



Halton Borough Council Audit Plan

Year ended 31 March 2023

21 June 2023



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Key matters



National context

For the general population, rising inflation rates, in particular for critical commodities such as energy, food and fuel, is pushing many households into poverty and financial hardship, including those in employment. At a national government level, recent political changes have seen an emphasis on controls on spending, which in turn is placing pressure on public services to manage within limited budgets.

Local Government funding continues to be stretched with increasing cost pressures due to the cost of living crisis, including higher energy costs, increasing pay demands, higher agency costs and increases in supplies and services. Local authority front-line services play a vital role in protecting residents from rising costs; preventing the most vulnerable from falling into destitution and helping to build households long-term financial resilience. At a local level, councils are also essential in driving strong and inclusive local economies, through their economic development functions and measures like increasing the supply of affordable housing, integrating skills and employment provision, and prioritising vulnerable households to benefit from energy saving initiatives. Access to these services remains a key priority across the country, but there are also pressures on the quality of services. These could include further unplanned reductions to services and the cancellation or delays to major construction projects such as new roads, amenities and infrastructure upgrades to schools, as well as pothole filling.

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

In planning our audit, we will take account of this context in designing a local audit programme which is tailored to your risks and circumstances.

Audit Reporting Delays

In a report published in January 2023 the NAO have highlighted that since 2017/18 there has been a significant decline in the number of local government body accounts including an audit opinion published by the deadlines set by government. The NAO outline a number of reasons for this and proposed actions. In our view, it is critical to early sign off that draft local authority accounts are prepared to a high standard and supported by strong working papers.

The Halton Council audit cycle is now up to date following the late sign off of the 2021/22 audit opinion on 1 March 2023. Halton Council is within a small minority of councils who have received their 2021/22 audit opinion and able to publish their audited financial statements.

Key matters



Our Responses

- As a firm, we are absolutely committed to audit quality and financial reporting in the local government sector. Our proposed work and fee, as set out further in our Audit Plan, has been agreed with the Operational Director, Finance.
- We will consider your arrangements for managing and reporting your financial resources as part of our audit in completing our Value for Money work.
- Our value for money work will also consider your arrangements relating to governance and improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
- We will continue to provide you and your Audit Committee (the Audit & Governance Board) with sector updates providing our insight on issues from a range of sources and other sector commentators via our Audit Committee updates.
- We hold annual financial reporting workshops for our audited bodies to access the latest technical guidance and interpretation, discuss issues with our experts and create networking links with other audited bodies to support consistent and accurate financial reporting across the sector.
- Firmwide, we have identified an increased incentive and opportunity for organisations in the public sector to manipulate their financial statements due to increasing financial pressures. Connected to this we report our significant audit risk and response in regard to management override of control at page 7. This is a non rebuttable risk under auditing standards.

