

Harlow District Council

Report to the Audit & Standards Committee

External Audit Plan & Strategy for the year ending
31 March 2024

June 2024

Introduction

To the Audit and Standards Committee of Harlow District Council

We are pleased to have the opportunity to meet with you on 26th June to discuss our audit of the consolidated financial statements of Harlow District Council for the year ending 31 March 2024.

We have been appointed as your auditors by Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd. The audit is governed by the provisions of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and in compliance with the NAO Code of Audit Practice. The NAO is consulting on a new Code of Audit Practice for 2023/24, therefore this plan will remain draft until the finalisation of that Code.

This report outlines our risk assessment and planned audit approach. Our planning activities are still ongoing and we will communicate any significant changes to the planned audit approach. We note that an audit opinion has not been expressed on the prior period, once the prior period audit opinion has been expressed we will communicate any significant changes to the planned approach. We provide this report to you in advance of the meeting to allow you sufficient time to consider the key matters and formulate your questions.

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The engagement team

Dean Gibbs is the engagement partner on the audit. He has 13 years of public sector and five years of Local Government experience.

Dean Gibbs shall lead the engagement and is responsible for the audit opinion.

Other key members of the engagement team include Himanshu Mohla, Manager and Angus Percival, In-charge for this audit.

Yours sincerely,

Dean Gibbs

Director - KPMG LLP

26th June 2024

How we deliver audit quality

Audit quality is at the core of everything we do at KPMG and we believe that it is not just about reaching the right opinion, but how we reach that opinion. We consider risks to the quality of our audit in our engagement risk assessment and planning discussions.

We define 'audit quality' as being the outcome when audits are:

- Executed consistently, in line with the requirements and intent of applicable professional standards within a strong system of quality controls; and
- All of our related activities are undertaken in an environment of the utmost level of objectivity, independence, ethics and integrity.

We depend on well planned timing of our audit work to avoid compromising the quality of the audit. This is also heavily dependent on receiving information from management and those charged with governance in a timely manner. The audit undertaken in the current year is dependent on the finalisation of the previous auditor's work over historical financial statements.

We aim to complete all audit work no later than 2 days before audit signing. As you are aware, we will not issue our audit opinion until we have completed all relevant procedures, including audit documentation.

Restrictions on distribution

This report is intended solely for the information of those charged with governance of Harlow District Council and the report is provided on the basis that it should not be distributed to other parties; that it will not be quoted or referred to, in whole or in part, without our prior written consent; and that we accept no responsibility to any third party in relation to it. .

Overview of planned scope including materiality

Our materiality levels

We determined materiality for the consolidated financial statements at a level which could reasonably be expected to influence the economic decisions of users taken on the basis of the financial statements. We used a benchmark of expenditure which we consider to be appropriate given the sector in which the entity operates, its ownership and financing structure, and the focus of users.

We considered qualitative factors such as stability of legislation, ownership structure, debt arrangement and the business environment when determining materiality for the financial statements as a whole.

To respond to aggregation risk from individually immaterial misstatements, we design our procedures to detect misstatements at a lower level of materiality £1.3m/65% of materiality. This is driven by our reduced knowledge of the control environment as first year auditors and the lack of assurance over prior numbers.

We report to you all errors exceeding £100k, except for areas such as remuneration of higher paid staff, where we report all unadjusted errors due to their sensitive nature.

We will report misstatements to the audit committee including:

- Corrected and uncorrected audit misstatements above £100k.
- Errors and omissions in disclosure (Corrected and uncorrected) and the effect that they, individually in aggregate, may have on our opinion.
- Other misstatements we include due to the nature of the item.

File review

We will undertake an appropriate prior year file review dependent on the final opinion issued by the previous auditors.

Group Materiality

Group	
Materiality for the consolidated financial statements as a whole	£2m <small>(2.5% of expenditure £78.9m)</small>
Procedure designed to detect individual errors at this level	£1.3m
Misstatements reported to the Audit and standards Committee	£100k

Council Materiality

£1.9m

1.8% of entity expenditure £110m

Overview of planned scope including materiality (cont.)

Timing of our audit and communications

- We will maintain communication led by the engagement partner and manager throughout the audit. We set out below the form, timing and general content of our planned communications:
- Kick-off meeting with management in November 2023 where we present our draft audit plan outlining our audit approach and discuss management's progress in key areas;
- Due to the work of previous auditors still being on-going, we will be communicating dates for audit completion at a future Committee.
- Audit and Standards Committee meeting on 26th June 2024 where we present our draft audit plan. As our planning and risk assessment work is still in progress we will continue to update our risk assessment.
- Status meetings with management on monthly basis where we communicate progress on the audit plan, any misstatements, control deficiencies and significant issues;
- Biannual private meetings can also be arranged with the Committee chair if there is interest.

Using the work of others and areas requiring specialised skill

We outline below where, in our planned audit response to audit risks, we expect to use the work of others such as Internal Audit or require specialised skill/knowledge to perform planned audit procedures and evaluate results.

Others	Extent of planned involvement or use of work
REVA	Our REVA property valuation specialists will be involved in the discussions with your valuers over the most complex of the assets held by the Council.
KPMG Pensions Centre of Excellence	Our Pensions Centre of Excellence will be involved in overseeing the audit of the involvement of the Council in the Essex Local Government Pension Scheme
Internal Audit	We will review the work of internal audit as part of our risk assessment procedures but will not place reliance on their work.

Significant risks and Other audit risks

Our risk assessment draws upon our understanding of the applicable financial reporting framework, knowledge of the business, the sector and the wider economic environment in which Harlow Council operates.

We also use our regular meetings with senior management to update our understanding and take input from sector and internal audit reports.

Due to the current levels of uncertainty there is an increased likelihood of significant risks emerging throughout the audit cycle that are not identified (or in existence) at the time we planned our audit. Where such items are identified we will amend our audit approach accordingly and communicate this to the Audit and Standards Committee.

