

Watford Borough Council

Annual Audit Letter for the year ended 31 March 2017

OCTOBER 2017

Ernst & Young LLP



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Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd (PSAA) have issued a “Statement of responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies”. It is available from the Chief Executive of each audited body and via the PSAA website (www.psaa.co.uk)

The Statement of responsibilities serves as the formal terms of engagement between appointed auditors and audited bodies. It summarises where the different responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies begin and end, and what is to be expected of the audited body in certain areas.

The “Terms of Appointment (updated 23 February 2017)” issued by PSAA sets out additional requirements that auditors must comply with, over and above those set out in the National Audit Office Code of Audit Practice (the Code) and statute, and covers matters of practice and procedure which are of a recurring nature.

This Annual Audit Letter is prepared in the context of the Statement of responsibilities. It is addressed to the Members of the audited body, and is prepared for their sole use. We, as appointed auditor, take no responsibility to any third party.

Our Complaints Procedure – If at any time you would like to discuss with us how our service to you could be improved, or if you are dissatisfied with the service you are receiving, you may take the issue up with your usual partner or director contact. If you prefer an alternative route, please contact Steve Varley, our Managing Partner, 1 More London Place, London SE1 2AF. We undertake to look into any complaint carefully and promptly and to do all we can to explain the position to you. Should you remain dissatisfied with any aspect of our service, you may of course take matters up with our professional institute. We can provide further information on how you may contact our professional institute.

A hand with white nail polish is writing on a document with a blue pen. In the background, there is a calculator, a laptop, and a white mug. A yellow rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

We are required to issue an annual audit letter to Watford Borough Council (the Council) following completion of our audit procedures for the year ended 31 March 2017.

Below are the results and conclusions on the significant areas of the audit process.

| Area of Work | Conclusion |
|---|--|
| Opinion on the Council's: ▶ Financial statements | Unqualified – the financial statements give a true and fair view of the financial position of the Council and Group as at 31 March 2017 and of its expenditure and income for the year then ended. |
| ▶ Consistency of other information published with the financial statements | Other information published with the financial statements was consistent with the Annual Accounts. |
| Concluding on the Council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness | We concluded that you have put in place proper arrangements to secure value for money in your use of resources. |

| Area of Work | Conclusion |
|---|--|
| Reports by exception: ▶ Consistency of Governance Statement | The Governance Statement was consistent with our understanding of the Council. |
| ▶ Public interest report | We had no matters to report in the public interest. |
| ▶ Written recommendations to the Council, which should be copied to the Secretary of State | We had no matters to report. |
| ▶ Other actions taken in relation to our responsibilities under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 | We had no matters to report. |

| Area of Work | Conclusion |
|--|---|
| Reporting to the National Audit Office (NAO) on our review of the Council's Whole of Government Accounts return (WGA). | The Council is below the specified audit threshold of £350 million. Therefore, we did not perform any audit procedures on the consolidation pack. |

As a result of the above we have also:

| Area of Work | Conclusion |
|---|---|
| Issued a report to those charged with governance of the Council communicating significant findings resulting from our audit. | Our Audit Results Report was issued on 27 September 2017. |
| Issued a certificate that we have completed the audit in accordance with the requirements of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and the National Audit Office's 2015 Code of Audit Practice. | Our certificate was issued on 29 September 2017. |

In February 2018 we will also issue a report to those charged with governance of the Council summarising the certification work we have undertaken.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Council's staff for their assistance during the course of our work.

Andrew Brittain

Associate Partner
For and on behalf of Ernst & Young LLP

Purpose



Purpose

The Purpose of this Letter

The purpose of this annual audit letter is to communicate to Members and external stakeholders, including members of the public, the key issues arising from our work, which we consider should be brought to the attention of the Council.

We have already reported the detailed findings from our audit work in our 2016/17 Audit Results Report to the 27 September 2017 Audit Committee, representing those charged with governance. We do not repeat those detailed findings in this letter. The matters reported here are the most significant for the Council.



Responsibilities

Responsibilities

Responsibilities of the Appointed Auditor

Our 2016/17 audit work has been undertaken in accordance with the Audit Plan that we issued on 8 February 2017 and is conducted in accordance with the National Audit Office's 2015 Code of Audit Practice, International Standards on Auditing (UK and Ireland), and other guidance issued by the National Audit Office.

As auditors we are responsible for:

- ▶ Expressing an opinion:
 - ▶ On the 2016/17 financial statements; and
 - ▶ On the consistency of other information published with the financial statements.
- ▶ Forming a conclusion on the arrangements the Council has to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.
- ▶ Reporting by exception:
 - ▶ If the annual governance statement is misleading or not consistent with our understanding of the Council;
 - ▶ Any significant matters that are in the public interest;
 - ▶ Any written recommendations to the Council, which should be copied to the Secretary of State; and
 - ▶ If we have discharged our duties and responsibilities as established by thy Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and Code of Audit Practice.

