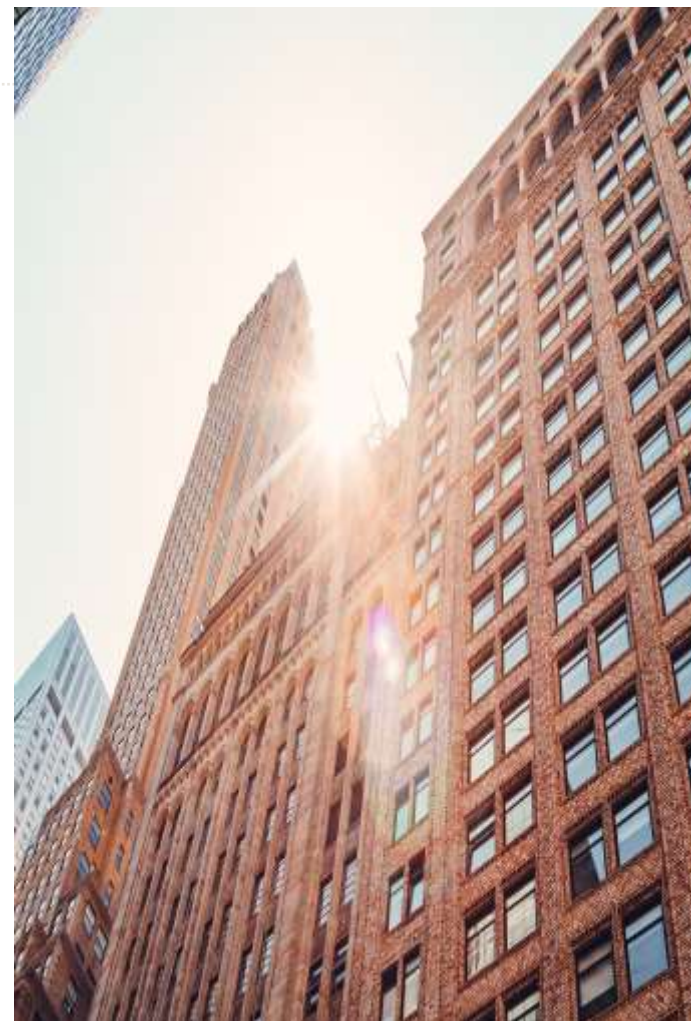
The National Audit Office ('the NAO') has issued a document entitled Code of Audit Practice ('the Code'). This summarises where the responsibilities of auditors begin and end and what is expected from the audited body. The NAO is in the process of updating the Code. We will communicate any implications of the revised code on this audit (where applicable). Our respective responsibilities are also set out in the agreed in the Terms of Appointment and Statement of Responsibilities issued by Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA), the body responsible for appointing us as auditor of the Council. We draw your attention to these documents.

## Scope of our audit

The scope of our audit is set in accordance with the Code and International Standards on Auditing (ISAs) (UK). We are responsible for forming and expressing an opinion on the Council and group's financial statements that have been prepared by management with the oversight of those charged with governance (the Audit and Governance committee); and we consider whether there are sufficient arrangements in place at the Council and group for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in your use of resources. Value for money relates to ensuring that resources are used efficiently in order to maximise the outcomes that can be achieved.

The audit of the financial statements does not relieve management or the Audit and Governance Committee of your responsibilities. It is the responsibility of the Council to ensure that proper arrangements are in place for the conduct of its business, and that public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for. We have considered how the Council is fulfilling these responsibilities.

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



# Introduction and headlines

## Significant risks

Those risks requiring special audit consideration and procedures to address the likelihood of a material financial statement error have been identified as:

- Management override of controls;
- Valuation of land and buildings and investment properties;
- Valuation of net pension liability

We will communicate significant findings on these areas as well as any other significant matters arising from the audit to you in our Audit Findings (ISA 260) Report.

## Group Audit

The Council is required to prepare group financial statements that consolidate the financial information of the following subsidiaries:

- Sefton New Directions Limited
- Sandway Homes Limited
- Sefton Hospitality Operations Limited

## Materiality

We have determined planning materiality to be £10.485m for the group and £10.360m for the Council, which equates to 1.4% of your prior year gross operating costs for the year. We are obliged to report uncorrected omissions or misstatements other than those which are 'clearly trivial' to those charged with governance. Clearly trivial has been set at £0.525m for the group and £0.518m for the Council.

## Value for Money arrangements

Our current risk assessment to date regarding your arrangements to secure value for money has identified possible risks of significant weakness across two of the three Value for Money themes. These are in respect of Financial Sustainability and Governance. The risks are linked to the medium-term financial sustainability of the Council and the high-needs block deficit as well as the Governance arrangements and insufficient improvement in Children's care following an inadequate Ofsted inspection.

## Audit logistics

Our planning work commenced in March and is continuing into April.

Our year-end final audit will take place during late June to early September.

Our key deliverables are this Audit Plan, our Audit Findings Report and our Auditor's Annual Report.

Our preference is for all our work to take place on site alongside your officers.

Our proposed fee for the audit will be £389,972 for the Council, subject to the Council delivering a good set of financial statements and working papers and no significant new financial reporting matters arising that require additional time and/or specialist input.

We have complied with the Financial Reporting Council's Ethical Standard (revised 2019) and we as a firm, and each covered person, confirm that we are independent and are able to express an objective opinion on the financial statements.