Value for money

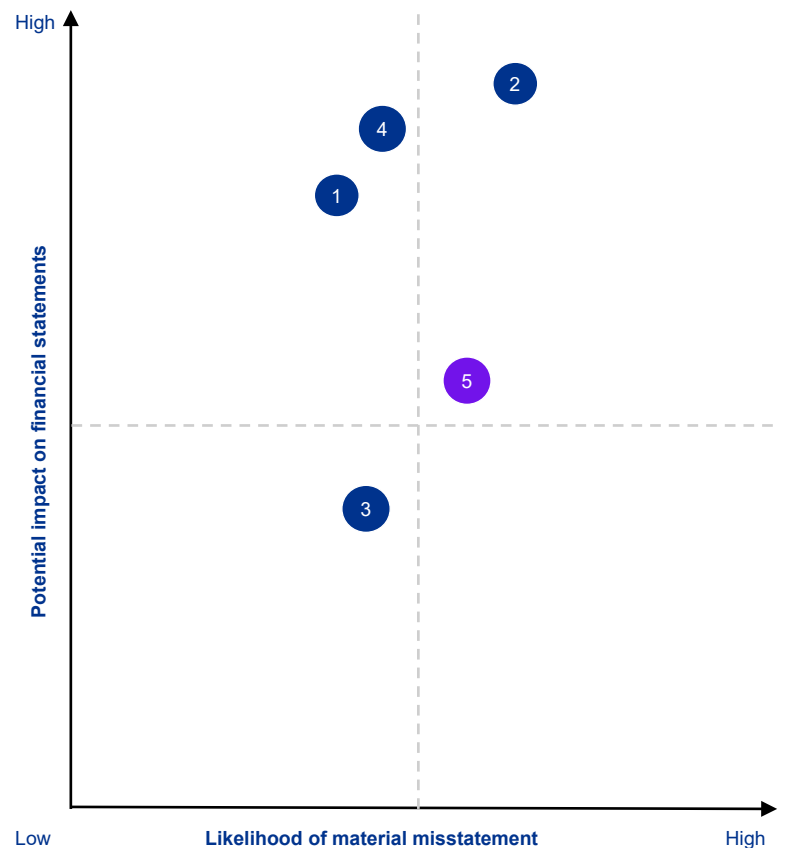
We are required to provide commentary on the arrangements in place for ensuring Value for Money is achieved at the Council and report on this via our Auditor's Annual Report. This will be published on the Council's website and include a commentary on our view of the appropriateness of the Council's arrangements against each of the three specified domains of Value for Money: financial sustainability; governance; and improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

Significant risks

1. Valuation of Council Dwellings
2. Valuation of Land and Buildings
3. Recognition of surplus on net pension asset
4. Management override of controls
5. Valuation of post retirement benefit obligations
6. Expenditure recognition

Area of focus

7. Acquisition of Burnt Mills Development.



Audit risks and our audit approach (cont.)

1 Valuation of Council Dwellings

The carrying amount of revalued Council Dwellings differs materially from the fair value



Significant audit risk

The Code requires that where assets are subject to revaluation, their year end carrying value should reflect the appropriate current value at that date. The Authority has adopted a rolling revaluation model which sees all land and buildings revalued over a five year cycle including Council Dwellings.

This creates a risk that the carrying value of assets not revalued in year differs materially from the year end current value.

A further risk is presented for those assets that are revalued in the year, which involves significant judgement and estimation on behalf of the engaged valuer.

Housing Beacons are valued by Wilks Head and Eve. A typical dwelling is identified for each dwelling type that the council owns and these are known as Beacon properties and the valuer will value these Beacon properties and the value for each will be applied to all the properties of the same Beacon type. This creates a risk around the appropriateness of the approach.



Planned response

We will perform the following procedures designed to specifically address the significant risk associated with the valuation:

- We will critically assess the independence, objectivity and expertise of Wilks Head and Eve, the valuers used in developing the valuation of the Council's properties at 31 March 2024;
- We will inspect the instructions issued to the valuers for the valuation of council dwellings to verify they are appropriate to produce a valuation consistent with the requirements of the CIPFA Code.
- We will compare the accuracy of the data provided to the valuers for the development of the valuation to underlying information;
- We will evaluate the design and implementation of controls in place for management to review the valuation and the appropriateness of assumptions used;
- We will challenge the appropriateness of the valuation of land and buildings. We will challenge key assumptions within the valuation as part of our judgement;
- We will agree the calculations performed of the movements in value of land and buildings and verify that these have been accurately accounted for in line with the requirements of the CIPFA Code;
- We will utilise our own valuation specialists to review the valuation report prepared by the Council's valuers to confirm the appropriateness of the methodology utilised; and
- Disclosures: We will consider the adequacy of the disclosures concerning the key judgements and degree of estimation involved in arriving at the valuation.

Audit risks and our audit approach (cont.)

2 Valuation of other land and buildings

The carrying amount of revalued Land & Buildings differs materially from the fair value



Significant audit risk

The Code requires that where assets are subject to revaluation, their year end carrying value should reflect the appropriate current value at that date. The Council has adopted a rolling revaluation model which sees all land and buildings revalued over a five year cycle and major assets are valued every year.

This creates a risk that the carrying value of assets not revalued in year differs materially from the year end current value.

A further risk is presented for those assets that are revalued in the year, which involves significant judgement and estimation.

As per the unaudited 2022-23 financial statements the value of other land and buildings is split between valued at DRC £29m and EUV £156m (NBV).

We note that this risk does not apply to infrastructure assets due to the recent CIPFA guidance: “Update to the Code and Specifications for Future Codes for Infrastructure Assets” and Bulletin 12: “Accounting for Infrastructure Assets – Temporary Solution”



Planned response

We will perform the following procedures designed to specifically address the significant risk associated with the valuation:

- We will inspect the methodology followed for valuation of land and buildings to verify they are appropriate to produce a valuation consistent with the requirements of the CIPFA Code.
- We will compare the accuracy of the data used for the development of the valuation to underlying information;
- We will evaluate the design and implementation of controls in place for management to review the valuation and the appropriateness of assumptions used;
- We will challenge the appropriateness of the valuation of land and buildings; including any material movements from the previous revaluations. We will challenge key assumptions within the valuation as part of our judgement;
- We will agree the calculations performed of the movements in value of land and buildings and verify that these have been accurately accounted for in line with the requirements of the CIPFA Code;
- We will utilise our own valuation specialists to review the valuation report prepared by the Council to confirm the appropriateness of the methodology utilised; and
- Disclosures: We will consider the adequacy of the disclosures concerning the key judgements and degree of estimation involved in arriving at the valuation.

Audit risks and our audit approach (cont.)

3

Recognition of the surplus on the net pension asset

Management's assessment of the level of recognisable surplus may not be in line with requirements



Significant audit risk

- Recent changes to market conditions have meant that more councils are finding themselves moving into surplus in their Local Government Pension Scheme. As at the 31 March 2023 Harlow District Council found their LGPS in a surplus of £66,268k up from a deficit of £10,853k at 31 March 2022.
- The requirements of the accounting standards on recognition of these surplus are complicated and requires actuarial involvement.
- The Council will need to assess the level of economic benefit it can derive from this surplus, as per the requirements of IFRIC14. This assessment will be required each year, and the outcome may change as it will depend upon market conditions at the year end and any changes in the contributions committed to under the rates and adjustments certificate.



Planned response

We will perform the following procedures:

- Test the data and valuations provided by the actuary in their IAS 19 report for completeness and consistency with the other information provided by the Council.
- Consider, and if necessary challenge, the Council's estimate of the recognisable surplus.
- Consider the adequacy of the Council's disclosures in respect of the assumptions or judgements made in determining the level of recognisable surplus.

Audit risks and our audit approach (cont.)

4 Management override of controls(a)

Fraud risk related to unpredictable way management override of controls may occur



Significant audit risk

- Professional standards require us to communicate the fraud risk from management override of controls as significant.
- Management is in a unique position to perpetrate fraud because of their ability to manipulate accounting records and prepare fraudulent financial statements by overriding controls that otherwise appear to be operating effectively.
- We have not identified any specific additional risks of management override relating to this audit.