Alongside our work on the financial statements, we also review and report to the National Audit Office (NAO) on you Whole of Government Accounts return. The Council is below the specified audit threshold of £350 million. Therefore, we did not perform any audit procedures on the return.

Responsibilities of the Council

The Council is responsible for preparing and publishing its statement of accounts accompanied by an Annual Governance Statement. In the AGS, the Council reports publicly each year on how far it complies with its own code of governance, including how it has monitored and evaluated the effectiveness of its governance arrangements in year, and any changes planned in the coming period.

The Council is also responsible for putting in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

A blurred office desk with a laptop, glasses of water, and financial documents. The scene is brightly lit, likely from a window with blinds in the background. A yellow rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the text 'Financial Statement Audit'.

Financial Statement Audit

Financial Statement Audit

Key Issues

The Council's Statement of Accounts is an important tool for the Council to show how it has used public money and how it can demonstrate its financial management and financial health.

We audited the Council's Statement of Accounts in line with the National Audit Office's 2015 Code of Audit Practice, International Standards on Auditing (UK and Ireland), and other guidance issued by the National Audit Office and issued an unqualified audit report on 29 September 2017.

Our detailed findings were reported to the 27 September 2017 Audit Committee.

The key issues identified as part of our audit were as follows:

| Significant Risk | Conclusion |
|---|---|
| <p>Management override of controls</p> <p>A risk present on all audits is that management is in a unique position to perpetrate fraud because of its ability to manipulate accounting records directly or indirectly, and prepare fraudulent financial statements by overriding controls that otherwise appear to be operating effectively.</p> <p>Auditing standards require us to respond to this risk by testing the appropriateness of journals, testing accounting estimates for possible management bias and obtaining an understanding of the business rationale for any significant unusual transactions.</p> | <p>We completed the following work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We tested a sample of accruals, prepayments and provisions to check whether they had been recorded at an appropriate value;• We undertook cut off testing for income and expenditure to ensure that material amounts had not been omitted from the financial statements that related to 2016/17;• We tested the appropriateness of journal entries recorded in the general ledger and other adjustments made in preparing the financial statements;• We evaluated the business rationale for any significant unusual transactions; and• We reviewed the following accounting estimates for evidence of management bias: pension valuations, business rates appeal provision and asset valuations. <p>We have not identified any material weaknesses in controls or evidence of material management override.</p> <p>We have not identified any instances of inappropriate judgements being applied.</p> <p>We did not identify any other transactions during our audit which appeared unusual or outside the Council's normal course of business.</p> |

Revenue and expenditure recognition

Auditing standards also required us to presume that there is a risk that revenue and expenditure may be misstated due to improper recognition or manipulation.

We respond to this risk by reviewing and testing material revenue and expenditure streams and revenue cut-off at the year end.

For local authorities the potential for the incorrect classification of revenue spend as capital is a particular area where there is a risk of management override. We therefore review capital expenditure on property, plant and equipment to ensure it meets the relevant accounting requirements to be capitalised.

We undertook the following:

- We identified the material income streams of the Council and concluded that based on their nature, the ability of the Council to manipulate recognition of revenue in any meaningful way, or to adopt aggressive recognition policies, is low.
- We reviewed the capital programme and noted that due to its materiality, there was the opportunity for the Council to inappropriately recognise revenue expenditure as capital expenditure. We tested a sample of capital additions to ensure appropriate capitalisation and noted no issues.

Our testing has not revealed any material misstatements with respect to revenue and expenditure recognition.

Overall our audit work did not identify any issues or unusual transactions which indicated that there had been any misreporting of the Council's financial position.

Business Rates Provision for Appeals

Councils include provisions in their accounts for the future cost of making repayments of business rates to payers who successfully appeal against the rateable value of their property as determined by the local Valuation Office.

In 2015/16 Watford Borough Council made a provision of £22.5 million in its Collection Fund, the Council's share of this was £8.381m (40% of the total).

In 2016/17 the Authority made a total provision of £15.8 million, the Council's share is £6.3 million.

This provision is a material estimate based on estimates of the likelihood of success of appeals.

We have considered the provision in line with IAS 37. We are satisfied that it represents a present obligation, since it relates to charges levied by the Council. We are satisfied that there is a probable outflow based on case history in similar instances over previous years. We are satisfied that the estimate is reliable since it relies on expert analysis of active and historic cases.

We have understood the basis of the total provision, which is made up three elements:

1. Known appeals
2. Appeals not yet lodged

We considered and tested each element of the provision.