# Significant risks identified

Significant risks are defined by ISAs (UK) as risks that, in the judgement of the auditor, require special audit consideration. In identifying risks, audit teams consider the nature of the risk, the potential magnitude of misstatement, and its likelihood. Significant risks are those risks that have a higher risk of material misstatement.

Risk	Risk relates to	Reason for risk identification	Key aspects of our proposed response to the risk
ISA240 revenue recognition	Group and Council	<p>Under ISA (UK) 240 there is a rebuttable presumed risk that revenue may be misstated due to the improper recognition of revenue. This presumption can be rebutted if the auditor concludes that there is no risk of material misstatement due to fraud relating to revenue recognition.</p> <p>Having considered the risk factors set out in ISA 240 and the nature of the revenue streams at the Council, we have determined that the risk of fraud arising from revenue recognition can be rebutted because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- There is little incentive to manipulate revenue recognition and opportunities to manipulate revenue recognition are very limited;</li><li>- The culture and ethical frameworks of local authorities, including Sefton, mean that all forms of fraud are seen as unacceptable.</li></ul>	<p>As we do not consider this to be a significant risk for the Council, we will not be undertaking any specific work in this area other than our normal audit procedures.</p> <p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• review and test, on a sample basis, revenue and expenditure transactions, ensuring that it remains appropriate to rebut the presumed risk of revenue recognition.</li><li>• design and carry out appropriate audit procedures to ascertain the recognition of income is in the correct accounting period using cut-off testing.</li></ul>

‘Significant risks often relate to significant non-routine transactions and judgmental matters. Non-routine transactions are transactions that are unusual, due to either size or nature, and that therefore occur infrequently. Judgmental matters may include the development of accounting estimates for which there is significant measurement uncertainty.’ (ISA (UK) 315)

# Significant risks identified

Significant risks are defined by ISAs (UK) as risks that, in the judgement of the auditor, require special audit consideration. In identifying risks, audit teams consider the nature of the risk, the potential magnitude of misstatement, and its likelihood. Significant risks are those risks that have a higher risk of material misstatement.

Risk	Risk relates to	Reason for risk identification	Key aspects of our proposed response to the risk
Risk of fraud related to expenditure recognition PAF Practice Note 10 [rename risk for specific Council factors]	Group and Council	<p>In line with the Public Audit Forum Practice Note 10, in the public sector, auditors must also consider the risk that material misstatements due to fraudulent financial reporting may arise from the manipulation of expenditure recognition (for instance by deferring expenditure to a later period).</p> <p>Based on our assessment we consider that we are able to rebut the significant risk in relation to expenditure and have determined it to be appropriate to rebut this risk based upon the limited incentive and opportunity to manipulate expenditure within the Council and due to the immaterial expenditure streams within the subsidiaries, but will nevertheless, and in line with PN10, recognise the heightened inherent risk of ‘other service expenditure’ in our audit scoping and testing assessment for the Council.</p>	<p>As we do not consider this to be a significant risk for the Council, we will not be undertaking any specific work in this area other than our normal audit procedures.</p> <p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>review and test, on a sample basis, expenditure transactions, ensuring that it remains appropriate to rebut the presumed risk of expenditure recognition.</li> <li>design and carry out appropriate audit procedures to ascertain the recognition of expenditure is in the correct accounting period using cut-off testing.</li> </ul>



# Significant risks identified

Significant risks are defined by ISAs (UK) as risks that, in the judgement of the auditor, require special audit consideration. In identifying risks, audit teams consider the nature of the risk, the potential magnitude of misstatement, and its likelihood. Significant risks are those risks that have a higher risk of material misstatement.

Risk	Risk relates to	Reason for risk identification	Key aspects of our proposed response to the risk
Management over-ride of controls	Group and Council	<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.</p> <p>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 for the group and the Council, which was one of the most significant assessed risks of material misstatement.</p>	<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• evaluate the design effectiveness of management controls over journals</li><li>• analyse the journals listing and determine the criteria for selecting high risk unusual journals</li><li>• test unusual journals recorded during the year and after the draft accounts stage for appropriateness and corroboration</li><li>• gain an understanding of the accounting estimates and critical judgements applied made by management and consider their reasonableness with regard to corroborative evidence</li><li>• evaluate the rationale for any changes in accounting policies, estimates or significant unusual transactions.</li><li>• request assurance from the component auditor in relation to the risk of management override of control within Sefton New Directions Limited, Sefton Hospitality Operations Limited and Sandway Homes Limited.</li></ul>