Introduction and headlines

Purpose

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

Respective responsibilities

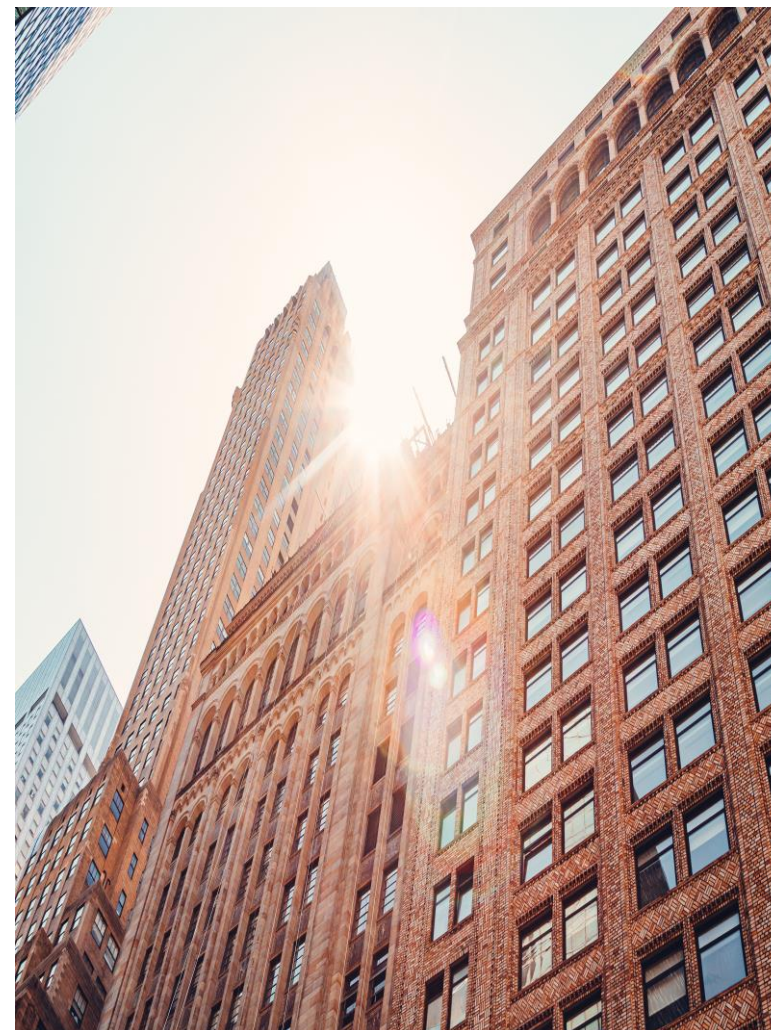
The National Audit Office ('the NAO') has issued a document entitled Code of Audit Practice ('the Code'). This summarises where the responsibilities of auditors begin and end and what is expected from the audited body. Our respective responsibilities are also set out in the agreed Terms of Appointment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

Scope of our audit

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

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

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



Introduction and headlines

Significant risks

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

- Management override of controls
- Valuation of property plant and equipment
- Valuation of pension fund net liability

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

Materiality

We have determined planning materiality of £9.267m (PY £8.795m) for the Council, which equates to 2% of prior year gross expenditure on provision of services.

We are also obliged to report uncorrected omissions or misstatements other than those which are ‘clearly trivial’ to those charged with governance.

As part of our risk assessment, we have also considered the impact of unadjusted prior period errors.

We have identified the following disclosure with a lower level of materiality given heightened public interest:

- Senior officer remuneration £35k (PY £34k). This is based upon 2% of total senior officer remuneration.

Clearly trivial has been set at £0.46m (PY £0.44m).

Value for Money arrangements

Our risk assessment regarding your arrangements to secure value for money has not identified any risks of significant weakness. We will continue to update our risk assessment until we issue our Auditor’s Annual Report.

New Auditing Standards

There are two auditing standards which have been significantly updated this year. These are ISA 315 (Identifying and assessing the risks of material misstatement) and ISA 240 (the auditor's responsibilities relating to fraud in an audit of financial statements). We provide more detail on the work required later in this plan.

Audit logistics

Our planning and interim audit work took place during April 2023 and our final visit will commence in September 2023. Our key deliverables are this Audit Plan, our Audit Findings Report and Auditor’s Annual Report.

Our proposed fee for the audit will be £135,326 (PY: £134,951) for the Council, subject to the Council delivering a good set of financial statements and working papers.

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

Significant risks identified

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

Risk	Reason for risk identification	Key aspects of our proposed response to the risk
Management over-ride of controls	<p>Under ISA (UK) 240, there is a non-rebuttable presumed risk that the risk of management override of controls is present in all entities. The Council faces external scrutiny of its spending and this could potentially place management under undue pressure in terms of how they report performance.</p> <p>We therefore identified management override of controls, in particular journals, management estimates, and transactions outside the course of business as a significant risk for the Council.</p>	<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluate the design effectiveness of management controls over journals • analyse the journals listing and determine the criteria for selecting high risk unusual journals • test unusual journals recorded during the year and after the draft accounts stage for appropriateness and corroboration • gain an understanding of the accounting estimates and critical judgements applied made by management and consider their reasonableness with regard to corroborative evidence • evaluate the rationale for any changes in accounting policies, estimates or significant unusual transactions.