Planned response

Our audit methodology incorporates the risk of management override as a default significant risk. Our response will include:

- Assess accounting estimates for biases by evaluating whether judgements and decisions in making accounting estimates, even if individually reasonable, indicate a possible bias.
- In line with our methodology, evaluate the design and implementation of controls over journal entries and post closing adjustments.
- Assess the appropriateness of changes compared to the prior year to the methods and underlying assumptions used to prepare accounting estimates.
- Assess the business rationale and the appropriateness of the accounting for significant transactions that are outside the Council's normal course of business, or are otherwise unusual.
- We will analyse all journals through the year and focus our testing on those with a higher risk, such as unusual journals impacting expenditure recognition posted during the final close down.

Audit risks and our audit approach (cont.)

5

Valuation of post retirement benefit obligations

An inappropriate amount is estimated and recorded for the defined benefit obligation



Significant audit risk

- The valuation of the post retirement benefit obligations involves the selection of appropriate actuarial assumptions, most notably the discount rate applied to the scheme liabilities, inflation rates and mortality rates. The selection of these assumptions is inherently subjective and small changes in the assumptions and estimates used to value the Council's pension liability could have a significant effect on the financial position of the Council
- The effect of these matters is that, as part of our risk assessment, we determined that post retirement benefits obligation has a high degree of estimation uncertainty. The financial statements disclose the assumptions used by the Council in completing the year end valuation of the pension deficit and the year on year movements.
- We have identified this in relation to the following pension scheme memberships: Essex Local Government Pension Scheme



Planned response

We will perform the following procedures:

- Understand the processes the Council have in place to set the assumptions used in the valuation;
- Evaluate the competency and objectivity of the actuaries to confirm their qualifications and the basis for their calculations;
- Perform inquiries of the accounting actuaries to assess the methodology and key assumptions made, including actual figures where estimates have been used by the actuaries, such as the rate of return on pension fund assets;
- Agree the data provided by the audited entity to the Scheme Administrator for use within the calculation of the scheme valuation;
- Evaluate the design and implementation of controls in place for the Council to determine the appropriateness of the assumptions used by the actuaries in valuing the liability;
- Challenge, with the support of our own actuarial specialists, the key assumptions applied, being the discount rate, inflation rate and mortality/life expectancy against externally derived data;
- Confirm that the accounting treatment and entries applied by the Group are in line with IFRS and the CIPFA Code of Practice;
- Consider the adequacy of the Council's disclosures in respect of the sensitivity of the deficit or surplus to these assumptions;
- Assess the impact of a new triennial valuation model and/or any special events, where applicable.

Audit risks and our audit approach (cont.)

6

Fraud risk from expenditure recognition

Liabilities and related expenses for purchases of goods or services are not completely identified and recorded



Significant audit risk

The Council has a statutory duty to balance their annual budget. Where a Council does not meet its budget this creates pressure on the Council's usable reserves and this in turn provides a pressure on the following year's budget.

At the time of completing our planning there has not been assurance provided over the level of usable reserves for 2019-20 onwards, therefore there is a risk relating to the accuracy of the opening level of reserves available to the Council to support cost pressures.

We consider that there could be an incentive for management to seek to manipulate the level of expenditure recorded at year end in order to report financial performance within the level of usable reserves. We consider this would be most likely to occur through the reduction of accruals that are required to be made at 31 March 2024 to report stronger financial performance.



Planned response

We will perform the following procedures in order to respond to the significant risk identified:

- We will evaluate the design and implementation of controls for developing manual expenditure accruals at the end of the year to verify that they have been completely and accurately recorded.
- We will inspect a sample of invoices of expenditure and payments made, in the period after 31 March 2024, to determine whether expenditure has been recognised in the correct accounting period and whether accruals are complete;
- We will select a sample of year end accruals and inspect evidence of the actual amount paid after year end in order to assess whether the accruals have been accurately recorded;
- We will inspect journals posted as part of the year end close procedures that decrease the level of expenditure recorded in order to critically assess whether there was an appropriate basis for posting the journal and the value can be agreed to supporting evidence; and
- We will compare the items that were accrued at 31 March 2023 to those accrued at 31 March 2024 in order to assess whether any items of expenditure not accrued for as at 31 March 2024 have been done so appropriately.

Audit risks and our audit approach (cont.)

7 Acquisition of Burnt Mills Development

Incorrect classification of Burnt Mills Development in the financial statements



Other Audit risk

Harlow District Council presented a Proposal to Acquire Commercial asset – Burnt Mills Development to the cabinet on 29th January 2024. The Burnt Mills Development is a 172 residential apartment scheme with 12,500 square feet of commercial space at ground floor (“Burnt Mills Development”). The Burnt Mills Development occupies one of the key strategic sites in the town. The Council would borrow short term to facilitate this transaction.

Harlow District Council (HDC) aims to provide housing to address the Council’s temporary accommodation provision through the delivery of 52 affordable housing units and 120 market rent units via a subsidiary LLP.

The proposal was approved by the Council and on 13th March 2024 Harlow exchanged signed contracts with the seller and the purchase was completed on 20th March 2024 and Harlow took legal ownership of the development

As the acquisition occurred using a temporary arrangement without having finalised the proposed management of the unit there is a risk that it is not accounted for appropriately as at 31 March 2024.



We will perform the following procedures:

- Assess the business rationale for the acquisition of the development and therefore the appropriateness of the accounting treatment and entries applied by the Council are in line with IFRS and the CIPFA Code of Practice.
- Consider the adequacy of the Council’s disclosure and adequate categorisation of the Burnt Mills development and short-term borrowing.
- Consider the adequacy of the Council’s disclosure regarding the formation of LLP and transfer of Burnt Mills development to LLP and lease hold arrangement.

Audit risks and our audit approach

Revenue – Rebuttal of Significant Risk

Professional standards require us to make a rebuttable presumption that the fraud risk from revenue recognition is a significant risk. Due to the nature of the revenue within the sector we have rebutted this significant risk. We have set out the rationale for the rebuttal of key types of income in the table below.

Description of Income	Nature of Income	Rationale for Rebuttal
Council tax	This is the income received from local residents paid in accordance with an annual bill based on the banding of the property concerned.	The income is highly predictable and is broadly known at the beginning of the year, due to the number of properties in the area and the fixed price that is approved annually based on a band D property: it is highly unlikely for there to be a material error in the population.
Business rates	Revenue received from local businesses paid in accordance with an annual demand based on the rateable value of the business concerned.	The income is highly predictable and is broadly known at the beginning of the year, due to the number of businesses in the area and the fixed amount that is approved annually: it is highly unlikely for there to be a material error in the population.
Fees and charges	Revenue recognised from receipt of fixed fee services, in line with the fees and charges schedules agreed and approved annually.	The income stream represents high volume, low value sales, with simple recognition. Fees and charges values are agreed annually. We do not deem there to be any incentive or opportunity to manipulate the income.
Grant income	Predictable income receipted primarily from central government, including for housing benefits.	Grant income at a local authority typically involves a small number of high value items and an immaterial residual population. These high value items frequently have simple recognition criteria and can be traced easily to third party documentation, most often from central government source data. There is limited incentive or opportunity to manipulate these figures.