# Significant risks identified - continued

Risk	Risk relates to	Reason for risk identification	Key aspects of our proposed response to the risk
Valuation of land and buildings and investment properties	Group and Council	<p>The Council revalues its land and buildings on a rolling programme over a five-year cycle to ensure the carrying value in the Council's financial statements is not materially different from current value at the financial statements date.</p> <p>This valuation represents a significant estimate by management in the financial statements £283m land and buildings as at 31 March 2023 and £32m in investment property.</p> <p>The valuation of land and buildings and investment properties is a key accounting estimate which is derived, depending on the valuation methodology, from assumptions that reflect market observations and the condition of the asset at the time. There is a risk that the use of inappropriate assumptions or methodologies may have a material impact on the financial statements especially given a high uncertainty in markets.</p> <p>However, the valuation methodology for Local Government land and buildings is specified in detail in the CIPFA Code and the sector is highly regulated by RICS, therefore we will focus our audit attention on assets that have large and unusual changes and / or approaches to the valuation of land and buildings, as a significant risk requiring special audit consideration. The risk will be pinpointed as part of our final accounts work, once we have understood the population of assets revalued. We will report an updated risk assessment for valuation of land and buildings and investment properties in our Audit Findings Report.</p>	<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• evaluate management's processes and assumptions for the calculation of the estimate, the instructions issued to valuation experts and the scope of their work</li> <li>• evaluate the competence, capabilities and objectivity of the valuation expert</li> <li>• write to the valuer and discuss with them the basis on which the valuation was carried out and any changes from prior year and any significant aspects of the valuation approach</li> <li>• challenge the information and assumptions used by the valuer to assess completeness and consistency with our understanding as well as corroborating key assumptions such as build rates or yield rates</li> <li>• engage our own valuer to assess the instructions to the Council's valuer, the Council's valuation report and the assumptions that underpin the valuation</li> <li>• evaluate the valuer's report to identify assets that have large and unusual changes and/or approaches to the valuation – these assets will be substantively tested to ensure the valuations are reasonable</li> <li>• test a selection of other asset revaluations made during the year to ensure they had been input accurately into the Council's asset register, revaluation reserve and Statement of Comprehensive Income and Expenditure</li> <li>• evaluate 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.</li> <li>• we have communicated our group instructions to the auditor of Sandway Homes Limited to provide us with sufficient assurance over the valuation of land and buildings as they have a land recorded in their accounts.</li> </ul>

# Significant risks identified - continued

Risk	Risk relates to	Reason for risk identification	Key aspects of our proposed response to the risk
Valuation assumptions of the pension fund net liability	Council	<p>The Council's pension fund net asset/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 (£33 million as at 31 March 2023) 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>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• update 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;</li> <li>• evaluate the instructions issued by management to their management expert (an actuary) for this estimate and the scope of the actuary's work;</li> <li>• assess the competence, capabilities and objectivity of the actuary who carried out the Council's pension fund valuation;</li> <li>• assess the accuracy and completeness of the information provided by the Council to the actuary to estimate the liability;</li> <li>• test 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;</li> <li>• undertake procedures to confirm the reasonableness of the actuarial assumptions made by reviewing the report of the consulting actuary (as auditor's expert) and performing any additional procedures suggested within the report; and</li> <li>• obtain assurances from the auditor of Merseyside Pension Fund as to the controls surrounding the validity and accuracy of membership data; contributions data and benefits data sent to the actuary by the pension fund and the fund assets valuation in the pension fund financial statements.</li> </ul>

Management should expect engagement teams to challenge areas that are complex, significant or highly judgmental. This may be the case for accounting estimates and similar areas. Management should also expect to provide to engagement teams with sufficient evidence to support their judgments and the approach they have adopted for key accounting policies, with reference to accounting standards or changes thereto.

Where estimates are used in the preparation of the financial statements management should expect teams to challenge management's assumptions and request evidence to support those assumptions.

# Other risks identified

We will communicate significant findings on these areas as well as any other significant matters arising from the audit to you in our Audit Findings Report.

Risk	Risk relates to	Reason for risk identification	Key aspects of our proposed response to the risk
Opening Balances	Group and Council	<p>As your newly appointed auditors for 2023-24, we were not responsible for the audit of your accounts for the year ended 31 March 2023.</p> <p>This means we have less assurance on those balances than had we audited them ourselves and therefore we need to perform additional procedures to gain that assurance.</p> <p>In addition, the last audited accounts for the Council were for the year ended 31 March 2021 and therefore at this stage it appears likely that <b>one of more of the previous year's accounts will fall under the proposals to address the delay in local audit – see pages 34 and 35 for further discussion on those proposals.</b> It is not clear at this stage what impact this may have on our audit approach and therefore our risk assessment will remain on-going and we will update it as and when we get new information.</p>	<p>In response to this risk we have already done the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Liaised with your former auditors and review their working papers</li><li>• Reviewed their reporting and assess whether there is any impact on our proposed audit approach</li></ul> <p>Between now and September, we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Obtain working papers to support the key balances in the 31 March 2023 statement of financial position</li><li>• Complete an IT environment review to document, evaluation and test the IT controls operating within the general ledger system</li><li>• Map the closing balances from the previous year ledger to the opening position in ledger to ensure accuracy and completeness of the financial information</li><li>• Agree any audit adjustments to opening balances are correctly reflected in the financial statements</li><li>• Agree the closing balances included in the unaudited accounts to the opening balances included in the accounts</li></ul>

# Other risks identified - continued

We will communicate significant findings on these areas as well as any other significant matters arising from the audit to you in our Audit Findings Report.

Risk	Risk relates to	Reason for risk identification	Key aspects of our proposed response to the risk
Equal Pay	Council	<p>During 2023 there was an emerging national issue across Local Government in respect of equal pay. In general terms, the Equality Act (EA) gives women and men the right to equal pay for equal work unless there is a material reason for the inequality that is not related to gender. The EA achieves this by implying an “equality” clause into every contract of employment that enables a contract to be modified once a successful claim is made out.</p> <p>We understand that the Local Government Association (LGA) has written to all Councils with guidance on Equal Pay and how to conduct an initial assessment.</p>	<p>In response to this risk we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Obtain the Council’s assessment of the risk of any claims in respect of equal pay</li><li>• Review their response to the LGA’s guidance</li><li>• Assess the impact on our audit approach</li></ul>

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# Group audit scope and risk assessment

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In accordance with ISA (UK) 600, as group auditor we are required to obtain sufficient appropriate audit evidence regarding the financial information of the components and the consolidation process to express an opinion on whether the group financial statements are prepared, in all material respects, in accordance with the applicable financial reporting framework.



