

The Audit Findings for Halton Council

Year ended 31 March 2015

3 September 2015

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3 September 2015

Dear Sirs

Audit Findings for Halton Borough Council for the year ending 31 March 2015

This Audit Findings report highlights the significant findings arising from the audit for the benefit of those charged with governance, as required by International Standard on Auditing (UK & Ireland) 260. Its contents have been discussed with management and will be discussed with the Business Efficiency Board on 23 September 2015.

As auditors we are responsible for performing the audit, in accordance with International Standards on Auditing (UK & Ireland), 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 for the preparation of the financial statements.

The contents of this report relate only to those matters which came to our attention during the conduct of our normal audit procedures which are designed primarily for the purpose of expressing our opinion on the financial statements. Our audit is not designed to test all internal controls or identify all areas of control weakness. However, where, as part of our testing, we identify any control weaknesses, we will report these to you. In consequence, our work cannot be relied upon to disclose defalcations or other irregularities, or to include all possible improvements in internal control that a more extensive special examination might identify. 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.

We would like to take this opportunity to record our appreciation for the kind assistance provided by the finance team and other staff during our audit.

Yours faithfully

Mark Heap

Chartered Accountants

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Section 1: Executive summary

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Executive summary

Purpose of this report

This report highlights the key matters arising from our audit of Halton Council's (the Council) financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2015. It is also used to report our audit findings to management and those charged with governance in accordance with the requirements of International Standard on Auditing 260 (ISA UK&I).

Under the Audit Commission's Code of Audit Practice we are required to report whether, in our opinion, the Council's financial statements present a true and fair view of the financial position and expenditure and income for the year and whether they have been properly prepared in accordance with the CIPFA Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting. We are also required to reach a formal conclusion on whether the Council has put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources (the Value for Money conclusion).

Introduction

In the conduct of our audit we have not had to alter or change our planned audit approach, which we communicated to you in our Audit Plan dated May 2015.

Our audit is substantially complete although we are finalising our work in the following areas:

- other revenues;
- investments and borrowing;
- property plant and equipment;
- operating expenses;
- housing benefit expenditure testing;
- related party transactions;

- review of the final version of the financial statements;
- obtaining and reviewing the final management letter of representation;
- review of the final version of the Annual Governance Statement;
- updating our post balance sheet events review, to the date of signing the opinion; and
- Whole of Government Accounts.

We received draft financial statements and accompanying working papers at the start of our audit, in accordance with the agreed timetable. Officers were available throughout our audit fieldwork to provide additional supporting information in a timely manner and resolved our queries promptly.

Key issues arising from our audit

Financial statements opinion

We anticipate providing an unqualified opinion in respect of the financial statements. Our audit work so far has found no material errors or adjustments.

The key messages arising from our audit of the Council's financial statements are:

- due to the omission of some cash related closedown journals, balance sheet cash has been understated by £0.9 million, and creditors understated by the same amount; officers have agreed to adjust for this.

The pre-audit financial statements recorded Net Expenditure of Continuing Operations of £126.819 million. We have also identified a number of adjustments to improve the presentation of the financial statements.

Further details are set out in section two of this report.

Value for Money conclusion

We are pleased to report that, based on our review of the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources, we propose to give an unqualified VfM conclusion.

Further detail of our work on Value for Money is set out in section three of this report.

Whole of Government Accounts (WGA)

We will complete our work in respect of the Whole of Government Accounts in accordance with the national timetable.

Controls

Roles and responsibilities

The Council's management is responsible for the identification, assessment, management and monitoring of risk, and for developing, operating and monitoring the system of internal control.

Our audit is not designed to test all internal controls or identify all areas of control weakness. However, where, as part of our testing, we identify any control weaknesses, we report these to the Council.

Findings

We draw your attention in particular to the following control issue identified during the audit:

- Last year we identified a material adjustment that arose from journal entries that were not actioned and should have been integral to the closedown procedures. This year there was non-processing of some cash related closedown journals that resulted in balance sheet cash being understated by £0.9 million. Whilst the balance per the bank statement had been reconciled to the ledger each month during the year, this had not been completed on a consistent basis at year-end. This represents a deficiency in internal control as cash is material by nature, though we are satisfied that there is no material impact on the financial position of the Council.

Further details are provided within section two of this report.

The way forward

Matters arising from the financial statements audit and review of the Council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources have been discussed with the Operational Director, Finance.

We have made a number of recommendations, which are set out in the action plan at Appendix A. These have been discussed and agreed with the Operational Director, Finance and the finance team.

Acknowledgment

We would like to take this opportunity to record our appreciation for the assistance provided by the finance team and other staff during our audit.

Grant Thornton UK LLP
September 2015

Section 2: Audit findings

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Audit findings

In this section we present our findings in respect of matters and risks identified at the planning stage of the audit and additional matters that arose during the course of our work. We set out on the following pages the work we have performed and the findings arising from our work in respect of the audit risks we identified in our audit plan, presented to the Business Efficiency Board on 3 June 2015. We also set out the adjustments to the financial statements arising from our audit work and our findings in respect of internal controls.

Changes to Audit Plan

We have not made any changes to our Audit Plan as previously communicated to you on 3 June 2015.

Audit opinion

Our proposed audit opinion is set out at Appendix B.

Audit findings against significant risks

"Significant risks often relate to significant non-routine transactions and judgmental matters. Non-routine transactions are transactions that are unusual, either due to 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&I) 315).

In this section we detail our response to the significant risks of material misstatement which we identified in the Audit Plan. As we noted in our plan, there are two presumed significant risks which are applicable to all audits under auditing standards.

