

# Audit Progress Report and Sector Update

Somerset County Council & Somerset Pension Fund  
Year ending 31 March 2018

5 June 2018



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# Introduction



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

The paper also includes:

- a summary of emerging national issues and developments that may be relevant to you as a local authority; and
- includes a number of challenge questions in respect of these emerging issues which the Committee may wish to consider (these are a tool to use, if helpful, rather than formal questions requiring responses for audit purposes)

Members of the Audit Committee can find further useful material on our website, where we have a section dedicated to our work in the public sector. Here you can download copies of our publications. Click on the Grant Thornton logo to be directed to the website [www.grant-thornton.co.uk](http://www.grant-thornton.co.uk).

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

# Progress at 5 June 2018

## Financial Statements Audit

We have issued a detailed audit plan for both the Council and the Pension Fund, setting out our proposed approach to the audit of the 2017/18 financial statements.

Our interim fieldwork is complete and included:

- Updated review of the Council's and Pension Fund's control environment
- Updated understanding of financial systems
- Review of Internal Audit reports on core financial systems
- Early work on emerging accounting issues

The findings from our interim work was reported to the Audit Committee in our April progress report.

The statutory deadline for the issue of the 2017/18 opinion is brought forward by two months to 31 July 2018. The final accounts audit began on the 29 May, for both the Council and the Pension Fund, and the findings will be reported to you in the Audit Findings Reports at the Audit Committee on 26 July.

## Value for Money

The scope of our work is set out in the guidance issued by the National Audit Office. The Code requires auditors to satisfy themselves that; "the Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources".

The guidance confirmed the overall criterion as: "in all significant respects, the audited body had proper arrangements to ensure it took properly informed decisions and deployed resources to achieve planned and sustainable outcomes for taxpayers and local people".

The three sub criteria for assessment to be able to give a conclusion overall are:

- Informed decision making
- Sustainable resource deployment
- Working with partners and other third parties

We made our initial risk assessment to determine our approach in December 2017 and reported this to you in our Audit Plan.

We will report our work in the Audit Findings Report and give our Value For Money Conclusion by the deadline in July 2018.

## Other areas

### Meetings

We met with Finance Officers in June as part of our quarterly liaison meetings and continue to be in discussions with finance staff regarding emerging developments and to ensure the audit process is smooth and effective.

### Events

We provide a range of workshops, along with network events for members and publications to support the Council.

# Audit Deliverables

2017/18 Deliverables	Planned Date	Status
<b>Fee Letter for Council and Pension Fund</b> Confirming audit fee for 2017/18.	April 2017	Complete
<b>Council's Audit Plan</b> We are required to issue a detailed accounts audit plan to the Audit Committee setting out our proposed approach in order to give an opinion on the Council's 2017-18 financial statements.	January 2018	Complete
<b>Pension Fund Audit Plan</b> We are required to issue a detailed accounts audit plan to the Audit Committee setting out our proposed approach in order to give an opinion on the Pension Funds 2017-18 Financial Statements	April 2018	Complete
<b>Interim Audit Findings (Council and Pension Fund)</b> We report to you the findings from our interim audit and our initial value for money risk assessment within our Progress Report.	April 2018	Complete
<b>Audit Findings Report (Council and Pension Fund)</b> The Audit Findings Reports for both the Council and the Pension Fund will be reported to the July Audit Committee.	July 2018	Not yet due
<b>Auditors Report</b> This is the opinion on your financial statement, annual governance statement and value for money conclusion.	July 2018	Not yet due
<b>Annual Audit Letter</b> This letter communicates the key issues arising from our work.	August 2018	Not yet due
<b>Annual Certification Letter</b> This letter reports any matters arising from our certification work carried out under the PSAA contract.	December 2018	Not yet due

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# Sector Update

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Local government finances are at a tipping point. Councils are tackling a continuing drive to achieve greater efficiency in the delivery of public services, whilst facing the challenges to address rising demand, ongoing budget pressures and social inequality.

Our sector update provides you with an up to date summary of emerging national issues and developments to support you. We cover areas which may have an impact on your organisation, the wider NHS and the public sector as a whole. Links are provided to the detailed report/briefing to allow you to delve further and find out more.

Our public sector team at Grant Thornton also undertake research on service and technical issues. We will bring you the latest research publications in this update. We also include areas of potential interest to start conversations within the organisation and with audit committee members, as well as any accounting and regulatory updates.