# Group audit scope and risk assessment

Component	Individually Significant?	Level of response required under ISA (UK) 600	Risks identified	Planned audit approach
Sefton Council	Yes	■	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>See pages 7-12</li> </ul>	Full scope audit performed by Grant Thornton UK LLP
Sandway Homes Limited	No	■	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Management override of controls</li> <li>Valuation of land and buildings</li> </ul>	Specified procedures to be performed as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Valuation of land of the component.</li> </ul>
Sefton New Directions Limited	No	■	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Management override of controls</li> </ul>	Analytical procedures at group level
Sefton Hospitality Operations Limited	No	■	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Management override of controls</li> </ul>	Analytical procedures at group level

## Audit scope

- Audit of the financial information of the component using component materiality
- Audit of one more classes of transactions, account balances or disclosures relating to significant risks of material misstatement of the group financial statements
- Review of component's financial information
- Specified audit procedures relating to risks of material misstatement of the group financial statements
- Analytical procedures at group level

# Other matters

## Other work

In addition to our responsibilities under the Code of Practice, we have a number of other audit responsibilities, as follows:

- We read your Narrative Report and Annual Governance Statement and any other information published alongside your financial statements to check that they are consistent with the financial statements on which we give an opinion and our knowledge of the Council.
- We carry out work to satisfy ourselves that disclosures made in your Annual Governance Statement are in line with requirements set by CIPFA.
- We carry out work on your consolidation schedules for the Whole of Government Accounts process in accordance with NAO group audit instructions.
- We consider our other duties under legislation and the Code, as and when required, including:
  - giving electors the opportunity to raise questions about your financial statements, consider and decide upon any objections received in relation to the financial statements;
  - issuing a report in the public interest or written recommendations to the Council under section 24 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the Act);
  - application to the court for a declaration that an item of account is contrary to law under section 28 or a judicial review under section 31 of the Act;
  - issuing an advisory notice under section 29 of the Act.
- We certify completion of our audit.

## Other material balances and transactions

Under International Standards on Auditing, 'irrespective of the assessed risks of material misstatement, the auditor shall design and perform substantive procedures for each material class of transactions, account balance and disclosure'. All other material balances and transaction streams will therefore be audited. However, the procedures will not be as extensive as the procedures adopted for the risks identified in this report.



# Our approach to materiality

The concept of materiality is fundamental to the preparation of the financial statements and the audit process and applies not only to the monetary misstatements but also to disclosure requirements and adherence to acceptable accounting practice and applicable law.

Matter	Description	Planned audit procedures
1	<b>Determination</b> We have determined financial statement materiality based on a proportion of the gross expenditure of the group and the Council for the financial year. Materiality at the planning stage of our audit is £10.485m for the Group, which equates to 1.40% of your gross expenditure for the previous period. Materiality for the Council is £10.360m.	We determine planning materiality in order to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– establish what level of misstatement could reasonably be expected to influence the economic decisions of users taken on the basis of the financial statements;</li><li>– assist in establishing the scope of our audit engagement and audit tests;</li><li>– determine sample sizes; and</li><li>– assist in evaluating the effect of known and likely misstatements in the financial statements.</li></ul>
2	<b>Other factors</b> An item does not necessarily have to be large to be considered to have a material effect on the financial statements.	An item may be considered to be material by nature where it may affect instances when greater precision is required. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– We have identified senior officer remuneration as a balance where we will apply a lower materiality level, as these are considered sensitive disclosures. We have set a materiality of £5k.</li></ul>

# Our approach to materiality

The concept of materiality is fundamental to the preparation of the financial statements and the audit process and applies not only to the monetary misstatements but also to disclosure requirements and adherence to acceptable accounting practice and applicable law.

Matter	Description	Planned audit procedures
3	<b>Reassessment of materiality</b> Our assessment of materiality is kept under review throughout the audit process.	We reconsider planning materiality if, during the course of our audit engagement, we become aware of facts and circumstances that would have caused us to make a different determination of planning materiality.
4	<b>Other communications relating to materiality we will report to the Audit and Governance Committee</b> Whilst our audit procedures are designed to identify misstatements which are material to our opinion on the financial statements as a whole, we nevertheless report to the Audit and Governance Committee any unadjusted misstatements of lesser amounts to the extent that these are identified by our audit work. Under ISA 260 (UK) 'Communication with those charged with governance', we are obliged to report uncorrected omissions or misstatements other than those which are 'clearly trivial' to those charged with governance. ISA 260 (UK) defines 'clearly trivial' as matters that are clearly inconsequential, whether taken individually or in aggregate and whether judged by any quantitative or qualitative criteria.	We report to the Audit and Governance Committee any unadjusted misstatements of lesser amounts to the extent that these are identified by our audit work. In the context of the Group and Council, we propose that an individual difference could normally be considered to be clearly trivial if it is less than £518k. If management have corrected material misstatements identified during the course of the audit, we will consider whether those corrections should be communicated to the Audit and Governance Committee to assist it in fulfilling its governance responsibilities.