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

Significant risks identified

Risk	Reason for risk identification	Key aspects of our proposed response to the risk
ISA240 revenue recognition risk	<p>ISA (UK) 240 includes a rebuttable presumed risk that revenue recognition may be misstated due to the improper recognition. This presumption can be rebutted if the auditor concludes there is no risk of material misstatement due to fraud relating to revenue recognition.</p> <p>Having considered the risk factors set out in ISA 240 and the nature of the revenue streams at the Council, we have determined that the risk of fraud arising from revenue recognition can be rebutted because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • there is little incentive to manipulate revenue recognition and opportunities to manipulate revenue recognition are very limited • the culture and ethical frameworks of local authorities, including Halton Council, mean that all forms of fraud are seen as unacceptable <p>Although the risk of fraud is rebutted, we recognise the risk of error in revenue recognition and this is addressed through the responses to risk detailed across.</p>	<p>N/A as rebutted.</p> <p>Despite revenue recognition not being a significant risk we will still undertake the following procedures to ensure that revenue included within the accounts is materially correct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluate the Council's accounting policy for income recognition for appropriateness and compliance with the Code • update our understanding of the Council's system for accounting for income and evaluating the design of relevant controls • undertake detailed substantive testing on the income streams in 2022/23, including sample testing of material revenue transactions • review the accounting treatment of all new income streams to confirm that they have been accounted for appropriately in line with the Code and accounting standards
ISA240 expenditure recognition risk	<p>In the public sector, whilst it is not a presumed significant risk, in line with the requirements of Practice Note (PN) 10: Audit of financial statements of public sector bodies in the United Kingdom - we also consider the risk of whether expenditure may be misstated due to the improper recognition of expenditure.</p> <p>This risk is rebuttable if the auditor concludes that there is no risk of material misstatement due to fraud relating to expenditure recognition. Based on our assessment we consider that we are able to rebut the significant risk in relation to expenditure.</p>	<p>N/A as rebutted.</p> <p>Despite expenditure recognition not being a significant risk we will still undertake the following procedures to ensure that expenditure included within the accounts is materially correct:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluate the Council's accounting policy for expenditure recognition for appropriateness and compliance with the Code • update our understanding of the Council's system for accounting for expenditure and evaluating the design of relevant controls • undertake detailed substantive testing on the expenditure streams in 2022/23, including sample testing of material expenditure transactions • review the accounting treatment of all new expenditure streams to confirm that they have been accounted for appropriately in line with the Code and accounting standards

Significant risks identified

Risk	Reason for risk identification	Key aspects of our proposed response to the risk
Valuation of the Pension Fund Net Liability	<p>The Council's pension fund net liability, as reflected in its balance sheet as the net defined benefit liability, represents a significant estimate in the financial statements.</p> <p>The pension fund net liability is considered a significant estimate due to the size of the numbers involved and the sensitivity of the estimate to changes in key assumptions.</p> <p>We therefore identified valuation of the Council's pension fund net liability as a significant risk of material misstatement.</p>	<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • update our understanding of the processes and controls put in place by management to ensure the Council's pension fund net liability is not materially misstated and evaluate the design of the associated controls • evaluate the instructions issued by management to their management expert (an actuary - Mercer) for this estimate and the scope of the actuary's work • assess the competence, capabilities and objectivity of the actuary who carried out the Council's pension fund valuation • assess the accuracy and completeness of the information provided by the Council to the actuary to estimate the liability • test the consistency of the pension fund asset and liability and disclosures in the notes to the core financial statements with the actuarial report from the actuary • undertake procedures to confirm the reasonableness of the actuarial assumptions made by reviewing the report of the consulting actuary (as auditor's expert) and performing any additional procedures suggested within the report • obtain assurances from the auditor of Cheshire Pension Scheme as to the controls surrounding the validity and accuracy of membership data; contributions data and benefits data sent to the actuary by the pension fund and the fund assets valuation in the pension fund financial statements