Mandatory communications - additional reporting

Going concern

Under NAO guidance, including Practice Note 10 - A local authority's financial statements shall be prepared on a going concern basis; this is, the accounts should be prepared on the assumption that the functions of the authority will continue in operational existence for the foreseeable future. Transfers of services under combinations of public sector bodies (such as local government reorganization) do not negate the presumption of going concern.






However, financial sustainability is a core area of focus for our Value for Money opinion.

Additional reporting

Your audit is undertaken to comply with the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 which gives the NAO the responsibility to prepare an Audit Code (the Code), which places responsibilities in addition to those derived from audit standards on us. We also have responsibilities which come specifically from acting as a component auditor to the NAO. In considering these matters at the planning stage we indicate whether:

Work is completed throughout our audit and we can confirm the matters are progressing satisfactorily 	We have identified issues that we may need to report 	Work is completed at a later stage of our audit so we have nothing to report 
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We have summarised the status of all these various requirements at the time of planning our audit below and will update you as our work progresses:

Type	Status	Response
Our declaration of independence		No matters to report. The engagement team and others in the firm, as appropriate, have complied with relevant ethical requirements regarding independence.
Issue a report in the public interest		We are required to consider if we should issue a public interest report on any matters which come to our attention during the audit. We have not identified any such matters to date.
Provide a statement to the NAO on your consolidation schedule		This "Whole of Government Accounts" requirement is fulfilled when we complete any work required of us by the NAO to assist their audit of the consolidated accounts of DLUHC.
Provide a summary of risks of significant weakness in arrangements to provide value for money		We are required to report significant weaknesses in arrangements. Work to be completed at a later stage.
Certify the audit as complete		We are required to certify the audit as complete when we have fulfilled all of our responsibilities relating to the accounts and use of resources as well as those other matters highlighted above.

Mandatory communications

Type	Statements
Management’s responsibilities (and, where appropriate, those charged with governance)	<p>Prepare financial statements in accordance with the applicable financial reporting framework that are free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error.</p> <p>Provide the auditor with access to all information relevant to the preparation of the financial statements, additional information requested and unrestricted access to persons within the entity.</p>
Auditor’s responsibilities	<p>Our responsibilities set out through the NAO Code (communicated to you by the PSAA) and can be also found on their website, which include our responsibilities to form and express 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.</p>
Auditor’s responsibilities – Fraud	<p>This report communicates how we plan to identify, assess and obtain sufficient appropriate evidence regarding the risks of material misstatement of the financial statements due to fraud and to implement appropriate responses to fraud or suspected fraud identified during the audit.</p>
Auditor’s responsibilities – Other information	<p>Our responsibilities are communicated to you by the PSAA and can be also found on their website, which communicates our responsibilities with respect to other information in documents containing audited financial statements. We will report to you on material inconsistencies and misstatements in other information.</p>
Independence	<p>Our independence confirmation at page 25 discloses matters relating to our independence and objectivity including any relationships that may bear on the firm’s independence and the integrity and objectivity of the audit engagement partner and audit staff.</p>

Harlow District Council

Value for money

Our approach

Year ended 31 March 2024

June 2024

Value for money

For 2023/24 our value for money reporting requirements have been designed to follow the guidance in the Audit Code of Practice.

Our responsibility to conclude on significant weaknesses in value for money arrangements is unchanged.

The main output remains a narrative on each of the three domains, summarising the work performed, any significant weaknesses and any recommendations for improvement.

We have set out the key methodology and reporting requirements on this slide and provided an overview of the process and reporting on the following page.

Risk assessment processes

Our responsibility remains to assess whether there are any significant weaknesses in the Council's arrangements to secure value for money. Our risk assessment will continue to consider whether there are any significant risks that the Council does not have appropriate arrangements in place.

In undertaking our risk assessment we will be required to obtain an understanding of the key processes the Council has in place to ensure this, including financial management, risk management and partnership working arrangements. We will complete this through review of the Council's documentation in these areas and performing inquiries of management as well as reviewing reports, such as internal audit assessments.

Reporting

As with the prior year our approach to value for money reporting aligns to the NAO guidance and includes:

- A summary of our commentary on the arrangements in place against each of the three value for money criteria, setting out our view of the arrangements in place compared to industry standards;
- A summary of any further work undertaken against identified significant risks and the findings from this work; and
- Recommendations raised as a result of any significant weaknesses identified and follow up of previous recommendations.

The Council will be required to publish the commentary on its website at the same time as publishing its annual report online.