# Our approach to materiality

The concept of materiality is fundamental to the preparation of the financial statements and the audit process and applies not only to the monetary misstatements but also to disclosure requirements and adherence to acceptable accounting practice and applicable law.

	Amount (£)	Qualitative factors considered
Materiality for the Council financial statements	£10.360m	<p>This equates to 1.40% of prior year gross operating costs. In setting materiality we consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ownership structure of the Council</li> <li>• The control environment of the Council</li> <li>• The Council's business environment</li> <li>• Whether the Council has any complex debt arrangements</li> <li>• Any other sensitivities that would require materiality to be reduced</li> </ul>
Materiality for specific transactions, balances or disclosures [senior officer remuneration]	£0.005m	<p>In setting materiality, we consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The user's of the financial statement and their heightened interest to the remuneration of Council officers.</li> </ul>



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# IT audit strategy

In accordance with ISA (UK) 315 Revised, we are required to obtain an understanding of the relevant IT and technical infrastructure and details of the processes that operate within the IT environment. We are also required to consider the information captured to identify any audit relevant risks and design appropriate audit procedures in response. As part of this we obtain an understanding of the controls operating over relevant Information Technology (IT) systems i.e., IT general controls (ITGCs). Our audit will include completing an assessment of the design and implementation of relevant ITGCs.

The following IT systems have been judged to be in scope for our audit and based on the planned financial statement audit approach we will perform the indicated level of assessment:

IT system	Audit area	Planned level IT audit assessment
Agresso	Financial reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>A review of the IT General Controls and testing of those controls to assess the design and implementation of controls related to security management and change management.</li></ul>
Controcc	Social Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>A review of the IT General Controls and testing of those controls to assess the design and implementation of controls related to security management and change management.</li></ul>

# Value for Money arrangements

## Approach to Value for Money work for the period ended 31 March 2024

The National Audit Office issued its latest Value for Money guidance to auditors in January 2023. The Code expects auditors to consider whether a body has put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. Auditors are expected to report any significant weaknesses in the body's arrangements, should they come to their attention. In undertaking their work, auditors are expected to have regard to three specified reporting criteria. These are as set out below:



### 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.



### 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.



# Risks of significant VFM weaknesses

As part of our planning work, we considered whether there were any risks of significant weakness in the body's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources that we needed to perform further procedures on. The risks we have identified are detailed in the first table below, along with the further procedures we will perform. We may need to make recommendations following the completion of our work. The potential different types of recommendations we could make are set out in the second table below.

## Potential types of recommendations

A range of different recommendations could be made following the completion of work on risks of significant weakness, as follows:



### Statutory recommendation

Written recommendations to the body under Section 24 (Schedule 7) of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. A recommendation under schedule 7 requires the body to discuss and respond publicly to the report.



### Key recommendation

The Code of Audit Practice requires that where auditors identify significant weaknesses in arrangements to secure value for money they should make recommendations setting out the actions that should be taken by the body. We have defined these recommendations as 'key recommendations'.



### Improvement recommendation

These recommendations, if implemented should improve the arrangements in place at the body, but are not made as a result of identifying significant weaknesses in the body's arrangements.

# Risks of significant VFM weaknesses – continued

The Audit Code sets out that the auditor’s work is likely to fall into three broad areas:

- planning;
- additional risk-based procedures and evaluation; and
- reporting.

We undertake initial planning work to inform this Audit Plan and the assumptions used to derive our fee. A key part of this is the consideration of prior year significant weaknesses and known areas of risk which is a key part of the risk assessment for 2023/24, however as the prior year auditors annual report was not available when we did our planning risk assessment, we have started our work without delay and formed our own view on the risks of significant weaknesses without the ability to place reliance on the work of a predecessor auditor. We set out our reported assessment below, which identifies risks of significant weakness in relation to your 2023/24 arrangements. :

Criteria		Risk of significant weakness identified from the planning work	Additional risk-based procedures planned
Financial sustainability	Red	We have identified a risk of possible significant weakness in respect of the medium- term financial sustainability of the council, including managing budget pressures (in particular in relation to children's services) and adequacy of reserves.	In response to this we will review the MTFP and 24/25 budget assumptions, 23/24 outturn, MTFP funding gap and associated savings plans and use of reserves. We will also review the High Needs deficit and council's arrangements for mitigation
Governance	Red	We have identified a risk of possible significant weakness in respect of insufficient improvement in Children's Social Care following an inadequate Ofsted inspection.	We will review the Council's progress in implementing actions arising from the Ofsted inspection and any impact on risks, finance and service quality from any delays to the improvements required.
Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness	Green	We have not identified a risk of possible significant weakness as part of our planning assessment.	We will keep this under review when we perform our additional procedures and evaluation.

**G** No risk of significant weaknesses in arrangements identified at planning stage  
**R** Risk of significant weaknesses in arrangements identified at planning stage

# Audit logistics and team



## Georgia Jones, Key Audit Partner

Provides oversight of the delivery of the audit including regular engagement with Governance Committees and senior officers

## Liz Luddington, Audit Senior Manager

Provides oversight of the delivery of the audit including regular engagement with Governance Committees and senior officers

## Jobelle Bongato, Audit In-charge

Key audit contact responsible for the day to day management and delivery of the audit work

## Audited Entity responsibilities

Where audited bodies do not deliver to the timetable agreed, we need to ensure that this does not impact on audit quality or absorb a disproportionate amount of time, thereby disadvantaging other audited bodies. Where the elapsed time to complete an audit exceeds that agreed due to an entity not meeting its obligations we will not be able to maintain a team on site. Similarly, where additional resources are needed to complete the audit due to an entity not meeting their obligations we are not able to guarantee the delivery of the audit to the agreed timescales. In addition, delayed audits will incur additional audit fees.