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

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

Significant risks identified

Risk	Reason for risk identification	Key aspects of our proposed response to the risk
Valuation of Land & Buildings	<p>The Council revalues its property assets on a rolling basis. Revaluations are shared between the Council's Internal Valuer and an external valuation expert, Sanderson Weatherall.</p> <p>These valuations represent a significant estimate by management in the financial statements due to the size of the numbers involved and the sensitivity of this estimate to changes in key assumptions.</p> <p>Additionally for land & buildings, management will need to ensure the carrying value in the financial statements is not materially different from the current value or the fair value at the financial statements date, where a rolling programme is used.</p> <p>We therefore identified the valuation of land & buildings including infrastructure assets as a significant risk for the Council.</p>	<p>For assurance over the balance sheet valuation of land & buildings (including valuations undertaken by both the internal and external valuation experts), and infrastructure assets we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluate management's processes and assumptions for the calculation of the valuation estimate, the instructions issued to valuation experts and the scope of their work • evaluate the competence, capabilities and objectivity of the valuation expert • write out to the valuation expert and discuss with the valuer the basis on which the valuation was carried out • challenge the information and assumptions used by the valuer to assess completeness and consistency with our understanding • evaluate the valuer's report to identify assets that have large and unusual changes and/or approaches to the valuation – these assets will be substantively tested to ensure the valuations are reasonable • test a selection of other asset revaluations made during the year to ensure they have been input accurately into the Council's asset register, revaluation and Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement • evaluate the assumptions made by management for those assets not revalued during the year and how management has satisfied themselves that these are not materially different to current value at year end • for assets not formally revalued or revalued on a desktop/indexation basis only, evaluate the judgements made by management or others in determination of the value of these assets • agree the basis of revaluations relating to Assets Held For Sale.

Other risks

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

Risk	Reason for risk identification	Key aspects of our proposed response to the risk
Accounting for Mersey Gateway Bridge Private Finance Initiative (PFI) liability	<p>The Mersey Gateway Bridge PFI scheme is large and high profile to the residents of the borough.</p> <p>PFI schemes are complex and involve a degree of subjectivity in the measurement of financial information.</p> <p>We therefore identified the accuracy and presentation of the Mersey Gateway Bridge PFI scheme as a risk for the audit.</p>	<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • review the PFI model and assumptions contained within • obtain an understanding of any changes to PFI contracts made since the prior year • compare the PFI model to the prior year model to identify any changes • review and test the output produced by the PFI model to generate financial balances within the financial statements • review the disclosures relating to the PFI scheme for compliance with the Code and the International Accounting Standard IFRIC12.

‘In respect of some risks, the auditor may judge that it is not possible or practicable to obtain sufficient appropriate audit evidence only from substantive procedures. Such risks may relate to the inaccurate or incomplete recording of routine and significant classes of transactions or account balances, the characteristics of which often permit highly automated processing with little or no manual intervention. In such cases, the entity’s controls over such risks are relevant to the audit and the auditor shall obtain an understanding of them.’ (ISA (UK) 315)

Other matters

Other work

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

- We read your Narrative Report and Annual Governance Statement to check that they are consistent with the financial statements on which we give an opinion and our knowledge of the Council.
- We carry out work to satisfy ourselves that disclosures made in your Annual Governance Statement are in line with requirements set by CIPFA.
- We carry out work on your consolidation schedules for the Whole of Government Accounts process in accordance with NAO group audit instructions.
- We consider our other duties under legislation and the Code, as and when required, including:
 - giving electors the opportunity to raise questions about your 2021/22 financial statements, consider and decide upon any objections received in relation to the 2021/22 financial statements;
 - issuing a report in the public interest or written recommendations to the Council under section 24 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the Act).
 - application to the court for a declaration that an item of account is contrary to law under section 28 or a judicial review under section 31 of the Act
 - issuing an advisory notice under section 29 of the Act
- We certify completion of our audit.

Other material balances and transactions

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

Progress against prior year audit recommendations

We identified the following issues in our 2021/22 audit of the Council's financial statements, which resulted in two recommendations being reported in our 2021/22 Audit Findings Report.

