

Sefton Council

Audit progress report and sector updates

August 2024



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Introduction

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This paper provides the Audit and Standards Committee with a report on progress in delivering our responsibilities as your external auditors.

The paper also includes a series of sector updates in respect of these emerging issues which the Committee may wish to consider.

Members of the Audit and Standards Committee can find further useful material on our website, where we have a section dedicated to our work in the public sector. Here you can download copies of our publications:

<https://www.grantthornton.co.uk/industries/public-sector/local-government/>

If you would like further information on any items in this briefing, or would like to register with Grant Thornton to receive regular email updates on issues that are of interest to you, please contact either your Engagement Lead or Engagement Manager.

Progress at August 2024

Financial Statements Audit

Our planning work took place in March and April 2024 and our audit plan was issued in May 2024 for the June Audit Committee.

We started our year-end work on the Financial Statements Audit at the end of June 2024.

Our work is progressing well and we are still intending to bring a draft Audit Findings Report to the 25 September Audit Committee, however we wanted to note the following:

- We have not yet received the Group Accounts so have not been able to start any work on the Group figures
- We are still waiting for valuation information, the most significant being in respect of the Strand shopping centre, which we may not receive until September 2024

These will inevitably lead to a delay in us being able to finalise our audit work.

Local Audit Backlog

As per the statement made by the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution on 30 July 2024, the proposed backstop dates for financial years up-to-and-including 2022/23 is the 13 December 2024.

The Council will need to liaise with their predecessor auditors to understand their timescales as we will not be able to issue our Auditor's report until the previous years' audits have been finalised.

We have included more information on the backlog on page 9.

Value for Money

As reported in June our planning work 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. Our work continues to progress, although we are waiting for information to be able to finalise our work.

Progress at August 2024 (continued)

Other areas

Certification of claims and returns

We are working on your Teachers Pensions Certification claim and the 23/24 deadline is 29 November 2024.

We will also be working on the certification of your Housing Benefit claim and the deadline is 30 November 2024.

Meetings

Since our appointment as auditors of the Council from the audit year 2023/24 we have met with senior officers and the chair of the Audit Committee.

Events

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.

Audit Fees

PSAA have published their scale fees for 2023/24 [2023/24 auditor appointments and audit fee scale – PSAA](#) .

For Sefton Council these scale fees are £371,422 for the Council audit although there will be some additional costs for ISA315, external valuation experts and potentially in respect of the impact of a delayed 2021/22 and 2022/23 audit opinion as set out in our audit plan. These fees are derived from the procurement exercise carried out by PSAA in 2022. They reflect both the increased work auditors must now undertake as well as the scarcity of audit firms willing to do this work.

Audit Deliverables

Below are some of the audit deliverables planned for 2023/24.

2023/24 Deliverables	Planned Date*	Status
<p>Audit Plan</p> <p>We are required to issue a detailed audit plan to the Audit and Standards Committee setting out our proposed approach in order to give an opinion on the Council's 2023/24 financial statements.</p>	June 2024	Delivered
<p>Audit Findings Report</p> <p>The Audit Findings Report will be reported to the Audit and Governance Committee.</p>	Interim - September 2024 Final - TBC	Not yet due
<p>Auditors Report</p> <p>This includes the opinion on your financial statements.</p>	TBC**	Not yet due
<p>Auditor's Annual Report</p> <p>This report communicates the key outputs of the audit, including our commentary on the Council's value for money arrangements.</p>	December 2024	Not yet due

*The planned dates are subject to national timetables, agreement with officers and unforeseen technical issues that may arise during the audit period. However, our expectations is to complete all necessary work by 31/12/2024

**We will not be able to issue our auditors report until the previous year's auditors reports have been issued by Ernst & Young

Audit Deliverables

Below are some of the audit related deliverables planned for 2023/24.

2023/24 Audit related deliverables	Planned date*	Status
<p data-bbox="120 533 689 563">Teachers Pensions Scheme – certification</p> <p data-bbox="120 580 1525 644">This is the report we submit to Teachers Pensions based upon the mandated agreed upon procedures we are required to perform.</p>	November 2024	Not yet due
<p data-bbox="120 681 658 711">Housing Benefit Subsidy – certification</p> <p data-bbox="120 719 1480 783">This is the report we submit to Department of Work and Pensions based upon the mandated agreed upon procedures we are required to perform.</p>	November 2024	Not yet due

*The planned dates are subject to national timetables, agreement with officers and unforeseen technical issues that may arise during the audit period.