	Risks identified in our audit plan	Work completed	Assurance gained and issues arising
1.	<p>Improper revenue recognition</p> <p>Under ISA (UK&I) 240 there is a presumed risk that revenue may be misstated due to improper recognition .</p>	<p>We have rebutted this presumption for Halton Council because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • there is little incentive to manipulate revenue recognition; • opportunities to manipulate revenue recognition are very limited; and • the culture and ethical frameworks of local authorities, including Halton Council, mean that all forms of fraud are seen as unacceptable. <p>We therefore do not consider this to be a significant risk for the Council.</p> <p>As part of our audit we have completed work to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • review your revenue recognition policies; • test material revenue streams; and • review unusual significant transactions 	<p>Our audit work so far has not identified any significant issues in relation to the risk identified.</p> <p>We set out later in this section of the report our work and findings on key accounting estimates and judgments in respect of revenue recognition.</p>
2.	<p>Management override of controls</p> <p>Under ISA (UK&I) 240 there is a presumed risk of management over-ride of controls</p>	<p>We have completed work to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • review accounting estimates, judgements and decisions made by management; • test journal entries; and • review unusual significant transactions. 	<p>Our audit work so far has not identified any evidence of management override of controls. In particular the findings of our review of journal controls and testing of journal entries has not identified any significant issues.</p> <p>We set out later in this section of the report our work and findings on key accounting estimates and judgments.</p>

Audit findings against other risks

In this section we detail our response to the other risks of material misstatement which we identified in the Audit Plan. Recommendations, together with management responses, are attached at Appendix A.

Transaction cycle	Description of risk	Work completed	Assurance gained & issues arising
Operating expenses	Creditors understated or not recorded in the correct period	We have undertaken the following work in relation to this risk: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • documentation of processes and controls in place in the operating expenses cycle; • walkthrough testing to confirm the operation of controls is in line with our understanding; • sample testing of expenditure items during the year and to creditors balances at the year end; • review of the accruals process, and review and testing of significant estimates made • cut-off testing to obtain assurance that creditors have been accounted for in the correct financial year. 	Our audit work so far has not identified any significant issues in relation to the risk identified. Due to non-processing of some cash related closedown journals, balance sheet cash has been understated by £0.9 million, and creditors understated by the same amount. Officers have agreed to amend for this.
Employee remuneration	Employee remuneration accrual understated	We have undertaken the following work in relation to this risk: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • documentation and identification of the processes and key controls within the employee remuneration cycle; • walkthrough testing to confirm the operation of controls is in line with our understanding; • substantive testing of payments made to employees during the 2014-15 financial year; • use of analytical techniques to compare expected payroll costs with actual; and • review of payroll reconciliations between the general ledger and the payroll system. 	Our audit work so far has not identified any significant issues in relation to the risk identified.

Accounting policies, estimates & judgements

In this section we report on our consideration of accounting policies, in particular revenue recognition policies, and key estimates and judgements made and included with the Council's financial statements.

Accounting area	Summary of policy	Comments	Assessment
Revenue recognition	<p>The Council has adopted the standard revenue recognition policies for Local Government as set out in the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting 2014/15 (The Code) and International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The policy for revenue recognition from the sale of goods and provision of services is set out in note 3(a) of the Council's Statement of Accounting Policies. Revenue from the sale of goods is recognised when the Council transfers the significant risks and rewards of ownership to the purchaser and it is probable that economic benefits or service potential associated with the transaction will flow to the Council. Revenue from the provision of services is recognised when the Council can measure reliably the percentage of completion of the transaction and it is probable that economic benefits or service potential associated with the transaction will flow to the Council. Council Tax and Non Domestic Rate income recognition is set out in note 7 of the Council's Statement of Accounting Policies. Income is recognised in the Collection Fund on an accruals basis, when it is due from the Council Tax or Non Domestic Rate payer. The Council's share of this income is recognised in the CIES. Government grants are recognised when there is reasonable assurance that the Council will comply with any conditions attached to the payments, and the grants or contributions will be received (note 12 of the Council's Statement of Accounting Policies). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Council's policies are appropriate and consistent with the relevant accounting framework – the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting 2014/15 (The Code) and International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS). The main elements of the Council's revenues are predictable and there is minimal judgement required from the Council. The accounting policies are appropriately disclosed in the Council's Statement of Accounting Policies (notes 3a, 7 and 12). 	●
Policy and judgements - Group accounts	<p>The Council has a number of interests in companies and has previously prepared annual group financial statements. For 2014/15 the Council made the decision not to prepare group accounts as the transactions relating to group entities are not material. This is set out at note 13 of the Council's Statement of Accounting Policies.</p>	<p>The Council's policy and judgement in respect of not preparing group accounts is proportionate and adequately disclosed.</p>	●
Policy and judgements - schools	<p>The CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting for 2014/15 includes new requirements for schools in local authorities. At note 17 to the Statement of Accounting Policies, the Council has concluded that Community Schools and Community Special Schools form part of the Council's non-current Assets. For all other schools the Council is merely using the non-current asset under licence.</p>	<p>The Council's policy and judgement in respect of schools appears reasonable and adequately disclosed. However our review is still in progress.</p>	●

Assessment



● Marginal accounting policy which could potentially attract attention from regulators

● Accounting policy appropriate and disclosures sufficient



● Accounting policy appropriate but scope for improved disclosure

Accounting policies, estimates & judgements (continued)

In this section we report on our consideration of accounting policies, in particular revenue recognition policies, and key estimates and judgements made and included with the Council's financial statements.