- **Grant Thornton Publications**
- **Insights from local government sector specialists**
- **Reports of interest**
- **Accounting and regulatory updates**

More information can be found on our dedicated public sector and local government sections on the Grant Thornton website

# The Vibrant Economy Index

## a new way to measure success

Our Vibrant Economy Index uses data to provide a robust, independent framework to help everyone understand the challenges and opportunities in their local areas. We want to start a debate about what type of economy we want to build in the UK and spark collaboration between citizens, businesses and place-shapers to make their places thrive.

Places are complex and have an intrinsic impact on the people and businesses within them. Economic growth doesn't influence all of the elements that are important to people's lives – so we shouldn't use GDP to measure success. We set out to create another measure for understanding what makes a place successful.

In total, we look at 324 English local authority areas, taking into account not only economic prosperity but health and happiness, inclusion and equality, environmental resilience, community and dynamism and opportunity. Highlights of the index include:

- Traditional measures of success – gross value added (GVA), average workplace earning and employment do not correlate in any significant way with the other baskets. This is particularly apparent in cities, which despite significant economic strengths are often characterised by substantial deprivation and low aspiration, high numbers of long-term unemployment and high numbers of benefit claimants
- The importance of the relationships between different places and the subsequent role of infrastructure in connecting places and facilitating choice. The reality is that patterns of travel for work, study and leisure don't reflect administrative boundaries. Patterns emerge where prosperous and dynamic areas are surrounded by more inclusive and healthy and happy places, as people choose where they live and travel to work in prosperous areas.
- The challenges facing leaders across the public, private and third sector in how to support those places that perform less well. No one organisation can address this on their own. Collaboration is key.

Visit our website ([www.grantthornton.co.uk](http://www.grantthornton.co.uk)) to explore the interactive map, read case studies and opinion pieces, and download our report **Vibrant Economy Index: Building a better economy**.

### Vibrant Economy app

To support local collaboration, we have also developed a Vibrant Economy app. It's been designed to help broaden understanding of the elements of a vibrant economy and encourage the sharing of new ideas for – and existing stories of – local vibrancy.

We've developed the app to help people and organisations:

- see how their place performs against the index and the views of others through an interactive quiz
- post ideas and share examples of local activities that make places more vibrant
- access insights from Grant Thornton on a vibrant economy.

We're inviting councils to share it with their employees and the wider community to download. We can provide supporting collateral for internal communications on launch and anonymised reporting of your employees' views to contribute to your thinking and response.

- To download the app visit your app store and search 'Vibrant Economy'
- Fill in your details to sign up, and wait for the verification email (check your spam folder if you don't see it)
  - Explore the app and take the quiz
  - Go to the Vibrant Ideas section to share your picture and story or idea



# Overview of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

## What is it?

The GDPR is the most significant development in data protection for 20 years. It introduces new rights for individuals and new obligations for public and private sector organisations.

## What's next?

Many public sector organisations have already developed strategic plans to implement the GDPR, which require policy, operational, governance and technology changes to ensure compliance by 25<sup>th</sup> May 2018.

### How will this affect you?

- ✓ All organisations that process personal data will be affected by the GDPR.
- ✓ The definition of 'personal data' has been clarified to include any data that can identify a living individual, either directly or indirectly. Various unique personal identifiers (including online cookies and IP addresses) will fall within the scope of personal data

### What organisations need to do by May 2018

- ✓ Local government organisations need to be able to provide evidence of completion of their GDPR work to internal and external stakeholders, to internal audit and to regulators.
- ✓ New policies and procedures need to be fully signed off and operational.

## Organisation Accountability

- Organisations must document their assurance procedures, and make them available to regulators
- Some organisations need to designate a Data Protection Officer, who has expert knowledge of data protection law

## Notifications and Rights

- Organisations must notify significant data breaches to regulators within 72 hours
- Organisations must explain to individuals what their rights over their personal information are and how it is being processed and protected

## Claims and Fines

- For the most serious data breaches, privacy regulators can impose penalties of up to €20 million on public sector organisations,
- Individuals and representative organisations can claim compensation for infringements of data protection law

## Questions for your organisation:

- Can your organisation erase personal data effectively?
- Have you appointed a Data Protection Officer if required to have one?
- How will your organisation ensure citizens know how their data is being used and whether it's being shared with other organisations?



# Financial sustainability of local authorities 2018

This National Audit Office report reviews financial sustainability across Local Government and examines whether the MHCLG, along with other departments with responsibility for local services, understands the impact of funding reductions on the financial and service sustainability of local authorities.