Financial sustainability

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

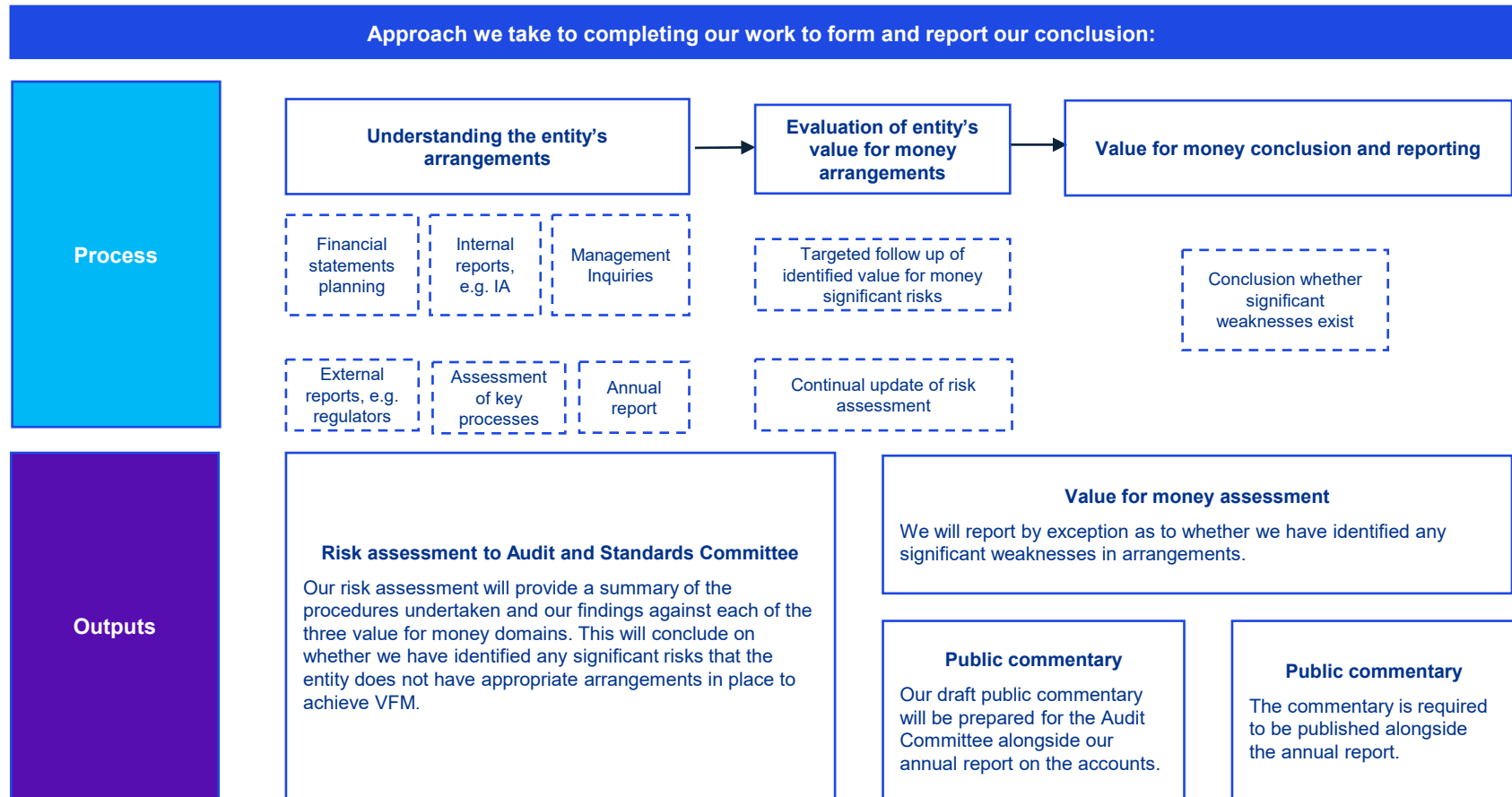
Governance

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

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.

Value for money



Summary of risk assessment

Summary of risk assessment

We have not identified any risks of significant weaknesses from our initial work to date, however our risk assessment is continuing and we will provide our full risk assessment at the next Audit Committee.

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Audit team and rotation

Your audit team has been drawn from our specialist local government audit department and is led by key members of staff who will be supported by auditors and specialists as necessary to complete our work. We also ensure that we consider rotation of your audit partner and firm.



Dean Gibbs is the director responsible for our audit. He will lead our audit work, attend the Audit and Standards Committee and be responsible for the opinions that we issue.



Himanshu Mohla is the manager responsible for our audit. He will co-ordinate our audit work, attend the Audit and Standards Committee and ensure we are co-ordinated across our accounts and use of funds work.



Angus Percival is the in-charge responsible for our audit. He will be responsible for our on-site fieldwork. He will complete work on more complex section of the audit.

To comply with professional standard we need to ensure that you appropriately rotate your external audit partner. There are no other members of your team which we will need to consider this requirement for:



This will be Dean's first year as your engagement lead. They are required to rotate every five years, extendable to seven with PSAA approval.

Audit cycle & timetable

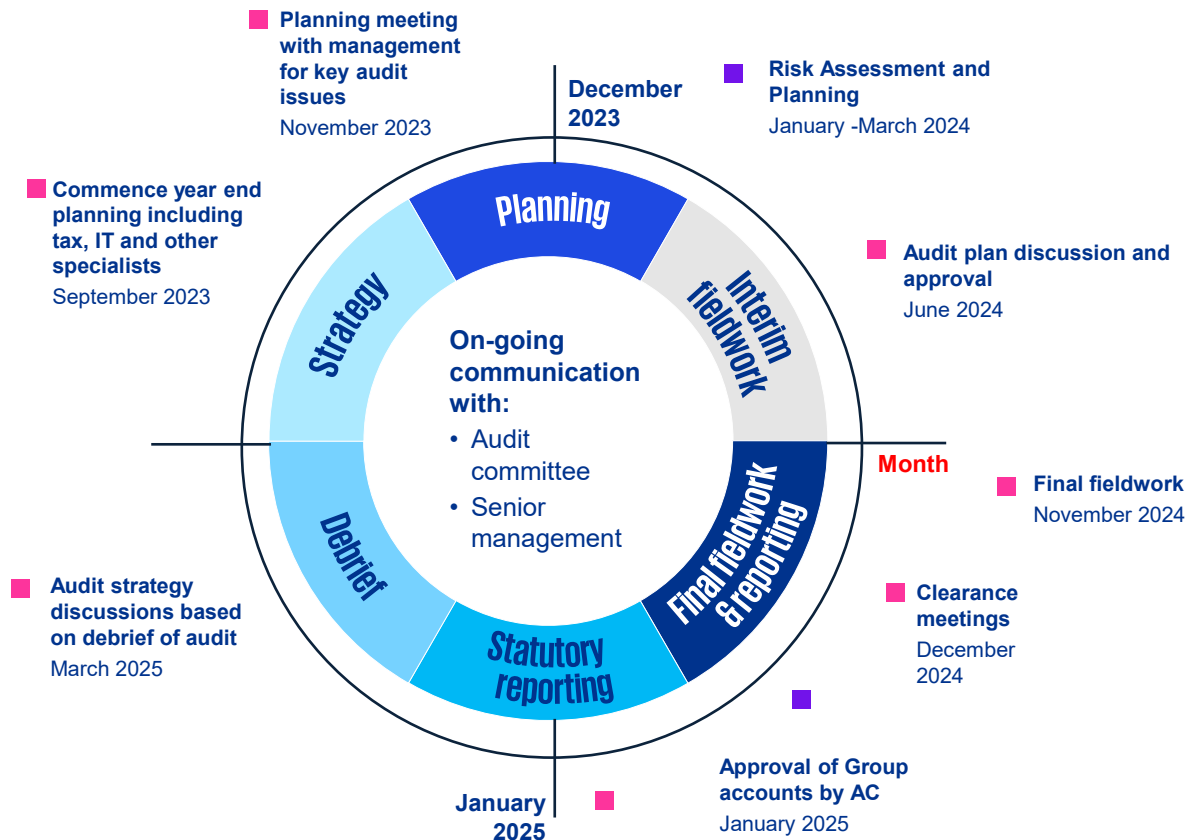
Our schedule 2023 – 2024

We have worked with management to generate our understanding of the processes and controls in place at the Council in its preparation of the Statement of Accounts.

We are still in discussion with management to agree an audit cycle and timetable that reflects our aim to sign our audit report.

This being the first year of KPMG as auditor we have undertaken greater activities to understand the Council at the planning stage. This level of input may not be required in future years and may change our audit timings.

Given the large amount of consultation happening in regard to the scope and timing of local government this audit **schedule may be subject to change**.



Key:

- Timing of AC communications
- Key events

Fees

Audit fee

Our fees for the year ending 31 March 2024 are set out in the PSAA Scale Fees communication and are shown below.

Entity	2023/24 (£'000)	2022/23 (£'000)
Statutory audit	198.3	[x]*
ISA315r	TBC	-
ISA240	TBC	-
TOTAL	TBC	[x]

*fee charged by XX - your predecessor auditor.