Accounting area	Summary of policy	Comments	Assessment
<p>Policy and judgements – borrowing in advance of need</p>	<p>The Statement of Accounts reports that 'The Council undertook new long term borrowing of £113m in 2014/15, taking advantage of historically low borrowing rates from the Public Works Loan Board. The borrowing was taken in advance of need for the contribution from the Council towards Mersey Gateway Crossing construction costs. Borrowings at low rates will represent a saving to the scheme with interest rates expected to increase at the start of 2016, ahead of the Council having to make a number of payments from September 2016.' (p11)</p> <p>It is similarly disclosed at notes 18 (Capital Expenditure and Financing), 23 (Investments), 30 (Borrowing) and 34 (Financial instruments).</p>	<p>The Council's policy and judgement in respect of borrowing in advance of need was based on consideration of the economic market and the risk that the Council may be bound to obtain a significant amount of borrowings at a time of unfavourable interest rates. The judgement was discussed and agreed with members, came within the Annual Treasury Management Strategy and is disclosed in the Statement of Accounts at notes 18 (Capital Expenditure and Financing), 23 (Investments), 30 (Borrowing) and 34 (Financial instruments). It is also drawn to the attention of readers in the Foreword by the Operation Director – Finance.</p>	
<p>Estimates – Property, Plant and Equipment revaluations (PPE)</p>	<p>Note 17 to the Core Financial Statements sets out the authority's rolling programme of property, plant and equipment revaluations.</p>	<p>We are currently completing our work on assessing whether the carrying amount of Property, Plant and Equipment (based on these valuations) does not differ materially from the fair value at 31 March 2015.</p> <p>In our view, however, and as reported last year, this rolling programme does not meet the Code's requirement in paragraph 4.1.2.35 to value items within a class of property, plant and equipment simultaneously. This paragraph of the Code, which is based on IAS16 Property, Plant and Equipment, does permit a class of assets to be revalued on a rolling basis provided that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the revaluation of the class of assets is completed within a 'short period' • the revaluations are kept up to date. <p>We would normally expect this 'short period' to be within a single financial year. This is because the purpose of simultaneous valuations is to 'avoid reporting a mixture of costs and values as at different dates'. This purpose is not met where a revaluation programme for a class of assets straddles more than one financial year.</p>	

Assessment

-  Marginal accounting policy which could potentially attract attention from regulators
-  Accounting policy appropriate and disclosures sufficient


-  Accounting policy appropriate but scope for improved disclosure

Accounting policies, estimates & judgements continued

Accounting area	Summary of policy	Comments	Assessment
Estimates and judgements – estimation uncertainty	<p>Other key estimates and judgements are set out at note 33 of the Council's Statement of Accounting Policies and include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PPE useful life of assets; • pensions liability; 	<p>Our work so far has identified:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The policies appear appropriate and are supported by reasonable methodologies. The potential financial statement impact of different assumptions appear reasonable. • Hymans Robertson LLP is engaged on behalf of the Council by Cheshire West and Chester Council (Pension fund administrator) to provide expert advice about the assumptions to be applied. The methods and assumptions used are in accordance with the Code and therefore reasonable and relevant for a LG body. 	
Going concern	<p>The Directors have a reasonable expectation that the services provided by the Council will continue for the foreseeable future. For this reason, they continue to adopt the going concern basis in preparing the financial statements.</p>	<p>We have reviewed the Directors' assessment and are satisfied with management's assessment that the going concern basis is appropriate for the 2014/15 financial statements.</p>	
Other accounting policies	<p>We have reviewed the Council's policies against the requirements of the CIPFA Code and accounting standards.</p>	<p>Our review of accounting policies so far has not highlighted any significant issues which we wish to bring to your attention.</p>	

Assessment

 Marginal accounting policy which could potentially attract attention from regulators

 Accounting policy appropriate but scope for improved disclosure

 Accounting policy appropriate and disclosures sufficient

Other communication requirements

We set out below details of other matters which we are required by auditing standards to communicate to those charged with governance.

	Issue	Commentary
1.	Matters in relation to fraud	We have previously discussed the risk of fraud with the Business Efficiency Board. We have not been made aware of any incidents in the period and no other issues have been identified during the course of our audit.
2.	Matters in relation to laws and regulations	We are not aware of any significant incidences of non-compliance with relevant laws and regulations.
3.	Written representations	A letter of representation has been requested from the Council.
4.	Disclosures	Our review so far has found no non-trivial omissions in the financial statements. We have identified a number of adjustments to improve the presentation of the financial statements.
5.	Matters in relation to related parties	We are not currently aware of any related party transactions which have not been disclosed.
6.	Confirmation requests from third parties	We obtained positive direct confirmations from PWLB, and other banks for loans and short term investment balances. We are awaiting confirmation for a number of loans and investments.
7.	Annual Governance Statement (AGS)	<p>The original AGS was presented with the pre-audit accounts and is to be signed as appropriate by the Chief Executive and Leader in line with the Accounts & Audit regulations and Code. Our review during the audit identified that the Statement is in line with the Guidance and with our knowledge of the issues at the Council.</p> <p>We made a recommendation to improve clarity within the statement to include an indication of the level of assurance that the systems and processes that comprise the entity's governance arrangements can provide. Officers have agreed to include a specific statement on this as an overall conclusion or at the end of the section on the review of effectiveness.</p>

Internal controls


The purpose of an audit is to express an opinion on the financial statements.

Our audit included consideration of internal controls relevant to the preparation of the financial statements in order to design audit procedures that are appropriate in the circumstances, but not for the purpose of expressing an opinion on the effectiveness of internal control. We considered and walked through the internal controls for Employee Remuneration and Operating Expenses as set out on page 10 above.

As part of our planned programme of work, our information system specialist team carried out a high level review of the general IT control environment at the Council. This was completed as part of the review of the internal controls system. We are pleased to report that no significant issues arose from our work. We identified a small number of areas where the Council's existing IT arrangements can be developed and have reported these to management.