## Our requirements

To minimise the risk of a delayed audit, you need to :

- ensure that you produce draft financial statements of good quality by the deadline you have agreed with us, including all notes, the Annual Report and the Annual Governance Statement
- ensure that good quality working papers are available at the start of the audit, in accordance with the working paper requirements schedule that we have shared with you.
- ensure that the agreed data reports are cleansed, are made available to us at the start of the audit and are reconciled to the values in the accounts, in order to facilitate our selection of samples for testing
- ensure that all appropriate staff are available on site throughout (or as otherwise agreed) the planned period of the audit.
- respond promptly and adequately to audit queries.



# Audit fees and updated Auditing Standards

Audit fees are set by PSAA as part of their national procurement exercise. In 2023 PSAA awarded a contract of audit for Sefton Council to begin with effect 2023/24. The scale fee set out in the PSAA contract for the 2023/24 audit is £371,422.

This contract sets out four contractual stage payments for this fee, with payment based on delivery of specified audit milestones:

- Production of the final auditor's annual report for the previous Audit Year (exception for new clients in 2023/24 only)
- Production of the draft audit planning report to Audited Body
- 50% of planned hours of an audit have been completed
- 75% of planned hours of an audit have been completed

Any variation to the scale fee will be determined by PSAA in accordance with their procedures as set out here <https://www.psa.co.uk/appointing-auditors-and-fees/fee-variations-overview/>

## Assumptions

In setting these fees, we have assumed that the Council will:

- prepare a good quality set of accounts, supported by comprehensive and well-presented working papers which are ready at the start of the audit
- provide appropriate analysis, support and evidence to support all critical judgements and significant judgements made during the course of preparing the financial statements
- provide early notice of proposed complex or unusual transactions which could have a material impact on the financial statements
- maintain adequate business processes and IT controls, supported by an appropriate IT infrastructure and control environment.

## Updated Auditing Standards

The FRC has issued updated Auditing Standards in respect of Quality Management (ISQM 1 and ISQM 2). It has also issued an updated Standard on quality management for an audit of financial statements (ISA 220). We confirm we will comply with these standards.

# Audit fees

Proposed fee 2023/24

Sefton Council Council Audit	£371,422
ISA 315	£12,550
Cost for External Valuation expert (may vary depending on work required)	£6,000
Potential impact of delayed 2022/23 audit opinion (TBC depending on guidance for work required)	TBC
Total audit fees (excluding VAT)	£389,972 (TBC)

## Relevant professional standards

In preparing our fees, we have had regard to all relevant professional standards, including paragraphs 4.1 and 4.2 of the FRC's [Ethical Standard \(revised 2019\)](#) which stipulate that the Engagement Lead (Key Audit Partner) must set a fee sufficient to enable the resourcing of the audit with partners and staff with appropriate time and skill to deliver an audit to the required professional and Ethical standards.

# IFRS 16 ‘Leases’ and related disclosures

IFRS 16 will need to be implemented by local authorities from 1 April 2024. This Standard sets out the principles for the recognition, measurement, presentation and disclosure of leases and replaces IAS17. The objective is to ensure that lessees and lessors provide relevant information in a manner that faithfully represents those transactions. This information gives a basis for users of financial statements to assess the effect that leases have on the financial position, financial performance and cash flows of an entity. As this is a shadow year for the implementation of IFRS 16, we will need to consider the work being undertaken by the Council to ensure a smooth adoption of the new standard.

## Introduction

IFRS 16 updates the definition of a lease to:

“a contract, or part of a contract, that conveys the right to use an asset (the underlying asset) for a period of time in exchange for consideration.”  
In the public sector the definition of a lease is expanded to include arrangements with nil consideration.

IFRS 16 requires all leases to be accounted for 'on balance sheet' by the lessee (subject to the exemptions below), a major departure from the requirements of IAS 17 in respect of operating leases.

IFRS 16 requires a lessee to recognise assets and liabilities for leases with a term of more than 12 months, unless the underlying asset is of low value. A lessee is required to recognise a right-of-use asset representing its right to use the underlying leased asset and a lease liability representing its obligation to make lease payments. There is a single accounting model for all leases (similar to that of finance leases under IAS 17), with the following exceptions:

- leases of low value assets
- short-term leases (less than 12 months).

Lessor accounting is substantially unchanged leading to asymmetry of approach for some leases (operating) although if an NHS body is the intermediary and subletting there is a change in that the judgement between operating and finance lease is made with reference to the right of use asset rather than the underlying asset

## Council's systems and processes

We believe that most local authorities will need to reflect the effect of IFRS 16 changes in the following areas:

- accounting policies and disclosures
- application of judgment and estimation
- related internal controls that will require updating, if not overhauling, to reflect changes in accounting policies and processes
- systems to capture the process and maintain new lease data and for ongoing maintenance

## Planning enquiries

As part of our planning risk assessment procedures we will enquire over the Council's preparedness of the standard on our audit communication platform info. We would appreciate a prompt response to these enquires in due course.