As per PSAA's Scale Fees Consultation, the fees do not include new requirements of ISA315 revised (risk of material misstatement); or ISA 240 (auditor's responsibilities relating to fraud. The fees also assume no significant risks are identified as part of the Value for Money risk assessment. Additional fees in relation to these areas will be subject to the fees variation process as outlined by the PSAA.

Billing arrangements

Fees will be billed in accordance with the milestone completion phasing that has been communicated by the PSAA.

Basis of fee information

Our fees are subject to the following assumptions:

- The Council's audit evidence files are completed to an appropriate standard (we will liaise with you separately on this);
- Draft statutory accounts are presented to us for audit subject to audit and tax adjustments;
- Supporting schedules to figures in the accounts are supplied;
- The council's audit evidence files are completed to an appropriate standard (we will liaise with management separately on this);
- A trial balance together with reconciled control accounts are presented to us;
- All deadlines agreed with us are met;
- We find no weaknesses in controls that cause us to significantly extend procedures beyond those planned;
- Management will be available to us as necessary throughout the audit process; and
- There will be no changes in deadlines or reporting requirements.

We will provide a list of schedules to be prepared by management stating the due dates together with pro-formas as necessary.

Our ability to deliver the services outlined to the agreed timetable and fee will depend on these schedules being available on the due dates in the agreed form and content.

Any variations to the above plan will be subject to the PSAA fee variation process.

Confirmation of Independence

We confirm that, in our professional judgement, KPMG LLP is independent within the meaning of regulatory and professional requirements and that the objectivity of the Partner and audit staff is not impaired.

To the Audit and Standard Committee members

Assessment of our objectivity and independence as auditor of Harlow District Council

Professional ethical standards require us to provide to you at the planning stage of the audit a written disclosure of relationships (including the provision of non-audit services) that bear on KPMG LLP's objectivity and independence, the threats to KPMG LLP's independence that these create, any safeguards that have been put in place and why they address such threats, together with any other information necessary to enable KPMG LLP's objectivity and independence to be assessed.

This letter is intended to comply with this requirement and facilitate a subsequent discussion with you on audit independence and addresses:

- General procedures to safeguard independence and objectivity;
- Independence and objectivity considerations relating to the provision of non-audit services; and
- Independence and objectivity considerations relating to other matters.

General procedures to safeguard independence and objectivity

KPMG LLP is committed to being and being seen to be independent. As part of our ethics and independence policies, all KPMG LLP partners/directors and staff annually confirm their compliance with our ethics and independence policies and procedures including in particular that they have no prohibited shareholdings. Our ethics and independence policies and procedures are fully consistent with the requirements of the FRC Ethical Standard. As a result we have underlying safeguards in place to maintain independence through:

- Instilling professional values.
- Communications.
- Internal accountability.
- Risk management.
- Independent reviews.

We are satisfied that our general procedures support our independence and objectivity.

Independence and objectivity considerations relating to the provision of non-audit services

Summary of non-audit services

Facts and matters related to the provision of non-audit services and the safeguards put in place that bear upon our independence and objectivity, are set out on the table overleaf.

Confirmation of Independence

Disclosure	Description of scope of services	Principal threats to Independence	Safeguards Applied	Basis of fee	Value of Services Delivered in the year ended 31 March 2023 £m	Value of Services Committed but not yet delivered £m
1	Housing benefit grant certification	Management Self review Self interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standard language on non-assumption of management responsibilities is included in our engagement letter. The engagement contract makes clear that we will not perform any management functions. The work is performed after the audit is completed and the work is not relied on within the audit file. Our work does not involve judgement and are statements of fact based on agreed upon procedures. 	Fixed	-	2021/22 - £56,800 2022/23 - £56,800 2023/24 - £57,700

Confirmation of Independence (cont.)

Summary of fees

We have considered the fees charged by us to the Group and its affiliates for professional services provided by us during the reporting period.

Fee ratio

The ratio of non-audit fees to audit fees for the year is anticipated to be 0:1. While we are contracted to provide housing benefit assurance services, this is not required to be considered as part of the non-audit fee ratio under the guidance provided by the National Audit Office. We do not consider that the total non-audit fees create a self-interest threat since the absolute level of fees is not significant to our firm as a whole.

	2023/24
	£'000
Statutory audit	198.3
Other Assurance Services	0
Total Fees	198.3

Application of the FRC Ethical Standard 2019

We communicated to you previously the effect of the application of the FRC Ethical Standard 2019. That standard became effective for the first period commencing on or after 15 March 2020, except for the restrictions on non-audit and additional services that became effective immediately at that date, subject to grandfathering provisions.

AGN 01 states that when the auditor provides non-audit services, the total fees for such services to the audited entity and its controlled entities in any one year should not exceed 70% of the total fee for all audit work carried out in respect of the audited entity and its controlled entities for that year.

We confirm that as at 15 March 2020 we were not providing any non-audit or additional services that required to be grandfathered.

Independence and objectivity considerations relating to other matters

There are no other matters that, in our professional judgment, bear on our independence which need to be disclosed to the Audit and Risk Committee.

Confirmation of audit independence

We confirm that as of the date of this letter, in our professional judgment, KPMG LLP is independent within the meaning of regulatory and professional requirements and the objectivity of the partner and audit staff is not impaired.

This report is intended solely for the information of the Audit and Risk Committee of the Group and should not be used for any other purposes.

We would be very happy to discuss the matters identified above (or any other matters relating to our objectivity and independence) should you wish to do so.

Yours faithfully

KPMG LLP

KPMG's Audit quality framework

Audit quality is at the core of everything we do at KPMG and we believe that it is not just about reaching the right opinion, but how we reach that opinion.

To ensure that every partner and employee concentrates on the fundamental skills and behaviours required to deliver an appropriate and independent opinion, we have developed our global Audit Quality Framework.

Responsibility for quality starts at the top through our governance structures as the UK Board is supported by the Audit Oversight Committee, and accountability is reinforced through the complete chain of command in all our teams.

■ Commitment to continuous improvement

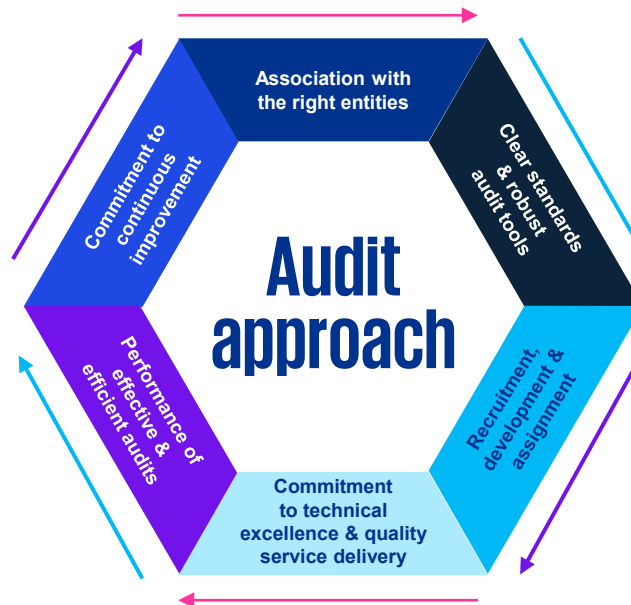
- Comprehensive effective monitoring processes
- Significant investment in technology to achieve consistency and enhance audits
- Obtain feedback from key stakeholders
- Evaluate and appropriately respond to feedback and findings