The report concludes that current pattern of growing overspends on services and dwindling reserves exhibited by an increasing number of authorities is not sustainable over the medium term. The financial future for many authorities is less certain than in 2014, when the NAO last looked at financial sustainability. It also notes that the financial uncertainty created by delayed reform to the local government financial system risks longer-term value for money.

The NAO's view is that the sector has done well to manage substantial funding reductions since 2010-11, but financial pressure has increased markedly since the 2014 review.. Services other than adult social care are continuing to face reducing funding despite anticipated increases in council tax. Local authorities face a range of new demand and cost pressures while their statutory obligations have not been reduced. Non-social-care budgets have already been reduced substantially, so many authorities have less room for manoeuvre in finding further savings. The scope for local discretion in service provision is also eroding even as local authorities strive to generate alternative income streams.

Key findings include:

Financial resilience varies between authorities, with some having substantially lower reserves levels than others. Levels of total reserves in social care authorities as a whole are higher now than in 2010-11. However, there is variation in individual authorities' ability to build up their reserves and differences in the rate at which they have begun to draw them down. Some 10.6% of single-tier and county councils would have the equivalent of less than three years' worth of total reserves (earmarked and unallocated combined) left if they continued to use their reserves at the rate they did in 2016-17.

A section 114 notice has been issued at one authority, which indicates that it is at risk of failing to balance its books in this financial year. In February 2018, the statutory financial officer for Northamptonshire County Council issued a section 114 notice, indicating that it was at risk of spending more in the financial year than the resources it has available, which would be unlawful.

MHCLG's work to assess the sector's funding requirements as part of the 2015 Spending Review was better than the work it undertook for the 2013 Spending Review. The Department's advice to ministers in 2015 drew on a more comprehensive evidence base, including data returns from 12 departments.

The government has announced multiple short-term funding initiatives in recent years and does not have a long-term funding plan for local authorities. In 2016-17, the Department offered a four-year settlement to all authorities to enable better financial planning. However, there have been many changes to funding streams outside this core offer. The funding landscape following the 2015 Spending Review has been characterised by one-off and short-term funding initiatives.

There is also uncertainty over the long-term financial plan for the sector. The absolute scale of future funding is unknown until the completion of the next Spending Review. The government has confirmed its intention to implement the results of the Fair Funding Review in 2020-21 and to allow local authorities to retain 75% of business rates. However, the implications of these changes are not yet clear.

There is a lack of ongoing coordinated monitoring of the impact of funding reductions across the full range of local authority services.

**49.1%**

real-terms reduction in government funding for local authorities, 2010-11 to 2017-18

**28.6%**

real-terms reduction in local authorities' spending power (government funding plus council tax), 2010-11 to 2017-18

**1**

number of authorities since 2010-11 where a section 114 notice has been issued that indicates they are at risk of spending more than the resources they have available



# Cost Assurance

## Did you know....

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**40**

Number of Public Sector engagements to date

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**£125m**

Annual spend analysed

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**£3.55m**

Rebate opportunities identified

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**£1.1m**

Fee income identified

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**2.84%**

Error rate – rebates versus spend volume

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**55%**

Of Public Sector engagements are Local Government

Our Cost Assurance service line provides Local Authorities with an independent and retrospective audit of their legacy telecommunications and utilities costs incurred during the past 6 years (as per the Statute of Limitation).

We find that there are repeat errors contained within a Suppliers' invoice arrangements – errors that aren't necessarily picked up by the end client. This is due to the fact that they tend to be contained in suppliers' billing systems 'at source' and are much further down the supply chain which the user won't necessarily have visibility of.

We are supported by a comprehensive library of legacy supplier pricing that has been collated since 2011. Our one aim is to ensure that the client has only paid for the services used during the period by:

- ensuring that bills presented by Suppliers' are in line with their contracts and relevant pricing mechanisms
- ensuring the client receives the Supplier refunds where errors have been identified by us
- ensuring consequential savings are identified and implemented immediately for the client

Our Cost Assurance work is based on a contingent-fee model and is supported by PSAA Ltd. Each of our Local Authority engagements include a fee cap to ensure governance and regulatory standards are maintained.

In summary, we are able to bring much needed financial benefit to the sector as well as providing insight into errors that may be prone to repeat offence by suppliers long after our work is concluded. We met with officers in April and continue to explore options for working with the Council to identify potential opportunities

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# Links

Grant Thornton website links

<https://www.grantthornton.co.uk/>

<http://www.grantthornton.co.uk/industries/publicsector>

PSAA website links

<https://www.psa.co.uk/audit-quality/reports-on-the-results-of-auditors-work/>

National Audit Office link

<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/financial-sustainability-of-local-authorities-2018/>



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