Assessment	Issue and risk previously communicated	Update on actions taken to address the issue
TBC	<p>Note 21 Assets held for sale</p> <p>Recommendation:</p> <p>In reclassifying assets to 'held for sale', the Council should ensure that Code guidance regarding AHFS valuation is followed and applied</p> <p>Background:</p> <p>An asset held for sale is incorrectly reported at its carrying value rather than the realisable value, resulting in an overstatement of £0.54m.</p> <p>As set out in note 15(d) to the financial statements "When it becomes probable that the carrying amount of an asset will be recovered through the sale of a transaction rather than through its continuing use, it is reclassified as an Asset Held for Sale. The asset is revalued immediately before reclassification and then carried at the lower of this amount and fair value at highest and best use, less costs to sell".</p> <p>The Council has not applied the correct accounting treatment in re-classifying the asset to 'held for sale' and there is a risk that similar matters could be identified in future.</p>	<p>We await draft 2022/23 financial statements to assess whether any reclassification within Assets Held for Sale occurred and will revisit.</p>
TBC	<p>Note 33 Financial instruments</p> <p>Recommendation:</p> <p>For the 2022/23 financial statements onwards the financial instruments disclosure note should include a reconciliation the values reported in the balance sheet to aid the understanding of the reader.</p> <p>Background:</p> <p>The financial instruments note should include a reconciliation between the fair values in the note and the Balance Sheet values. This will require the non financial instruments to be identified and included as reconciling items and allow a reader of the accounts to link back to the amounts disclosed in the Balance Sheet.</p>	<p>Management's response to this recommendation was "Reconciliation between the values in the note and the Balance Sheet will be considered if appropriate and beneficial to the reader of the accounts".</p> <p>We await draft 2022/23 financial statements to assess management's view.</p>

Our approach to materiality

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

Matter	Description	Planned audit procedures
1	<p>Determination</p> <p>We have determined financial statement materiality based on a proportion of the gross expenditure on provision of services at the Council for the financial year. Planning materiality at the planning stage of our audit is £9.267m, which equates to 2% of your gross expenditure on provision of services for the prior period.</p>	<p>We determine planning materiality in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – establish what level of misstatement could reasonably be expected to influence the economic decisions of users taken on the basis of the financial statements – assist in establishing the scope of our audit engagement and audit tests – determine sample sizes and – assist in evaluating the effect of known and likely misstatements in the financial statements
2	<p>Other factors</p> <p>An item does not necessarily have to be large to be considered to have a material effect on the financial statements.</p>	<p>An item may be considered to be material by nature where it may affect instances when greater precision is required.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – We have identified senior officer remuneration as a balance where we will apply a lower materiality level, as these are considered sensitive disclosures. We have set a materiality of £35,000, being 2% of the prior year total senior officer remuneration cost.

Our approach to materiality

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

Matter	Description	Planned audit procedures
3	<p>Reassessment of materiality</p> <p>Our assessment of materiality is kept under review throughout the audit process.</p>	<p>We reconsider planning materiality if, during the course of our audit engagement, we become aware of facts and circumstances that would have caused us to make a different determination of planning materiality.</p>
4	<p>Other communications relating to materiality we will report to the Audit Committee</p> <p>Whilst our audit procedures are designed to identify misstatements which are material to our opinion on the financial statements as a whole, we nevertheless report to the Audit Committee any unadjusted misstatements of lesser amounts to the extent that these are identified by our audit work. Under ISA 260 (UK) 'Communication with those charged with governance', we are obliged to report uncorrected omissions or misstatements other than those which are 'clearly trivial' to those charged with governance. ISA 260 (UK) defines 'clearly trivial' as matters that are clearly inconsequential, whether taken individually or in aggregate and whether judged by any quantitative or qualitative criteria.</p>	<p>We report to the Audit Committee any unadjusted misstatements of lesser amounts to the extent that these are identified by our audit work.</p> <p>In the context of the Council, we propose that an individual difference could normally be considered to be clearly trivial if it is less than £0.46m (PY £0.44m). If management have corrected material misstatements identified during the course of the audit, we will consider whether those corrections should be communicated to the Audit and Governance Board to assist it in fulfilling its governance responsibilities.</p>

Our approach to materiality

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

	Amount (£)	Qualitative factors considered
Materiality for the Council's financial statements	9,267,000	Based upon financial performance of the Council using gross expenditure on provision of services for the prior year as a benchmark.
Materiality for specific transactions, balances or disclosures - senior officer remuneration	35,000	Materiality has been significantly reduced for auditing the senior officer remuneration disclosures due to the sensitive nature of these disclosures and the heightened public interest.