Sector update

Audit Backstop - update

Government proposals around the backstop

On 30 July 2024, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution, Jim McMahon, provided the following written statement to Parliament [Written statements - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#) This confirm the government's intention to introduce a backstop date for English local authority audits up to 2022/23 of 13 December 2024. As a consequence of this, the authority's accounts for 2 years up to 2022/23 are expected to be backstopped and a disclaimer of opinion will be issued by Ernst & Young 13 December 2024.

The government has set out its intention that from 2023/24, auditors should work with local authorities to begin the process of recovery. A backstop date for 2023/24 has been proposed of 28 February 2025, and a date for 2024/25 audits of 27 February 2026.

Our intention is that over time we will re-build assurance in respect of prior years across all backstopped audits, taking account of guidance from the National Audit Office and the Financial Reporting Council. For 2023/24, we have focused at your audit on the following areas in advance of the backstop date.

- Risk assessment and evaluation of the control environment for 2023/24 including ISA 315 assessment
- Audit of closing balances as at 31 March 2024
- Audit of income and expenditure and movements within financial year 2023/24 and associated cut off testing
- Testing of journals within 2023/24
- Testing of Movement of Reserves statements and other primary statements (within the constraints that we will not have opening balance assurance)
- Financial statements disclosure
- Recognising the sensitivity of cash, including the opening cash position as at 1 April 2023

We will continue the process of recovery during 2024/25 and ongoing years.

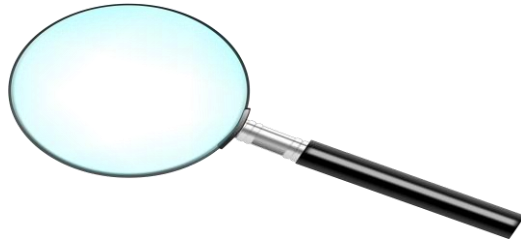
Change of external auditor – how to get the best out of new arrangements

With 2023/24 being the first year of a new five-year PSAA contract for external audit, and the year-end (31 March 2024) having just passed, many Local Authorities will now be starting to work closely with a new incoming external auditor. Audit delays from the past mean that for some Local Authorities, this will be the first close experience of working with an external auditor for several years.

When it works well, external audit can provide management with valuable insight and, at the same time, demonstrate to the public that there has been proper use of, and accounting for, public money. To get the best out of this year's audit though, many Local Authorities will need to take effective steps to close-down the prior year backlog whilst simultaneously ensuring a smooth transition between different external auditors.

A recent Local Government Association “Must know” guide on working with auditors may help with navigating the unique challenges that this year's audit cycle poses. The guide provides an oversight of internal and external audit functions and outlines what to expect from external audit, and when to expect it.

For the full guide, see [Must know guide: Working with auditors | Local Government Association](#).



Working well with a new external auditor

- **Understand the respective responsibilities of the Local Authority and the external auditor.**
- **Be open to early meetings between senior executives and the new external auditor.**
- **Understand that outgoing and incoming external auditors will need time to confer.**
- **Introduce the Head of Internal Audit.**
- **Facilitate introductions for the Audit Committee.**
- **Share the timetable and be clear about how timetable risk will be managed.**
- **Provide a named single point of contact and appropriate supporting resources.**
- **Provide early information around any new projects, including commercial projects.**
- **Provide appropriate access to IT systems and records.**
- **Respond promptly to requests for information.**
- **Ensure that all relevant staff affected by the external audit process understand what to expect and why it is important.**

Local government elections – what do they mean for Audit Committees?

With the 2nd May 2024 local government elections having seen changes at many of the 107 local authorities that took part, for many local authorities it is now time to agree Audit Committee membership at the start of a new municipal year.

Whilst newly elected administrations will inevitably want to focus on new strategic vision and “fixing things”, it will be important to remember to continue to “defend things” and protect the underlying mechanics of effective government as well.

The Audit Committee is one of the key lines of defence for a local authority. Its members oversee governance, risk management, internal and external audit, anti-fraud arrangements, financial reporting and statutory duties.

Following the local elections there may be changes to appointments to the Audit Committee. Experience shows that the Committees are more effective when appointments are non-political; cover a range of relevant skills and experience (including financial expertise); and include at least one independent, co-opted member. Two independent co-opted members is generally considered best practice.

Once appointed, the new Audit Committee will need to build relationships with internal audit, external audit, and senior management. It may also want to review its terms of reference. Training needs of new Audit Committee members will also need to be identified and training provide.

Annual reviews of Audit Committee effectiveness are common, but for the early days, new Committees may wish to make use of the Local Government Association’s April 2024 “Ten Questions” to make sure they start by steering on the right path.

For a full copy of the Local Government Association’s guide, see [Ten questions for audit committees](#).