We are satisfied that the provision is a reasonable assessment of the cost associated with successful business rates appeals relating to 2016/17.

| Other Key Findings | Conclusion |
|---|--|
| <p>Presentation of expenditure and funding analysis statement, and restatement of CIES and MiRS</p> | <p>New CIPFA reporting requirements impact the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement (CIES) and Movement in Reserves Statement (MiRS), and include the introduction of the new 'Expenditure and Funding Analysis' note as a result of the 'Telling the Story' review of the presentation of local authority financial statements.</p> <p>The service analysis is based on the organisational structure under which the Authority operates and shows the Authority's segmental analysis. The Expenditure and Funding Analysis has been described as a core statement, however, which is incorrect and will need to be amended in the final version of the accounts.</p> |
| <p>Pension Fund Liability</p> | <p>The pension fund liability is both highly judgemental and material, and therefore small errors in assumptions can have a significant impact on the valuation of the liability.</p> <p>We have engaged our expert to review the methodology and assumptions applied by management's expert, with no issues noted.</p> |
| <p>Asset Valuations</p> | <p>This is an area of judgement. Due to the significance of the balance and the estimation uncertainty, this has been an area of audit focus.</p> <p>Nationally, we have noted variation in the application of the depreciated replacement cost methodology for specialised assets, which has resulted in material error in some Authorities. For Watford, this is relevant this year as a number of leisure centres have been revalued using this methodology.</p> <p>We have engaged our experts and spoken directly to your valuer to provide additional assurance in this area. We are satisfied that the methodology applied is reasonable, resulting in an overall valuation which is in an acceptable range.</p> <p>The Authority already documents their instructions to the valuer. Going forward, best practice would be to fully document review and challenge of assumptions made by the valuer, including comments made on any draft valuations provided.</p> |

Our application of materiality

When establishing our overall audit strategy, we determined a magnitude of uncorrected misstatements that we judged would be material for the financial statements as a whole.

| Item | Thresholds applied |
|----------------------|---|
| Planning materiality | We determined planning materiality to be £1.6 million (2015/16: £1.6 million), which is 2% of gross revenue expenditure. We consider gross revenue expenditure to be one of the principal considerations for stakeholders in assessing the financial performance of the Council. |
| Reporting threshold | We agreed with the Audit Committee that we would report to the Committee all audit differences in excess of £82,000 (2015/16: £81,000) |

We also identified the following areas where misstatement at a level lower than our overall materiality level might influence the reader. For these areas we developed an audit strategy specific to these areas. The areas identified and audit strategy applied include:

- Remuneration disclosures including any severance payments, exit packages and termination benefits: We applied a lower threshold for errors (£1,000) and any error that would affect the banding (where applicable to the note).
- Related party transactions: the accounting standard requires us to consider the disclosure from the point of materiality to either side of the transaction we therefore considered this on a case by case basis.
- Members Allowances: We applied a lower threshold for errors (£1,000).

We evaluate any uncorrected misstatements against both the quantitative measures of materiality discussed above and in light of other relevant qualitative considerations.

A close-up, shallow depth-of-field photograph of a stack of coins. The coins are stacked vertically, with the edges of several coins visible. The lighting is warm, highlighting the metallic texture and the ridges on the edges. A bright yellow rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the text "Value for Money".

Value for Money

Value for Money

We are required to consider whether the Council has put in place 'proper arrangements' to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness on its use of resources. This is known as our value for money conclusion.

Proper arrangements are defined by statutory guidance issued by the National Audit Office. They comprise your arrangements to:

- Take informed decisions;
- Deploy resources in a sustainable manner; and
- Work with partners and other third parties.



We did not identify any significant risks in relation to these criteria

We have performed the procedures outlined in our audit plan. We did not identify any significant weaknesses in the Council's arrangements to ensure it took properly informed decisions and deployed resources to achieve planned and sustainable outcomes for taxpayers and local people.

We therefore issued an unqualified value for money conclusion on 29 September 2017.



Other Reporting
Issues

Other Reporting Issues

Whole of Government Accounts

The Council is below the specified audit threshold of £350 million. Therefore, we did not perform any audit procedures on the consolidation pack.

Annual Governance Statement

We are required to consider the completeness of disclosures in the Council's annual governance statement, identify any inconsistencies with the other information of which we are aware from our work, and consider whether it is misleading.

We completed this work and did not identify any areas of concern.

Report in the Public Interest

We have a duty under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 to consider whether, in the public interest, to report on any matter that comes to our attention in the course of the audit in order for it to be considered by the Council or brought to the attention of the public.

We did not identify any issues which required us to issue a report in the public interest.