## Further information

Further details on the requirements of IFRS16 can be found in the HM Treasury Financial Reporting Manual. This is available on the following link.

[IFRS 16 Application Guidance December 2020.docx \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/90422/IFRS_16_Application_Guidance_December_2020.docx)

# Independence and non-audit services

## Auditor independence

Ethical Standards and ISA (UK) 260 require us to give you timely disclosure of all significant facts and matters that may bear upon the integrity, objectivity and independence of the firm or covered persons, relating to our independence. We encourage you to contact us to discuss these or any other independence issues with us. We will also discuss with you if we make additional significant judgements surrounding independence matters.

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We confirm that there are no significant facts or matters that impact on our independence as auditors that we are required or wish to draw to your attention. We have complied with the Financial Reporting Council's Ethical Standard and we as a firm, and each covered person, confirm that we are independent and are able to express an objective opinion on the financial statements.. Further, we have complied with the requirements of the National Audit Office's Auditor Guidance Note 01 issued in May 2020 which sets out supplementary guidance on ethical requirements for auditors of local public bodies.

We confirm that we have implemented policies and procedures to meet the requirements of the Ethical Standard. For the purposes of our audit, we will make enquiries of all Grant Thornton UK LLP teams and component audit firms providing services to the group and Council.

# Independence and non-audit services

## Other services

The following other services provided by Grant Thornton were identified.

The amounts detailed are fees agreed to-date for audit related and non-audit services to be undertaken by Grant Thornton UK LLP in the current financial year. These services are consistent with the group and Council's policy on the allotment of non-audit work to your auditors.

None of the services provided are subject to contingent fees.

Service	Fees £	Threats	Safeguards
Audit related			
Certification of Teachers Pension Return	20,000	Self-interest, Self review and management	The level of this recurring fee taken on its own is not considered a significant threat to independence as the fee for this work is £20,000 in comparison to the total fee for the audit of £383,972, and in particular relative to Grant Thornton UK LLP's turnover overall. Further, it is a fixed fee and there is no contingent element to it. For the self-review threat safeguards include the fact that we do not prepare any of the work reviewed and any changes would be agreed with the local authority prior to submission, and we would have no subsequent involvement in any decisions made about changes once our report has been issued. In respect of the management threat the scope of our work does not include making decisions on behalf of management or recommending or suggesting a particular course of action for management to follow. We believe these factors all mitigate the perceived threats to an acceptable level.
Certification of Housing Benefits grant	37,970	Self-interest, Self review and management	The level of this recurring fee taken on its own is not considered a significant threat to independence as the fee for this work is £37,970 in comparison to the total fee for the audit of £383,972, and in particular relative to Grant Thornton UK LLP's turnover overall. Further, it is a fixed fee and there is no contingent element to it. For the self-review threat safeguards include the fact that we do not prepare any of the work reviewed and any changes would be agreed with the local authority prior to submission, and we would have no subsequent involvement in any decisions made about changes once our report has been issued. In respect of the management threat the scope of our work does not include making decisions on behalf of management or recommending or suggesting a particular course of action for management to follow. We believe these factors all mitigate the perceived threats to an acceptable level.

# Communication of audit matters with those charged with governance

Our communication plan	Audit Plan	Audit Findings	
Respective responsibilities of auditor and management/those charged with governance	•		<p>ISA (UK) 260, as well as other ISAs (UK), prescribe matters which we are required to communicate with those charged with governance, and which we set out in the table here.</p> <p>This document, the Audit Plan, outlines our audit strategy and plan to deliver the audit, while the Audit Findings will be issued prior to approval of the financial statements and will present key issues, findings and other matters arising from the audit, together with an explanation as to how these have been resolved.</p> <p>We will communicate any adverse or unexpected findings affecting the audit on a timely basis, either informally or via an audit progress memorandum.</p>
Overview of the planned scope and timing of the audit, form, timing and expected general content of communications including significant risks and Key Audit Matters	•		
Confirmation of independence and objectivity of the firm, the engagement team members and all other indirectly covered persons	•	•	
A statement that we have complied with relevant ethical requirements regarding independence. Relationships and other matters which might be thought to bear on independence. Details of non-audit work performed by Grant Thornton UK LLP and network firms, together with fees charged. Details of safeguards applied to threats to independence	•	•	
Significant matters in relation to going concern	•	•	
Matters in relation to the group audit, including: Scope of work on components, involvement of group auditors in component audits, concerns over quality of component auditors' work, limitations of scope on the group audit, fraud or suspected fraud	•	•	
Views about the qualitative aspects of the Group's accounting and financial reporting practices including accounting policies, accounting estimates and financial statement disclosures		n/a	

# Communication of audit matters with those charged with governance

Our communication plan	Audit Plan	Audit Findings
Significant findings from the audit		•
Significant matters and issue arising during the audit and written representations that have been sought		•
Significant difficulties encountered during the audit		•
Significant deficiencies in internal control identified during the audit		•
Significant matters arising in connection with related parties		•
Identification or suspicion of fraud( deliberate manipulation) involving management and/or which results in material misstatement of the financial statements ( not typically council tax fraud)		•
Non-compliance with laws and regulations		•
Unadjusted misstatements and material disclosure omissions		•
Expected modifications to the auditor's report, or emphasis of matter		•

## Respective responsibilities

As auditor we are responsible for performing the audit in accordance with ISAs (UK), which is directed towards forming and expressing an opinion on the financial statements that have been prepared by management with the oversight of those charged with governance.