IT audit strategy

In accordance with ISA (UK) 315 Revised, we are required to obtain an understanding of the relevant IT and technical infrastructure and details of the processes that operate within the IT environment. We are also required to consider the information captured to identify any audit relevant risks and design appropriate audit procedures in response. As part of this we obtain an understanding of the controls operating over relevant Information Technology (IT) systems i.e., IT general controls (ITGCs). Our audit will include completing an assessment of the design and implementation of relevant ITGCs. The following IT systems have been judged to be in scope for our audit and based on the planned financial statement audit approach we will perform the indicated level of assessment:

IT system	Audit area	Planned level IT audit assessment
Agresso	Financial reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment of design and implementation of relevant IT general controls operated by the Council. To review IT general controls related to security management, development and maintenance and technology infrastructure
Northgate	Council Tax, Business Rates, Benefits, Grants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment of design and implementation of relevant IT general controls operated by the Council
iTrent	Payroll	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment of design and implementation of relevant IT general controls operated by the Council. To review IT general controls related to security management, development and maintenance and technology infrastructure

Value for Money arrangements

Approach to Value for Money work for the period ended 31 March 2023

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



Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness

How the body uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services.



Financial Sustainability

How the body plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services.



Governance

How the body ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks.

We have not identified any risks of significant weaknesses from our initial planning work. We will continue our review of your arrangements, including reviewing your Annual Governance Statement, before we issue our auditor’s annual report.

Audit logistics and team



Michael Green, Engagement Lead

Leads our relationship with you and takes overall responsibility for the delivery of a high quality audit, meeting the highest professional standards and adding value to the Council.

Stephen Nixon, Senior Manager

Plans and manages the delivery of the audit and value for money work. Maintains regular contact with senior officers and regularly attends the Audit & Governance Board to provide audit updates.

Andrew McNeil, Assistant Manager

Key audit contact for the finance team, responsible for the day to day management and delivery of the audit work including supervision of junior team members.

Audited Entity responsibilities

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

Our requirements

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

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

Audit fees and updated Auditing Standards including ISA 315 Revised

In 2017, PSAA awarded a contract of audit for Halton Borough Council to begin with effect from 2018/19. The fee agreed in the contract was £81,076. Since that time, there have been a number of developments, particularly in relation to the revised Code and ISA's which are relevant for the 2022/23 audit. For details of the changes which impacted on years up to 2021/22 please see our prior year Audit Plans.

The major change impacting on our audit for 2022/23 is the introduction of ISA (UK) 315 (Revised) - Identifying and assessing the risks of material misstatement ('ISA 315'). There are a number of significant changes that will impact the nature and extent of our risk assessment procedures and the work we perform to respond to these identified risks. Key changes include:

- Enhanced requirements around understanding the Council's IT Infrastructure and IT environment. From this we will then identify any risks arising from the use of IT. We are then required to identify the IT General Controls ('ITGCs') that address those risks and test the design and implementation of ITGCs that address the risks arising from the use of IT.
- Additional documentation of our understanding of the Council's business model, which may result in us needing to perform additional inquiries to understand the Council's end-to-end processes over more classes of transactions, balances and disclosures.
- We are required to identify controls within a business process and identify which of those controls are controls relevant to the audit. These include, but are not limited to, controls over significant risks and journal entries. We will need to identify the risks arising from the use of IT and the general IT controls (ITGCs) as part of obtaining an understanding of relevant controls.
- Where we do not test the operating effectiveness of controls, the assessment of risk will be the inherent risk, this means that our sample sizes may be larger than in previous years.

These are significant changes which will require us to increase the scope, nature and extent of our audit documentation, particularly in respect of your business processes, and your IT controls. We will be unable to determine the full fee impact until we have undertaken further work in respect of the above areas. However, for an authority of your size, we estimate an initial increase of £5,000. We will let you know if our work in respect of business processes and IT controls identifies any issues requiring further audit testing. There is likely to be an ongoing requirement for a fee increase in future years, although we are unable yet to quantify that.

The other major change to Auditing Standards in 2022/23 is in respect of ISA 240 which deals with the auditor's responsibilities relating to fraud in an audit of financial statements. This Standard gives more prominence to the risk of fraud in the audit planning process. We will let you know during the course of the audit should we be required to undertake any additional work in this area which will impact on your fee.

Taking into account the above, our proposed work and fee for 2022/23, as set out below, is detailed overleaf and has been agreed with the Operational Director, Finance.