Written Recommendations

We have a duty under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 to designate any audit recommendation as one that requires the Council to consider it at a public meeting and to decide what action to take in response.

We did not identify any issues which required us to issue a written recommendation.

Objections Received

We did not receive any objections to the 2016/17 financial statements from member of the public.

Other Powers and Duties

We identified no issues during our audit that required us to use our additional powers under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

Independence

We communicated our assessment of independence in our Audit Results Report to the Audit Committee on 26 September 2017. In our professional judgement the firm is independent and the objectivity of the audit engagement partner and audit staff has not been compromised within the meaning regulatory and professional requirements.

Control Themes and Observations

As part of our work, we obtained an understanding of internal control sufficient to plan our audit and determine the nature, timing and extent of testing performed. Although our audit was not designed to express an opinion on the effectiveness of internal control, we are required to communicate to you significant deficiencies in internal control identified during our audit.

We have adopted a fully substantive approach and have therefore not tested the operation of controls.

Our audit did not identify any significant controls issues to bring to the attention of the Audit Committee.

We have, however, discussed with management whether or not their method for determining the level of bad debt provision associated with the collection fund is appropriate, given the level of the error identified this year. We have suggested an alternative approach to them, which would not result in an error in subsequent years. We appreciate that this area is highly judgemental.

A close-up photograph of a person's face as they look through a pair of black binoculars. The person's eyes are focused on the lenses, and their hands are visible holding the device. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white. A bright yellow rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the text "Focused on your future".

Focused on your
future

Focused on your future

| Area | Issue | Impact |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Earlier deadline for production and audit of the financial statements from 2017/18</p> | <p>The Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 introduced a significant change in statutory deadlines from the 2017/18 financial year. From next year the timetable for the preparation and approval of accounts will be brought forward with draft accounts needing to be prepared by 31 May and the publication of the audited accounts by 31 July.</p> | <p>These changes provide challenges for both the preparers and the auditors of the financial statements.</p> <p>To prepare for this change the Council has taken a number of steps as outlined below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critically reviewed and amended the closedown process • Streamlined the Statement of Accounts removing all non-material disclosure notes • Brought forward the commissioning and production of key externally provided information such as IAS 19 pension information, asset valuations <p>As auditors, nationally we have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issued a thought piece on early closedown • As part of the strategic Alliance with CIPFA jointly presented accounts closedown workshops across England, Scotland and Wales • Presented at CIPFA early closedown events and on the subject at the Local Government Accounting Conferences in July 2017 <p>Locally we have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Had regular discussions through the year on the Council's proposals to bring forward the closedown timetable • Hosted a faster close workshop and networking event |

| Area | Issue | Impact |
|--|---|--|
| IFRS 15 Revenue from Contracts and Customers | <p>Applicable for local authority accounts from the 2018/19 financial year. This new standard deals with accounting for all contracts with customers except:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leases; • Financial instruments; • Insurance contracts; and • for local authorities; Council Tax and NDR income. <p>The key requirements of the standard cover the identification of performance obligations under customer contracts and the linking of income to the meeting of those performance obligations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are transitional arrangements within the standard; however as the 2018/19 Accounting Code of Practice for Local Authorities has yet to be issued it is unclear what the impact on local authority accounting will be | <p>Together with the Council agreed areas for early work which have included testing of major income and expenditure streams at month 9.</p> <p>Some initial thoughts on the approach to adopting IFRS 15 have been issued by CIPFA. However, until the Code is issued there remains some uncertainty. However, what is clear is that for all material income sources from customers the Council will have to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disaggregate revenue into appropriate categories • Identify relevant performance obligations and allocate income to each • Summarise significant judgements <p>The Council anticipates a moderate impact but is awaiting clarification of the exact requirements before investing time in the above work.</p> |
| IFRS 16 Leases | <p>IFRS 16 will be applicable for local authority accounts from the 2019/20 financial year.</p> <p>Whilst the definition of a lease remains similar to the current leasing standard, the new standard will have a significant impact for local authorities who lease in a large number of assets, with nearly all current leases being included on the balance sheet.</p> <p>There are transitional arrangements within the standard, although as the 2019/20 Accounting Code of Practice for Local Authorities has yet to be issued it is unclear what the impact on local authority accounting will be or whether any statutory overrides will be introduced.</p> | <p>Until 2019/20 Accounting Code is issued and any statutory overrides are confirmed there remains some uncertainty in this area.</p> <p>However, what is clear is that the Council will need to undertake a detailed exercise to classify all of its leases and therefore must ensure that all lease arrangements are fully documented.</p> <p>The Council has yet to commence work in this area due to the timing of implementation.</p> |

EY | Assurance | Tax | Transactions | Advisory

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ED None

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