■ Performance of effective & efficient audits

- Professional judgement and scepticism
- Direction, supervision and review
- Ongoing mentoring and on the job coaching, including the second line of defence model
- Critical assessment of audit evidence
- Appropriately supported and documented conclusions
- Insightful, open and honest two way communications

■ Commitment to technical excellence & quality service delivery

- Technical training and support
- Accreditation and licensing
- Access to specialist networks
- Consultation processes
- Business understanding and industry knowledge
- Capacity to deliver valued insights



■ Association with the right entities

- Select entities within risk tolerance
- Manage audit responses to risk
- Robust client and engagement acceptance and continuance processes
- Client portfolio management

■ Clear standards & robust audit tools

- KPMG Audit and Risk Management Manuals
- Audit technology tools, templates and guidance
- KPMG Clara incorporating monitoring capabilities at engagement level
- Independence policies

■ Recruitment, development & assignment of appropriately qualified personnel

- Recruitment, promotion, retention
- Development of core competencies, skills and personal qualities
- Recognition and reward for quality work
- Capacity and resource management
- Assignment of team members and specialists

ISA (UK) 315 Revised: Overview



Summary

In the prior period, ISA (UK) 315 Revised “Identifying and assessing the risks of material misstatement” was introduced and incorporated significant changes from the previous version of the ISA.

These were introduced to achieve a more rigorous risk identification and assessment process and thereby promote more specificity in the response to the identified risks. The revised ISA was effective for periods commencing on or after **15 December 2021**.

The revised standard expanded on concepts in the existing standards but also introduced new risk assessment process requirements – the changes had a significant impact on our audit methodology and therefore audit approach.

What impact did the revision have on audited entities?

With the changes in the environment, including financial reporting frameworks becoming more complex, technology being used to a greater extent and entities (and their governance structures) becoming more complicated, standard setters recognised that audits need to have a more robust and comprehensive risk identification and assessment mechanism.

The changes result in additional audit awareness and therefore clear and impactful communication to those charged with governance in relation to (i) promoting consistency in effective risk identification and assessment, (ii) modernising the standard by increasing the focus on IT, (iii) enhancing the standard’s scalability through a principle based approach, and (iv) focusing auditor attention on exercising professional scepticism throughout risk assessment procedures.

Implementing year 1 findings into the subsequent audit plan

Entering the second year of the standard, the auditors will have demonstrated, and communicated their enhanced insight into their understanding of your wider control environment, notably within the area of IT.

In year 2 the audit team will apply their enhanced learning and insight into providing a targeted audit approach reflective of the specific scenarios of each entity’s audit.

A key area of focus for the auditor will be understanding how the entity responded to the observations communicated to those charged with governance in the prior period.

Where an entity has responded to those observations a re-evaluation of the control environment will establish if the responses by entity management have been proportionate and successful in their implementation.

Where no response to the observations has been applied by entity, or the auditor deems the remediation has not been effective, the audit team will understand the context and respond with proportionate application of professional scepticism in planning and performance of the subsequent audit procedures.

What will this mean for our on-going audits?

To meet the on-going requirements of the standard, auditors will each year continue to focus on risk assessment process, including the detailed consideration of the IT environment.

Subsequent year auditor observations on whether entity actions to address any control observations are proportionate and have been successfully implemented will represent an on-going audit deliverable.

Each year the impact of the on-going standard on your audit will be dependent on a combination of prior period observations, changes in the entity control environment and developments during the period. This on-going focus is likely to result in the continuation of enhanced risk assessment procedures and appropriate involvement of technical specialists (particularly IT Audit professionals) in our audits which will, in turn, influence auditor remuneration.

ISA (UK) 240 Revised: changes embedded in our practices

Ongoing impact of the revisions to ISA (UK) 240

ISA (UK) 240 (revised May 2021, effective for periods commencing on or after 15 December 2021) The auditor’s responsibilities relating to fraud in an audit of financial statements included revisions introduced to clarify the auditor’s obligations with respect to fraud and enhance the quality of audit work performed in this area. These changes are embedded into our practices and we will continue to maintain an increased focus on applying professional scepticism in our audit approach and to plan and perform the audit in a manner that is not biased towards obtaining evidence that may be corroborative, or towards excluding evidence that may be contradictory.

We will communicate, unless prohibited by law or regulation, with those charged with governance any matters related to fraud that are, in our judgment, relevant to their responsibilities. In doing so, we will consider the matters, if any, to communicate regarding management’s process for identifying and responding to the risks of fraud in the entity and our assessment of the risks of material misstatement due to fraud.

Area	Our approach following the revisions
Risk assessment procedures and related activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Increased focus on applying professional scepticism – the key areas affected are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the need for auditors not to bias their approach towards obtaining evidence that is corroborative in nature or excluding contradictory evidence; • remaining alert for indications of inauthenticity in documents and records, and • investigating inconsistent or implausible responses to inquiries performed. 2) Requirements to perform inquiries with individuals at the entity are expanded to include, amongst others, those who deal with allegations of fraud. 3) We will determine whether to involve technical specialists (including forensics) to aid in identifying and responding to risks of material misstatement due to fraud.
Internal discussions and challenge	<p>We will have internal discussions among the audit team to identify and assess the risk of fraud in the audit, including determining the need for additional meetings to consider the findings from earlier stages of the audit and their impact on our assessment of the risk of fraud.</p>

FRC's areas of focus



The FRC released their [Annual Review of Corporate Reporting 2021/22](#) in October 2022, along with a [summary of key matters](#) for the coming year, primarily targeted at CEOs, CFOs and Audit Committee chairs. In addition, they released six thematic reviews during the year which should be considered when preparing financial reports.

The reports identify where the FRC believes companies should be improving their reporting. Below is a high level summary of the key topics. We encourage management and those charged with governance to read further on those areas which are significant to the group.



Reporting in uncertain times

Last year's Annual Review of Corporate Reporting from the FRC was prepared in the context of the current heightened economic and geopolitical uncertainty. The challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and slowing of global economies has led to inflationary pressure worldwide and rising interest rates.

This makes meaningful disclosure more important than ever, and the FRC has stressed the need for companies to move beyond simply complying with the minimum requirements of the relevant accounting and reporting frameworks. They expect companies to provide high-quality, decision-useful information for investors, with companies continually assessing evolving risks and ensuring these are clearly explained in annual reports.

The potential effects of uncertainty on recognition, measurement and disclosure are numerous, and companies will need to think carefully about the impacts of uncertainty, in particular inflation, on their reporting. The Annual Review gives a number of examples including:

Strategic report: the impact of inflation on the business model, changes to principal risks and uncertainties, and the impact of inflation on stakeholders.

Discount rates: inputs need to follow a consistent approach in incorporating the effects of inflation.