The audit of the financial statements does not relieve management or those charged with governance of their responsibilities.

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# Escalation policy

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities are proposing to introduce an audit backstop date on a rolling basis to encourage timelier completion of local government audits in the future.

As your statutory auditor, we understand the importance of appropriately resourcing audits with qualified staff to ensure high quality standards that meet regulatory expectations and national deadlines. It is the Authority's responsibility to produce true and fair accounts in accordance with the CIPFA Code by the 31 May 2024 and respond to audit information requests and queries in a timely manner.

To help ensure that accounts audits can be completed on time in the future, we have introduced an escalation policy. This policy outlines the steps we will take to address any delays in draft accounts or responding to queries and information requests. If there are any delays, the following steps should be followed:

## **Step 1 - Initial Communication with Executive Director of Corporate Resources and Customer Services (within one working day of statutory deadline for draft accounts or agreed deadline for working papers)**

We will have a conversation with the Executive Director of Corporate Resources and Customer Services to identify reasons for the delay and review the Authority's plans to address it. We will set clear expectations for improvement.

## **Step 2 - Further Reminder (within two weeks of deadline)**

If the initial conversation does not lead to improvement, we will send a reminder explaining outstanding queries and information requests, the deadline for responding, and the consequences of not responding by the deadline.

## **Step 3 - Escalation to Chief Executive (within one month of deadline)**

If the delay persists, we will escalate the issue to the Chief Executive, including a detailed summary of the situation, steps taken to address the delay, and agreed deadline for responding..

## **Step 4 - Escalation to the Audit and Governance Committee (at next available Audit and Governance Committee meeting or in writing to Audit and Governance Committee Chair within 6 weeks of deadline)**

If senior management is unable to resolve the delay, we will escalate the issue to the Audit and Governance Committee, including a detailed summary of the situation, steps taken to address the delay, and recommendations for next steps.

## **Step 5 – Consider use of wider powers (within two months of deadline)**

If the delay persists despite all efforts, we will consider using wider powers, e.g. issuing a statutory recommendation. This decision will be made only after all other options have been exhausted. We will consult with an internal risk panel to ensure appropriateness.

By following these steps, we aim to ensure that delays in responding to queries and information requests are addressed in a timely and effective manner, and that we are able to provide timely assurance to key stakeholders including the public on the Authority's financial statements.



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# Addressing the local audit backlog - consultation

## Consultation

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), working with the FRC, as incoming shadow system leader, and other system partners, has put forward proposals to address the delay in local audit. The proposals consist of three phases:

**Phase 1: Reset** involving clearing the backlog of historic audit opinions up to and including financial year 2022/23 by 30 September 2024.

**Phase 2: Recovery** from Phase 1 in a way that does not cause a recurrence of the backlog by using backstop dates to allow assurance to be rebuilt over multiple audit cycles.

**Phase 3: Reform** involving addressing systemic challenges in the local audit system and embedding timely financial reporting and audit.

The consultation ran until 7 March 2024. Full details of the consultation can be seen on the following pages:

- FRC landing page - [Consultations on measures to address local audit delays \(frc.org.uk\)](https://www.frc.org.uk/consultations/consultations-on-measures-to-address-local-audit-delays)
- DLUHC landing page - [Addressing the local audit backlog in England: Consultation - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/addressing-the-local-audit-backlog-in-england)
- NAO landing page - [Code of Audit Practice Consultation - National Audit Office \(NAO\)](https://www.nao.org.uk/consultations/code-of-audit-practice-consultation)

## Our response to the consultation

Grant Thornton responded to the consultation on 5 March 2024. In summary, we recognise the need for change, and support the proposals for the introduction of a backstop date of 30 September 2024. The proposals are necessarily complex and involved. We believe that all stakeholders would benefit from guidance from system leaders in respect of:

- the appropriate form of reporting for a backstopped opinion
- the level of audit work required to support a disclaimer of opinion
- how to rebuild assurance in terms of opening balances when previous years have been disclaimed.

We believe that both auditor and local authority efforts will be best served by focusing on rebuilding assurance from 2023/24 onwards. This means looking forwards as far as possible, and not spending 2023/24 undertaking audit work which was not carried out in previous years. We look for guidance from systems leaders to this effect.

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# Preparing for the backstop

For any outstanding years up to 2022/23, local authorities should:

- Prepare, adopt and publish financial statements in line with Code and Statutory requirements (Accounts and Audit Regs 2015 – ‘true and fair’)
- Support statements with a proper set of working papers and audit trail
- Work with the auditor to support the completion of outstanding audit work (where possible) and for the completion of Value for Money Work.

For 2023/24, local authorities should:

- Agree a timetable and working paper requirements with the auditor
- Put project planning and key milestones in place
- Consider the implications of CIPFA consultation (property valuation and pensions)
- Ensure the Audit and Governance Committee is properly briefed and prepared

As your auditor we will:

- Keep you updated on all national developments
- Set out clear expectations of the information we will require to conclude our work
- Agree a plan for the delivery of our work programme with a commitment to key milestones

## Next steps

We await the government’s response to the consultation. We will discuss next steps including any implications for your audit once we have further information.