Our work on the documentation and walkthrough of significant systems at our interim audit identified no significant deficiencies to report to you.

The matters that we identified during the course of our final accounts audit are set out in the table below. These and other recommendations, together with management responses, are included in the action plan attached at Appendix A.

	Assessment	Issue and risk	Recommendations
1.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Last year we identified a material adjustment that arose from journal entries that were not actioned and should have been integral to the closedown procedures. This year there was non-processing of some cash related closedown journals that resulted in balance sheet cash being understated by £0.9 million. Whilst the balance per the bank statement had been reconciled to the ledger each month during the year, this had not been completed on a consistent basis at year-end. This represents a deficiency in internal control as cash is material by nature, though we are satisfied that there is no material impact on the financial position of the Council. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure bank reconciliations (reconciling the balance per the bank statements at year end to the ledger) are completed on a consistent basis. Ensure all appropriate closedown journals are identified and processed promptly.

Adjusted misstatements

A number of adjustments to the draft financial statements have been identified during the audit process. We are required to report all non-trivial misstatements to those charged with governance, whether or not the financial statements have been adjusted by management. The table below summarises the adjustments arising from the audit which have been processed by management.

Impact of adjusted misstatements

All adjusted misstatements are set out below along with the impact on the primary statements and the reported financial position.

Detail	Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Account £'000	Balance Sheet £'000	Impact on total net expenditure £000
1 Due to non-processing of some cash related closedown journals, balance sheet cash has been understated by £0.9 million, and creditors understated by the same amount.	0	0	0
Overall impact	£0	£0	£0

Impact of uncorrected misstatements in the prior year

	Detail	Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Account £'000	Balance Sheet £'000	Reason for not adjusting
1	Note 26: Cash and Cash Equivalents. Included in the Bank Current Accounts figure is an amount of £720,004 relating to Wade Deacon High School which has become an Academy. There is also £4,408 relating to Fairfield High School which merged with Wade Deacon. This is no longer an asset of the Council and should be expensed to revenue and then extinguished by release from the schools' reserve.	724	724	Agreed that this was incorrect. The school balance needed to be reversed through the Schools Reserves. This was not adjusted in the 2013/14 accounts as it was considered to be immaterial to the results of the Council and its financial position at the year-end. This was corrected in the 2014/15 accounts.
2	An outstanding item of £9,777 has not been cleared from the bank reconciliation since change to Aggresso system in 2010.	10	10	Agreed to write off in 2014/15. Any future reconciling items will be resolved in the following year to ensure no on-going reconciling items. This was not adjusted in the 2013/14 accounts as it was considered to be immaterial to the results of the Council and its financial position at the year-end.
3	Note (41) in respect of the detail for non-cash movements in the Cash Flow Statement was not amended to provide further analysis of the figures on the face of the Statement.	0	0	Disclosure note: A more comprehensive analysis has been provided in 2014/15.
	Overall impact	£734	£734	

Misclassifications & disclosure changes

The table below provides details of misclassification and disclosure changes identified during the audit which have been made in the final set of financial statements.

Adjustment type	Value £'000	Account balance	Impact on the financial statements
1 Disclosure	n/a	Statement of Accounting Policies Policy note 17 - Non-Current Assets, Property, Plant and Equipment	Given clarification in the 14/15 Code, disclosure could be enhanced by setting out the accounting treatment adopted upon derecognition of an academy school. Infrastructure assets, community assets and vehicles, plant and equipment are carried at depreciated historic cost. Policy should refer also to use of depreciated historic cost as a proxy for fair value for vehicles, plant and equipment.
2 Disclosure	n/a	Foreword by Operational Director - Finance	The Foreword discloses a charge for depreciation and impairment of PPE – it would be clearer to say 'Charge for Depreciation and Revaluation Losses'. As there are no group accounts it would be better to leave out the explanation.
3 Disclosure	n/a	Statement of Accounts	The accounts contain a few references to terminology that has been superseded in the current Code, for example Fixed Assets are now known as Non Current Assets.
4 Disclosure	n/a	Statement of Accounting Policies Policy note 33 - Assumptions made about the future and other major sources of estimation uncertainty.	The disclosure should be limited to those estimates that have a significant risk of resulting in a material adjustment within the next financial year (Code 3.4.2.83). Disclosures related to impairment of debtors and provision for business rate appeals would not appear to fall into this category, and could be removed.
5 Disclosure	n/a	Capital commitments Notes to the Collection Fund.	The Code, paragraph 3.2.2.29 requires the presentation of comparative information in respect of all amounts reported in the accounts. There are two areas in respect of which comparatives have not been provided: Capital commitments; and Notes to the Collection Fund.

Misclassifications & disclosure changes

The table below provides details of misclassification and disclosure changes identified during the audit which have been made in the final set of financial statements.

Adjustment type	Value £'000	Account balance	Impact on the financial statements
6 Disclosure	n/a	Statement of Accounting Policies Policy note 1 - General.	There is no mention of the requirement to produce accounts under the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2011. An Exceptional items policy is no longer applicable under the Code and can be deleted.
7 Disclosure	n/a	Statement of Responsibilities for the Statement of Accounts	The Statement of Responsibilities for the Statement of accounts has been enhanced to provide an explicit statement that the Statement of Accounts presents a true and fair view of the financial position and income and expenditure of Halton Borough Council for the year ended 31 March 2015'
8 Disclosure	n/a	Statement of Accounts	We made recommendations to correct a few minor editing errors and to improve the format of the statements in respect of the Balance Sheet; Movement in Reserves Statement; Cash Flow Statement; Pooled Budgets note 11; Related Party Transactions note 15; Heritage Assets note 19; Investments note 23; Leases note 29; and Pensions note 33.
9 Disclosure	n/a	Notes to the Accounts 3. Exit Packages	Note enhanced to include the amount charged in the current year to the CIES: 'The cost of redundancies charged to the Comprehensive Income & Expenditure Statement in 2014/15 was £0.449m (2013/14 - £0.178m).'
10 Disclosure	n/a	Supplementary Financial Statements – Group Accounts	As Group Accounts have not been prepared it would be better to call this 'Interest in Companies and Other Entities' and amalgamate it with the policy note on p121.