Material assumptions: where inflation assumptions represent a source of significant estimation uncertainty, the FRC expects companies to provide explanation of how these have been calculated and sensitivity disclosures if appropriate.

Pension schemes: explain the effect of uncertainty on investment strategy and associated risks.



Climate-related reporting

Climate-related reporting has advanced significantly this year as premium listed entities are required by the Listing Rules to provide disclosures consistent with the Taskforce on Climate-Related Disclosures (TCFD) recommendations. This follows the expansion of the Streamlined Energy and Carbon Reporting (SECR) rules last year, which require quoted companies and large unquoted companies and LLPs to provide emissions reporting.

Climate has therefore been an area of ongoing focus for the FRC, with a thematic reviews in both 2021 and 2022 on aspects of climate reporting. From reviews of TCFD disclosures in the year, the FRC has highlighted five areas of improvement for companies to consider going forwards:

Granularity and specificity: disclosures should be granular and specific both to the company and the individual disclosure requirement, including a clear link to financial planning.

Balance: discussion of climate-related risks and opportunities should be balanced, and companies should consider any technological dependencies.

Interlinkage with other narrative disclosures: companies should ensure clear links between TCFD disclosures with other narrative disclosures in the annual report.

Materiality: companies should clearly articulate how they have considered materiality in the context of their TCFD disclosures.

Connectivity between TCFD and financial statements disclosures: the FRC may challenge those that disclose significant climate risks or net zero transition plans in narrative reporting, but do not explain how this is taken into account in the financial statements.

FRC's areas of focus (cont.)

Cash flow statements

This continues to be a particular area of concern as it is a recurring source of errors identified by the FRC, with 15 companies restating their cash flow statements in the review period as a result of the FRC's enquiries.

Companies are encouraged to consider the guidance in the 2020 thematic review on this topic, and to ensure that robust pre-issuance reviews of the financial statements have been undertaken.

Cash flows must be classified as operating, investing or reporting in line with the requirements of the standard, and amounts reported should be consistent with disclosures elsewhere in the report and accounts including the elimination of non-cash transactions.

Several errors identified by the FRC related to the parent company cash flow statement, and it should be ensured that this statement also complies with the requirements of the standard.

Financial Instruments

Companies should ensure that disclosure is sufficient to enable users to evaluate the nature and extent of risks arising from financial instruments and the approach taken to risk management.

These disclosures should include the approach and assumptions used in the measurement of expected credit losses, and details of concentrations of risk. In times of economic uncertainty, disclosure of methods used to measure exposure to risks, and details of hedging arrangements put in place for interest rates or inflation are all the more important.

In addition, accounting policies should be provided for all material financing and hedging arrangements and any changes in these arrangements. Where companies have banking covenants, information about these should be provided (unless the likelihood of a breach is considered remote).

Income taxes

Where material deferred tax assets are recognised by historically loss-making entities, disclosures should explain the nature of the evidence supporting their recognition. In addition, any connected significant accounting judgements or sources of estimation uncertainty will also need to be disclosed.

On tax more generally, the FRC expects companies to ensure that tax-related disclosures are consistent throughout the annual report and accounts, and material reconciling items in the effective tax rate reconciliation are adequately explained.

For groups operating in several jurisdictions, effective tax reconciliations may be more meaningful if they aggregate reconciliations prepared using the domestic rate in each individual jurisdiction, with a weighted average tax rate applied to accounting profit.

Strategic report and other Companies Act 2006 matters

The strategic report needs to articulate the effects of economic and other risks facing companies, including inflation, rising interest rates, supply chain issues and labour relations. Mitigation strategies should be explained, with links, where relevant, to information disclosed elsewhere in the annual report.

Business reviews should discuss significant movements in the balance sheet and cash flow statement, and should not be limited to just an explanation of financial performance in the period.

The FRC has also identified instances of companies not complying with legal requirements around distributions, and companies are reminded of the need to file interim accounts to support distributions in excess of the distributable profits shown in the relevant accounts.

Revenue

Accounting policies should be provided for all significant performance obligations and should address the timing of revenue recognition, the basis for over-time recognition, and the methodology applied.

Inflationary features in contracts with customers and suppliers and the accounting for such clauses are under increased focus this year.

Alternative performance measures ('APMs')

APMs should not be presented with more prominence, emphasis or authority than measures stemming directly from the financial statements, and should be reconciled to the relevant financial statements line item.

FRC's areas of focus (cont.)

Provisions and contingencies

Companies should give clear and specific descriptions of the nature and uncertainties for material provisions or contingent liabilities, the expected timeframe and the basis for estimating the probable or possible outflow.

Inputs used in measuring provisions should be consistent in the approach to incorporating the effects of inflation, and details of related assumptions should be provided if material.

Presentation of financial statements and related disclosures

Material accounting policy information should be clearly disclosed, and additional company-specific disclosures should be provided when compliance with IFRS requirements is insufficient to adequately explain transactions.

Judgements and estimates

Economic uncertainty increases the likelihood of companies needing to make significant judgements when preparing financial statements. The FRC highlights two specific examples – going concern assessments and accounting for inflationary features in contracts – where disclosure is key.

More generally, the FRC highlights the need for disclosures to clearly distinguish between estimates with a significant risk of a material adjustment to the carrying amounts of assets/liabilities within the next year, and other sources of estimation uncertainty.

Significant estimates, and the associated disclosures should be updated at the balance sheet date. Sensitivity disclosures should be meaningful for readers, for example by sensitising the most relevant assumptions, and explaining any changes in assumption since the previous year.

Impairment of assets

Economic uncertainty may have a significant impact on impairment assessments, and this is an area where queries raised from the FRC could have been avoided by clearer disclosure.

Companies need to explain the sensitivity of recoverable amounts to changes in assumptions, especially where the range of possible outcomes has widened. This should include explanation of the effect of economic assumptions, such as reduction in customer demand and increased cost.

Inflation should be treated consistently in value in use calculations. Nominal cash flows are discounted at a nominal rate, and real cash flows are discounted at a real rate.

Lastly, the FRC stresses the importance of consistency between impairment reviews/disclosures and other disclosures in the annual report.

Thematic reviews

The FRC released six thematic reviews on corporate reporting last year, and companies are encouraged to consider the guidance in those reviews, where relevant, to enhance their financial reporting. The topics covered are:

- [TCFD disclosures and climate in the financial statements](#)
- [Judgements and estimates](#)
- [IFRS 3 Business Combinations](#)
- [Discount rates](#)
- [Deferred Tax Assets \(IAS 12\)](#)
- [Earnings per Share \(IAS 33\)](#)

2022/23 review priorities

The FRC has indicated that its 2022/23 reviews will focus on the extent to which companies' disclosures address risks and uncertainty in the challenging economic environment, including those relating to climate change. Companies need to clearly articulate the impact of these risks on their strategy, business model and viability. In particular, the FRC intends to prioritise reviews of companies operating in the following sectors:

 Travel, hospitality and leisure

 Construction materials

 Retail

 Gas, water and multi-utilities



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