Ten questions for a newly formed Audit Committee

- **How can we be an effective Audit Committee?**
- **What might we miss as an Audit Committee?**
- **How will we get assurance for ourselves and others regarding governance, risk management, internal control, and the accuracy of financial reporting?**
- **What is management doing to ensure there is an effective culture?**
- **How does management support and promote the role of audit (internal and external)?**
- **How will management provide us with practical support?**
- **What is internal audit’s role, scope, and mandate? How should internal audit be resourced?**
- **How does internal audit set its audit plan? Is internal audit providing assurance around business-critical risks?**
- **How do we know we have an effective internal audit function?**
- **How should internal and external auditors work together to complement each other?**
- **What are the 2-3 things we should be most worried about?**

LGA Improvement and Assurance Framework

On 24 May 2024 the Local Government Association (LGA) published an Improvement and Assurance Framework which is applicable to unitary, county, district and borough councils in England, and to English authorities with all types of governance system.

There has not previously been a document or framework which sets out, in one place, the various required components of local government assurance, how they all fit together, how to use them effectively and what improvement support is available to help. This framework aims to:

- support councils to understand how to use the components within the framework and how they fit together;
- increase the effectiveness of assurance in the sector. While it cannot itself prevent failures, its use may reduce the risk – and costs – of statutory or non-statutory intervention, whether by Oflog, central government or other regulators;
- make it easier for local residents and businesses to understand how to hold their local authority to account.

The framework includes content on:

- A definition of assurance.
- How does accountability work?
- Components of the improvement and assurance framework.
- Working with auditors.
- Guidance on taking a structured and robust approach to considering commercial activity.

- Guidance for officers in key statutory roles and for key committees including the Audit Committee.
- How does the council hold itself to account?
- Key principles of good assurance and accountability.

The framework can be accessed here:

<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/improvement-and-assurance-framework-local-government-0>



The State of the Locals

In April, shortly before the recent local government elections, a “State of the Locals” report found that public trust in government at all levels is falling, but that public trust in local councillors and the Local Authorities they run is still almost twice as strong as public trust in the national UK government.

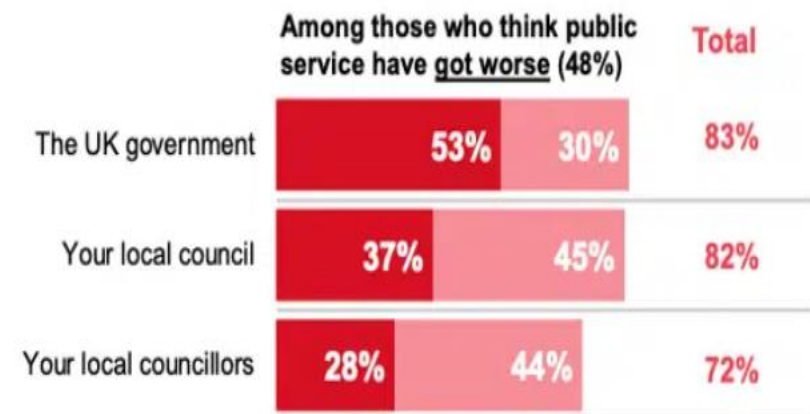
The report, published by the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU), found that the public do recognise the role that Local Authorities and their members play and do credit them when things go well. However, the report also found that the public believe services have got worse over the last five years overall; believe Local Authorities play a significant role in this (although not as great a role as the national government); and do not always understand what Local Authorities do.

For new members joining local government for the first time and for the more experienced members starting or continuing their term, it’s worth reflecting on LGIU findings. From the surveys that LGIU carried out, detailed findings show that people feel residents should be included more within decision-making processes; but there remains a low level of public awareness about what local government does.

This may be a good time to revisit communications strategies. Educating the public about the role and functions of local government, as well as the outcomes that members are actually able to achieve, might not only protect trust at its current level above national government, but also pave the way for a stronger level of trust overall in the future.

For a full copy of the LGIU report, see [The State of the Locals 2024 - LGIU](#)

State of the Locals extract: Who do the public think are responsible?



Productivity plans – new guidelines revealed and a note of caution

On 16th April 2024, Local Government Minister Simon Hoare wrote to all Local Authority Chief Executives, asking them to formally begin compiling their productivity plans. Key things for members to be aware of are:

- There is no formal template and there are no specific metrics to report;
- Four categories are proposed for consideration. These surround resources; technology; reducing wasteful spend; and the barriers preventing progress;
- Metrics and performance indicators are expected to be included in the plans, but Local Authorities can decide for themselves which ones are relevant to include;
- Plans should be three to four pages long and need to be returned to DLUHC by 19th July 2024, with members having endorsed them first; and
- For transparency, plans should then be published on the Local Authority's website, so that residents can see them and, over time, monitor progress.