Section 3: Value for Money

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Value for Money

Value for money conclusion

The Code of Audit Practice 2010 (the Code) describes the Council's responsibilities to put in place proper arrangements to:

- secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources;
- ensure proper stewardship and governance; and
- review regularly the adequacy and effectiveness of these arrangements.

We are required to give our VfM conclusion based on two criteria specified by the Audit Commission which support our reporting responsibilities under the Code.

These criteria are:

The Council has proper arrangements in place for securing financial resilience - the Council has robust systems and processes to manage effectively financial risks and opportunities, and to secure a stable financial position that enables it to continue to operate for the foreseeable future.

The Council has proper arrangements for challenging how it secures economy, efficiency and effectiveness - the Council is prioritising its resources within tighter budgets, for example by achieving cost reductions and by improving efficiency and productivity.

Key findings

Securing financial resilience

We have undertaken a review which considered the Council's arrangements against the three expected characteristics of proper arrangements as defined by the Audit Commission:

- Financial governance;
- Financial planning; and
- Financial control.

Overall our work highlighted that the Council has robust systems and processes to manage effectively financial risks and opportunities, and to secure a stable financial position that enables it to continue to operate for the foreseeable future. The Council continues to demonstrate good financial performance, despite the financial and demographic pressures facing Local Government. However, based on current funding expectations, it has identified that it could reach a financial 'tipping point' in 2018/19 where savings and transformation options have been exhausted and increasing cost pressures and reduced reserves could mean significant reductions in essential services would need to be made in order to achieve a balanced budget.

Challenging economy, efficiency and effectiveness

We have considered the Council's arrangements to challenge economy, efficiency and effectiveness against the following themes:

- Prioritising resources
- Improving efficiency & productivity

Overall our work highlighted that the Council is prioritising its resources within tighter budgets, for example by achieving cost reductions and by improving efficiency and productivity.

Overall VfM conclusion

On the basis of our work, and having regard to the guidance on the specified criteria published by the Audit Commission, we are satisfied that in all significant respects the Council has put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources for the year ending 31 March 2015.

We set out below our detailed findings against six risk areas which have been used to assess the Council's performance against the Audit Commission's criteria. We summarise our assessment of each risk area using a red, amber or green (RAG) rating, based on the following definitions.

The table below and overleaf summarises our overall rating for each of the themes reviewed.

Green	Adequate arrangements
Amber	Adequate arrangements, with areas for development
Red	Inadequate arrangements

Theme	Summary findings	RAG rating
<p>Key indicators of performance</p>	<p>There were no significant adverse indicators of performance during the year except for sickness absence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The figure for sickness absence this year is an improvement on last year but is still below target. There has been a steady increase from 9.02 days per FTE in 2011/12 to 11.24 in 2013/14 with 2014/15 reducing to 10.44 against a target of 8.5. Asset disposals increased from £6.9 million to £11.7 million and are part of the planned capital programme and overall asset management strategy. Actual borrowing costs for the year were less than budgeted and income from investments exceeded the income target. The Council increased borrowing by £113 million in 2014/15 for the Council's contribution towards the construction costs of the Mersey Gateway Project. Savings for 2014/15 were taken from the budget and there was an overall surplus of £0.2 million; the most significant overspend of £4.4 million in respect of Children and Families was largely anticipated throughout the year and partially offset by other savings within the Directorate and balanced overall within the overall Council net underspend. There was no evidence of any cash flow difficulties; between 2013/14 and 2014/15, creditors increased slightly from £32.5 million to £33.9 million and debtors reduced substantially from £65.6 million to £20.9 million. Collection of Council Tax and Business Rates both decreased marginally although they remain above the 95% target at 95.47% and 97.04%. The average time for processing new Housing and Council Tax Benefit claims reduced from 15.18 days to 14.42, below the target of 17 days. The Council's value of usable reserves as a percentage of gross expenditure for 2014/15 was 16%, consistent with previous years; there was a slight increase to the general reserve from £8.6 million to £8.8 million. However, the Council subsequently approved use of £5.5m of useable reserves, including £3.5 million from general reserves, to assist with delivering a balanced budget for 2015/16. 	<p>Green</p>
<p>Strategic financial planning</p>	<p>The financial planning process is focussed on the achievement of corporate priorities. The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) shows that local and national issues are adequately taken into account, assumptions are reasonable and resources are focussed on corporate priorities. The MTFS is kept up to date and supports the annual budget setting process, development of business and other plans and strategies. Halton Council has a good track record of setting a balanced budget, achieving both a positive outturn and savings/efficiencies. In 2014/15 the outturn against the budget of £108.2 million was a small surplus of £0.2 million with a general reserve going forward of £8.8 million. Capital spending of £32.4 million represented 74% delivery of the plan with slippage of some of the larger projects, including Castlefields Regeneration and Widnes Waterfront.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The MTFS has regard to the Council's priority areas: A Healthy Halton; Halton's Urban Renewal; Children and Young People in Halton; Employment Learning and Skills in Halton; and A Safer Halton. It links to the Council's Corporate Plan and the Sustainable Community Strategy. The 3-year MTFS is linked to the Corporate Plan and provides the context and assumptions for preparing the annual budget which is then set within this context. The MTFS 2015/16 to 2017/18 was reported to the Council's Executive Board in November 2014 and was updated in February 2015 to inform the 2015/16 budget. The latest update identified shortfalls in funding of £19 million, £18 million, and £11 million over the next three years and as a result a total of £48m will need to be removed from the Council's budget. The MTFS and the annual budgets demonstrate that the leadership team do not focus primarily on the short term. Review of savings plans over the next two years show the inclusion of some short term fixes, including the use of £3.5 million general reserves in 2015/16, but the focus of savings identification is on recurrent savings. In the past, we identified no weaknesses in the Council's medium term financial planning processes that would cause us to qualify the VfM Conclusion or comment negatively on arrangements. The planning assumptions behind the 2015/16 to 2017/18 MTFS appear realistic and achievable although the Council has acknowledged the challenges. The Council loses £23 million in formula grant reductions over the next three years and based on current funding expectations, it has identified that it could reach a financial 'tipping point' in 2018/19 where savings and transformation options have been exhausted and increasing cost pressures and reduced reserves could mean significant reductions in essential services would need to be made in order to achieve a balanced budget. 	<p>Green</p>