Audit fees

	Actual Fee 2021/22	Proposed fee 2022/23
Halton Borough Council Audit and VFM	£134,951	£135,326

Assumptions

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

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

Relevant professional standards

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

All variations to the scale fee will need to be approved by PSAA

Audit fees – detailed analysis

2022/23 Scale fee published by PSAA	£96,076
Additional work on Value for Money (VfM) under the new NAO Code	£20,000
Increased audit requirements of revised ISA 540	£6,000
Enhanced audit procedures on journals testing	£3,000
FRC response – additional review requirements	£1,500
Infrastructure assets	£2,500
Payroll change of circumstances	£500
Collection Fund reliefs testing	£750
ISA 315	£5,000
Total audit fees 2022/23 (excluding VAT)	£135,326

Independence and non-audit services

Auditor independence

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

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

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

Independence and non-audit services

Other services

The following other services provided by Grant Thornton were identified.

The amounts detailed are fees agreed to-date for audit related services to be undertaken by Grant Thornton UK LLP in the current financial year. These services are consistent with the Council's policy on the allotment of non-audit work to your auditors. Any changes and full details of all fees charged for audit related and non-audit related services by Grant Thornton UK LLP and by Grant Thornton International Limited network member Firms will be included in our Audit Findings report at the conclusion of the audit.

None of the services provided are subject to contingent fees.

No non-audit related services have been provided to the Council during 2022/23 or are planned to be provided.

Service	Fees £	Threats	Safeguards
Audit related			
Housing Benefits Subsidy Certification	28,000 (estimated)	Self-Interest (because this is a recurring fee)	The level of this recurring fee taken on its own is not considered a significant threat to independence as the fee for this work is £28,000 in comparison to the planned total fee for the audit of £135,326 and in particular relative to Grant Thornton UK LLP's turnover overall. Further, it is a fixed fee and there is no contingent element to it. These factors all mitigate the perceived self-interest threat to an acceptable level.
Teachers' Pension Agency Certification	10,000	Self-Interest (because this is a recurring fee)	The level of this recurring fee taken on its own is not considered a significant threat to independence as the fee for this work is £10,000 in comparison to the planned total fee for the audit of £135,326 and in particular relative to Grant Thornton UK LLP's turnover overall. Further, it is a fixed fee and there is no contingent element to it. These factors all mitigate the perceived self-interest threat to an acceptable level.
Total	26,844		

Communication of audit matters with those charged with governance

Our communication plan	Audit Plan	Audit Findings	
Respective responsibilities of auditor and management/those charged with governance	•		<p>ISA (UK) 260, as well as other ISAs (UK), prescribe matters which we are required to communicate with those charged with governance, and which we set out in the table here.</p> <p>This document, the Audit Plan, outlines our audit strategy and plan to deliver the audit, while the Audit Findings will be issued prior to approval of the financial statements and will present key issues, findings and other matters arising from the audit, together with an explanation as to how these have been resolved.</p> <p>We will communicate any adverse or unexpected findings affecting the audit on a timely basis, either informally or via an audit progress memorandum.</p> <p>Respective responsibilities</p> <p>As auditor we are responsible for performing the audit in accordance with ISAs (UK), which is directed towards forming and expressing an opinion on the financial statements that have been prepared by management with the oversight of those charged with governance.</p> <p>The audit of the financial statements does not relieve management or those charged with governance of their responsibilities.</p>
Overview of the planned scope and timing of the audit, form, timing and expected general content of communications including significant risks and Key Audit Matters	•		
Confirmation of independence and objectivity of the firm, the engagement team members and all other indirectly covered persons	•	•	
A statement that we have complied with relevant ethical requirements regarding independence. Relationships and other matters which might be thought to bear on independence. Details of non-audit work performed by Grant Thornton UK LLP and network firms, together with fees charged. Details of safeguards applied to threats to independence	•	•	
Significant matters in relation to going concern	•	•	
Significant findings from the audit		•	
Significant matters and issue arising during the audit and written representations that have been sought		•	
Significant difficulties encountered during the audit		•	
Significant deficiencies in internal control identified during the audit		•	
Significant matters arising in connection with related parties		•	
Identification or suspicion of fraud[deliberate manipulation] involving management and/or which results in material misstatement of the financial statements [not typically council tax fraud]		•	
Non-compliance with laws and regulations		•	
Unadjusted misstatements and material disclosure omissions		•	
Expected modifications to the auditor's report, or emphasis of matter		•	



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