Whilst this may feel like additional burden, there will presumably be scope for using key performance indicator metrics already available.

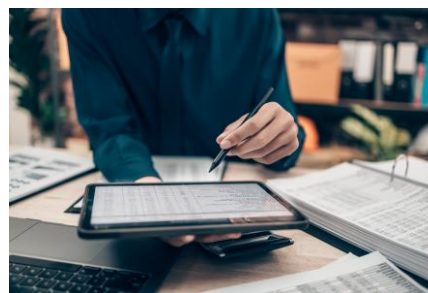
The current intention of government is not to use Productivity Plans for rating or scoring or for league tables, but rather to inform policy considerations in the future. However, most Councils will remember that the Times recently used Office for Local Government data to compile and publish its own league table, so far without any redress from national government.

For Productivity Plan metrics, as for any other performance indicators, it will be important to be clear about what drives the metrics. Whether for a three-to-four-page productivity plan or for any other domain, simply obtaining data isn't enough. Understanding the data, explaining it to residents, and acting on it is ultimately what matters most.

For recent comments from the Local Government Lawyer on Simon Hoare's letter to Chief Executives and on the Times's league table see:

[Government reveals guidelines for new council 'productivity plans'](https://www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/government-reveals-guidelines-for-new-council-productivity-plans/) ([localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk](https://www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk))

[Councils cry foul after Oflog data used for Times article on 'worst-performing councils'](https://www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/councils-cry-foul-after-oflog-data-used-for-times-article-on-worst-performing-councils/) ([localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk](https://www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk))



Housing and homelessness – continuing crisis and a new reform

The Levelling-Up, Housing and Communities (LUHC) Committee published a report on the finances and sustainability of the social housing sector on 29th April 2024, arguing that the Government needs to deliver 90,000 more social homes for rent each year to alleviate the “continuing chronic shortage” of social housing.

Just one day later, latest quarterly statistics on statutory homelessness and households in temporary accommodation were released. They made for sobering reading when compared with equivalent quarterly statistics from the previous year, underlining the real affect that our shortage of housing is having:

- 4.8% increase in overall initial assessments for homelessness year on year;
- 15.8% increase in households owed a relief duty this year compared to last;
- 15.3% increase in households owed a main homelessness duty;
- 12.1% increase in households in temporary accommodation;
- 15% increase in households with children in temporary accommodation.

For short term responses to homelessness, the February 2024 announcement that the Government would top up local authority homelessness prevention grants by £109 million will doubtless be helpful, as perhaps could be some certainty around the future of no-fault eviction laws. For a long-term solution though, addressing the supply of housing stock itself may still the best means of addressing the root cause of homelessness issues.

A new reform came into effect on the same day that homelessness statistics were published. Since 30th April, Local Authorities have been empowered to buy land for development through using Compulsory Purchase Orders without paying inflated ‘hope value’ costs. ‘Hope value’ estimates the cost land could be worth if it was developed on in the future, often meaning that Local Authorities have been forced to pay potentially thousands more to buy the land they need for housing and/ or have become entrenched in protracted disputes.

Housing and homelessness are complex areas and there is unlikely to be any quick fix solution. The new reform may help stimulate the building activity needed to address at least one part of the problem though, and in this respect is likely to be welcome.

For a full copy of the LUHC Committee report, see

[The Finances and Sustainability of the Social Housing Sector \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/publications/2024/04/levelling-up-housing-and-communities-committee-report-the-finance-and-sustainability-of-the-social-housing-sector)

For the latest statistics on homelessness and households in temporary accommodation, see [Statutory homelessness in England: October to December 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-october-to-december-2023)

For details of the new reform around hope values, see [New powers for councils to help build more affordable homes - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-powers-for-councils-to-help-build-more-affordable-homes)

Design for life – the smart regeneration journey to 2030

Leading think tank Localis published an analysis of local regeneration policy on 8th May 2024, making a series of recommendations to national government around how best to develop the public realm over the rest of this decade.

Localis highlighted that local regeneration projects, particularly in urban areas, are key to addressing the national housing crisis; national net zero targets; and national health aspirations.

Recommendations that the report called on national government to implement included:

- Return to strategic regional planning;
- Establish regional planning offices;
- Provide single revenue and capital budgets to Local Authorities instead of splitting the budgets;
- Stop loosening regulation over council asset sales;
- Mandate that local and regional development plans will include carbon assessments and promote urban sites;
- Provide long term financial settlements, to reduce fiscal uncertainty and encourage public-private partnership; and
- For health and wellbeing aspects of regeneration, base additional funding on demographic profiles.