Theme	Summary findings	RAG rating
Financial governance	<p>The Council has effective financial governance arrangements in place. Members and officers have a good understanding of the financial environment and the risks facing the Council. There is good executive and member engagement and adequate internal and external consultation on the budget-setting process. Budget reporting is at an appropriate level of detail to allow good monitoring and decision-making. The size of the Council and the impact of demand led and statutory services has driven the Council to consider new ways of working and it has worked effectively with partners over recent years, working jointly with neighbouring authorities, developing alternative delivery models and implementing pooled budgets. The Council is also an active participant in the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and Halton's Chief Executive and Strategic Director, Policy and Resources take the lead for the Combined Authority Scrutiny Panel.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The leadership team is made aware of financial matters through a variety of mechanisms including departmental meetings, performance reports to the Executive Board and scrutiny committees, budget seminars, briefings for the Labour group and opposition parties and regular meetings between portfolio holders and directorate leads. The Council has a Budget Working Group, comprising all Executive Board Members and each of the Chairs of all the other Boards and Committees. This meets on an on-going basis and reviews and considers the impact of savings proposals using lists of mandatory and discretionary services to help consider priorities. Risk management arrangements are in place and in addition to departmental risk registers and the corporate risk register, the Council has a budget risk register that highlights the significant financial risks facing the Council during budget preparations; it is also monitored and updated during the year to provide assurance that the risks to the budget identified are being managed. Directorate Risk Registers are updated each year alongside the development of Directorate Business Plans and the main financial risks facing the Council are included in the MTFS. From review of the current MTFS 2015/16 to 2017/18 and the two most recent budgets, the Council does not have a high dependence on one source of income. The Business Efficiency Board is 'the body charged with governance' and its terms of reference includes the core functions of an Audit Committee in line with CIPFA guidance. The main focus of the Business Efficiency Board is on governance and control related issues, receiving and approving the Council's financial statements each year and it also monitors the efficiency programme that is developed through the Budget Working Group and the Efficiency Programme Board. The Council is also an active participant in the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and Halton's Chief Executive and Strategic Director, Policy and Resources lead the Combined Authority Scrutiny Panel. 	Green
Financial control	<p>The process in place for budget setting and monitoring has a history of ensuring reliable and achievable budgets and savings plans. However, to address the challenges, the Council has identified that it may need to utilise reserves in the future to support on-going routine revenue expenditure and rely in part on growth in income, including business rates, to help close the funding gap over the life of the MTFS . The assurance framework and risk management processes are sound.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The savings programme is supported by a corporate project management team for savings and transformation that reports to the Efficiency Programme Board and the Business Efficiency Board. The Council has an effective in-house internal audit function which is in line with the CIPFA standards. Plans are approved by the Business Efficiency Board which also receives regular progress reports. For 2014/15 the Head of Internal Audit reported to the June 2015 Board that the Council continues to maintain an adequate framework of governance, risk management and control and the internal audit work carried out during the year provides assurance that the Council's main financial systems are operating effectively. There is a positive history of external audit unqualified opinions and value for money conclusions and the external auditor assessed the Council's arrangements for financial resilience as 'green' in 2013/14. The Council has an experienced finance team and the main financial systems provide reliable and timely financial monitoring information to enable the Council to identify and manage financial risks. 	Green