Localis described local authorities as “the hinge around which regeneration actors revolve.” Whilst their recommendations would require changes in national policy, there are best practice questions that Local Authorities can be asking themselves now:

- Is our planning department properly financed?
- Are our regeneration goals sufficiently balanced across housing, carbon and community health needs?
- Do we have effective ongoing relationships with partners so that we can leverage short term funds quickly when they do become available?
- Can we scale up capacity for regeneration by pooling leverage with local NHS bodies, the third sector and community organisations?

For a full copy of the Localis report, see

<https://www.localis.org.uk/research/design-life-smart-regeneration-journey-2030/>



Simpler Recycling – new rules to be aware of

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) announced on 9th May 2024 that simpler recycling rules are going to be introduced. Local Authorities are likely to be required to comply by 2026. The new rules aim to simplify recycling processes and boost recycling rates, although they have met with significant criticism.

To be ready for compliance with the new rules, Local Authorities need to prepare for:

Standardisation:

All Local Authorities in England will be required to collect a consistent set of recyclable materials: Plastics; Glass; Metals; Paper and Card; and Food Waste. The intention is to remove uncertainty and variation around the country about what can and cannot be recycled.

A three-bin arrangement:

'Dry recycling' items such as cardboard and paper, tins and glass will be collected in one bin. Organic waste (food and garden) will be collected in a second bin. Residual (non-recyclable) waste will be collected in a third.

Weekly and fortnightly requirements:

Food waste collection will be required weekly. Local Authorities will be required to collect residual waste on a fortnightly basis, even if at present they have already successfully transitioned to a three-weekly cycle.

Critics have pointed out that mixed dry recycling may contaminate paper and lead to less of it being recycled; whilst the move away from three weekly residual waste collection in favour of a fortnightly residual waste collection is likely to reduce recycling overall. Nevertheless, the reform has been passed and Local Authorities will need to be ready. Important steps to take now are:

- Review and update the Waste Management Strategy;
- Engage with finance business partners to ensure that activity will be accurately recorded and, in turn, translated to relevant new funding claims;
- Explore whether the changes in themselves generate new income opportunities; and
- Assess the readiness of contract delivery partners.

For DEFRA's comments on the reform, see [Simpler bin collections for England to boost recycling - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/simpler-bin-collections-for-england-to-boost-recycling)



Audit Committee resources

The Audit Committee and organisational effectiveness in local authorities (CIPFA):

<https://www.cipfa.org/services/support-for-audit-committees/local-authority-audit-committees>

LGA Regional Audit Forums for Audit Committee Chairs

These are convened at least three times a year and are supported by the LGA. The forums provide an opportunity to share good practice, discuss common issues and offer training on key topics. Forums are organised by a lead authority in each region. Please email ami.beeton@local.gov.uk LGA Senior Adviser, for more information.

Public Sector Internal Audit Standards

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-sector-internal-audit-standards>

Code of Audit Practice for local auditors (NAO):

<https://www.nao.org.uk/code-audit-practice/>

Governance risk and resilience framework: material for those with a leadership responsibility on good governance (CfGS):

<https://www.cfgs.org.uk/material-for-those-with-a-leadership-responsibility-on-good-governance/>

The Three Lines of Defence Model (IAA)

<https://www.theiia.org/globalassets/documents/resources/the-iias-three-lines-model-an-update-of-the-three-lines-of-defense-july-2020/three-lines-model-updated-english.pdf>

Risk Management Guidance / The Orange Book (UK Government):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/orange-book>

CIPFA Guidance and Codes

The following all have a charge, so do make enquiries to determine if copies are available within your organisation.

Audit Committees: Practical Guidance For Local Authorities And Police

<https://www.cipfa.org/policy-and-guidance/publications/a/audit-committees-practical-guidance-for-local-authorities-and-police-2022-edition>

Delivering Good Governance in Local Government

<https://www.cipfa.org/policy-and-guidance/publications/d/delivering-good-governance-in-local-government-framework-2016-edition>

Financial Management Code

<https://www.cipfa.org/fmcode>

Prudential Code

<https://www.cipfa.org/policy-and-guidance/publications/t/the-prudential-code-for-capital-finance-in-local-authorities-2021-edition>

Treasury Management Code

<https://www.cipfa.org/policy-and-guidance/publications/t/treasury-management-in-the-public-services-code-of-practice-and-crosssectoral-guidance-notes-2021-edition>



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