Theme	Summary findings	RAG rating
Prioritising resources	<p>The Council has a good strategic approach to reducing costs and improving VfM through its strategic financial planning and budget-setting processes and its efficiency programme. Decision-making is based on appropriate and adequate information and although savings plans include some short -term fixes, they are mainly based on recurrent and long-term measures. The Council has developed joint plans to ensure transformation in integrated health and social care through a single pooled budget of over £30 million as part of the 'Better Care Fund'.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is clear leadership and commitment from the top in terms of setting strategic direction and that includes prioritising resources and spending reductions. The Council has a good strategic approach to reducing costs and improving value for money through its budget setting process and its efficiency programme. Strategic directors and members, through the Budget Working Group, play a key role in identifying and prioritising spending reductions. It is clear that the leadership team understands the Council's current financial position and is aware of the financial challenges facing the Council over the medium term; this is also acknowledged in the 2014/15 pre-audit accounts explanatory foreword. • The Council is involved in a number of key strategic partnerships, has regular dialogue with its partners and through this (and the service planning cycle) it develops its understanding of the resources at the disposal of relevant partnerships. Relationships with the local CCG are good and the Council and CCG are sharing premises and looking to develop more joint services/working arrangements. The community and voluntary sector are represented on the Halton Strategic Partnership Board and on all its Specialist Strategic Partnerships. The Halton Strategic Partnership Board brings together key partners to develop and deliver Halton's Sustainable Community Strategy. • The Council consults residents and service users using a range of ways to gather their views. The Corporate Plan is linked to a range of other plans and strategies which are also subject to consultation with staff and local residents where appropriate. Service users are involved in setting priorities through user groups and also through the Area Forums. 	Green
Improving efficiency & productivity	<p>Benchmarking information has been used well to review services and the Council has a good understanding of its costs. There is evidence that the Council is addressing areas of high spend and improving productivity through the efficiency review programme and is also providing management capacity to other councils for children's, adults and legal services and joint procurement of highways works.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council has used benchmarking information to review services and members take account of the longer term impact of funding decisions. Halton - in comparison with its statistical neighbours in the VfM profiles - has one of the highest net expenditures per head but this is something that the Council is aware of and is largely due to the low population base, the needs of the Borough given the high areas of deprivation, the nature of industry in Halton and the maintenance of the Silver Jubilee Bridge. • The Council's efficiency programme investigates the way services are delivered and looks for new ways to deliver services and reduce costs. The Efficiency Review of Library Services carried out in 2014/15 has achieved £0.4 million sustainable revenue savings. During 2014/15 the Council developed the Garden Waste scheme, introducing charges for garden waste collection from 1 June 2015; 13,700 green waste subscriptions had been sold by the end of June, generated £0.352 million without any increase in staff resources. The Council also now undertakes in-house claims handling, with recent success with an insurance fraud prosecution and have a Risk Financing & Insurance Strategy which has led to a review and overhaul of the Council's insurance programme. • In addition the Council has a number of partnership and shared service arrangements in place including providing management capacity to Sefton Council for adult social care and to Cheshire West and Chester Council for children's and legal services and the Monitoring Officer role. Halton has also worked with Sefton Council to develop digital connectivity, implement the Agresso Financial Management system and deliver the processing of all invoices for both authorities. In 2014/15 the Council received accreditation to operate as a BACS Approved Bureau which allows it the potential to increase income by processing BACS for other organisations. • Halton has developed its Social Value and Procurement Framework and are the national lead in this area. • Ofsted awarded three 'good' judgements and two 'requires improvement' resulting in an overall assessment of 'requires improvement'. • The Council also provides support on the financial aspects of the Mersey Gateway Project, partnership arrangements on the pooled budget with Halton CCG and the joint venture arrangements with Daresbury Science and Innovation Campus established to attract high quality science and innovation companies. 	Green

Section 4: Fees, non-audit services and independence

01. Executive summary

02. Audit findings

03. Value for Money

04. Fees, non-audit services and independence

05. Communication of audit matters

Fees, non-audit services and independence

We confirm below our final fees charged for the audit and provision of non-audit services (excluding VAT).

Audit fees

	Per Audit plan £	Actual fees £
Council audit	140,392	140,392
Grant certification on behalf of Audit Commission/Pubic Sector Audit Appointments	10,740	*10,740
Total audit fees	151,132	151,132

* The grant certification fee above and fees for other services below are estimates at this stage.

Fees for other services *

Service	Fees £
Audit related services	
Independent report on Teachers' Pensions return (PEN)	4,200
Independent report on Regional Growth Fund claim (RGF)	<u>3,110</u>
Total	7,310
Non audit related services	
Tax (Employee Solutions) work for the Council	6,750
VAT reviews	<u>24,600</u>
Total	31,350

Independence and ethics

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 Standards and therefore we confirm that we are independent and are able to express an objective opinion on the financial statements.

We confirm that we have implemented policies and procedures to meet the requirements of the Auditing Practices Board's Ethical Standards.

Section 5: Communication of audit matters

01. Executive summary

02. Audit findings

03. Value for Money

04. Fees, non-audit services and independence

05. Communication of audit matters

Communication of audit matters to those charged with governance

International Standard on Auditing ISA (UK&) 260, as well as other (UK&I) ISAs, prescribe matters which we are required to communicate with those charged with governance, and which we set out in the table opposite.

The Audit Plan outlined our audit strategy and plan to deliver the audit, while this Audit Findings report presents the key issues and other matters arising from the audit, together with an explanation as to how these have been resolved.

Respective responsibilities

The Audit Findings Report has been prepared in the context of the Statement of Responsibilities of Auditors and Audited Bodies issued by the Audit Commission (www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

We have been appointed as the Council's independent external auditors by the Audit Commission, the body responsible for appointing external auditors to local public bodies in England. As external auditors, we have a broad remit covering finance and governance matters.

Our annual work programme is set in accordance with the Code of Audit Practice (the Code) issued by the Audit Commission and includes nationally prescribed and locally determined work. Our work considers the Council's key risks when reaching our conclusions under the Code.

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.

	Audit Plan	Audit Findings
Our communication plan		
Respective responsibilities of auditor and management/those charged with governance	✓	
Overview of the planned scope and timing of the audit. Form, timing and expected general content of communications	✓	
Views about the qualitative aspects of the entity's accounting and financial reporting practices, significant matters and issues arising during the audit and written representations that have been sought		✓
Confirmation of independence and objectivity	✓	✓
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		
Material weaknesses in internal control identified during the audit		✓
Identification or suspicion of fraud involving management and/or others which results in material misstatement of the financial statements		✓
Compliance with laws and regulations		✓
Expected auditor's report		✓
Uncorrected misstatements		✓
Significant matters arising in connection with related parties		✓
Significant matters in relation to going concern		✓

Appendices

Appendix A: Action plan

Rec No.	Recommendation	Priority	Management response	Implementation date & responsibility
1	Ensure bank reconciliations - reconciling the balance per the bank statements at year end to the ledger - are completed on a consistent basis.	Medium	Procedures will be improved to ensure that bank reconciliations are balanced to the ledger correctly at year-end, as they currently are during the year, to avoid any similar omissions in future. Bank reconciliations are particularly important to ensure there are no delays with preparation of the Statement of Accounts. This is currently being considered as part of the implementation of the Agresso Income Manager module, which should further automate and simplify the reconciliation process in future.	Operational Director, Finance 31st March 2016
2	Ensure all appropriate closedown journals are identified and processed promptly.	Medium	Further checks will be introduced into closedown procedures to ensure all journals are identified and processed promptly.	Operational Director, Finance 31st March 2016

Appendix B: DRAFT Audit opinion

We anticipate we will provide the Council with an unmodified audit report

INDEPENDENT AUDITOR'S REPORT TO THE MEMBERS OF HALTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

We have audited the financial statements of Halton Borough Council for the year ended 31 March 2015 under the Audit Commission Act 1998. The financial statements comprise the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement, the Balance Sheet, the Movement in Reserves Statement, the Cash Flow Statement the Collection Fund, the related notes and the Statement of Accounting Policies. The financial reporting framework that has been applied in their preparation is applicable law and the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2014/15.

This report is made solely to the members of Halton Borough Council, as a body, in accordance with Part II of the Audit Commission Act 1998 and as set out in paragraph 48 of the Statement of Responsibilities of Auditors and Audited Bodies published by the Audit Commission in March 2010. Our audit work has been undertaken so that we might state to the members those matters we are required to state to them in an auditor's report and for no other purpose. To the fullest extent permitted by law, we do not accept or assume responsibility to anyone other than the Authority and the Authority's members as a body, for our audit work, for this report, or for the opinions we have formed.

Respective responsibilities of the Operational Director – Finance and auditor

As explained more fully in the Statement of Responsibilities for the Statement of Accounts, the Operational Director – Finance is responsible for the preparation of the Statement of Accounts, which includes the financial statements, in accordance with proper practices as set out in the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2014/15, and for being satisfied that they give a true and fair view. Our responsibility is to audit and express an opinion on the financial statements in accordance with applicable law and International Standards on Auditing (UK and Ireland). Those standards also require us to comply with the Auditing Practices Board's Ethical Standards for Auditors.

Scope of the audit of the financial statements

An audit involves obtaining evidence about the amounts and disclosures in the financial statements sufficient to give reasonable assurance that the financial statements are free from material misstatement, whether caused by fraud or error. This includes an assessment of: whether the accounting policies are appropriate to the Authority's circumstances and have been consistently applied and adequately disclosed; the

reasonableness of significant accounting estimates made by the Operational Director – Finance, and the overall presentation of the financial statements. In addition, we read all the financial and non-financial information in the Foreword by Operational Director – Finance to identify material inconsistencies with the audited financial statements and to identify any information that is apparently materially incorrect based on, or materially inconsistent with, the knowledge acquired by us in the course of performing the audit. If we become aware of any apparent material misstatements or inconsistencies we consider the implications for our report.

Opinion on financial statements

In our opinion the financial statements:

- give a true and fair view of the financial position of Halton Borough Council as at 31 March 2015 and of its expenditure and income for the year then ended; and
- have been properly prepared in accordance with the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2014/15 and applicable law.

Opinion on other matters

In our opinion, the information given in the Foreword by Operational Director – Finance for the financial year for which the financial statements are prepared is consistent with the financial statements.

Matters on which we report by exception

We are required to report to you if:

- in our opinion the annual governance statement does not reflect compliance with 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: a Framework' published by CIPFA/SOLACE in June 2007; or
- we issue a report in the public interest under section 8 of the Audit Commission Act 1998; or
- we designate under section 11 of the Audit Commission Act 1998 a recommendation as one that requires the Authority to consider it at a public meeting and to decide what action to take in response; or
- we exercise any other special powers of the auditor under the Audit Commission Act 1998.

We have nothing to report in these respects.

Conclusion on the Authority’s arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources

Respective responsibilities of the Authority and the auditor

The Authority is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources, to ensure proper stewardship and governance, and to review regularly the adequacy and effectiveness of these arrangements.

We are required under Section 5 of the Audit Commission Act 1998 to satisfy ourselves that the Authority has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. The Code of Audit Practice issued by the Audit Commission requires us to report to you our conclusion relating to proper arrangements, having regard to relevant criteria specified by the Audit Commission in October 2014.

We report if significant matters have come to our attention which prevent us from concluding that the Authority has put in place proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. We are not required to consider, nor have we considered, whether all aspects of the Authority’s arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources are operating effectively.

Scope of the review of arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources

We have undertaken our review in accordance with the Code of Audit Practice, having regard to the guidance on the specified criteria, published by the Audit Commission in October 2014, as to whether the Authority has proper arrangements for:

- securing financial resilience; and
- challenging how it secures economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

The Audit Commission has determined these two criteria as those necessary for us to consider under the Code of Audit Practice in satisfying ourselves whether the Authority put in place proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources for the year ended 31 March 2015.

We planned our work in accordance with the Code of Audit Practice. Based on our risk assessment, we undertook such work as we considered necessary to form a view on whether, in all significant respects, the Authority had put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

Conclusion

On the basis of our work, having regard to the guidance on the specified criteria published by the Audit Commission in October 2014, we are satisfied that, in all significant respects, Halton Borough Council put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources for the year ended 31 March 2015.

Certificate

We certify that we have completed the audit of the financial statements of Halton Borough Council in accordance with the requirements of the Audit Commission Act 1998 and the Code of Audit Practice issued by the Audit Commission.

[Signature]

Mark Heap
for and on behalf of Grant Thornton UK LLP, Appointed Auditor
Royal Liver Building, Liverpool L3 1PS

[date] September 2015



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