



Audit progress report

City of Lincoln Council

February 2019





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1. AUDIT PROGRESS

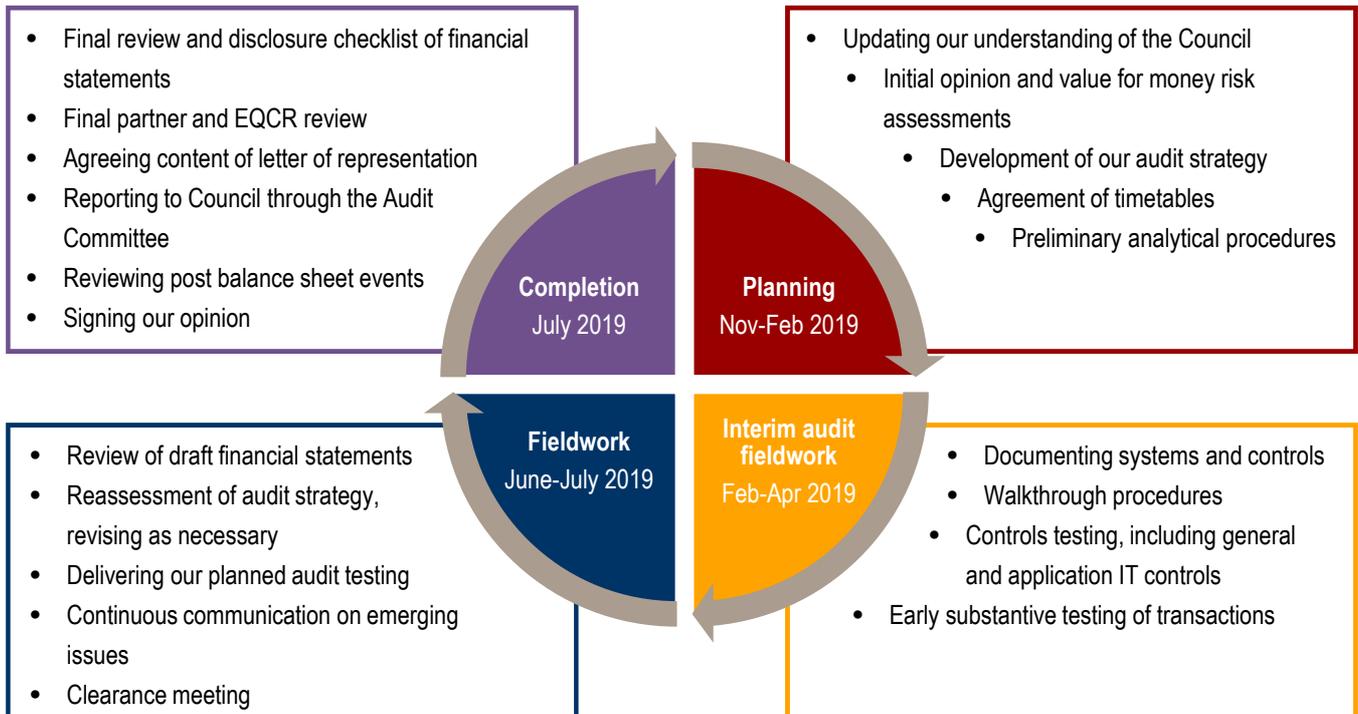
Purpose of this report

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

Audit progress

Our key audit stages are summarised in the diagram shown below.

We are in the process of finalising the Audit Strategy Memorandum and completing our walkthroughs at the time of writing this report; if there are any issues arising to report to this Committee, we will include these in our next audit progress report.



2. NATIONAL PUBLICATIONS

	Publication/update	Key points
National Audit Office (NAO)		
1.	Local auditor reporting in England 2018	Main findings reported by auditors in 2017/18.
2.	Local authorities - governance	Consideration of VfM and financial sustainability in local authorities.
3.	NHS financial sustainability	Current picture not sustainable and yet to be seen whether spending plans will deliver the change required.
4.	A review of the role and costs of clinical commissioning groups	Organisational stability needed.
Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd (PSAA)		
5.	Local quality audit forum	December 18 forum slides available online.
6.	Oversight of audit quality, quarterly compliance reports	No significant issues.
Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA)		
7.	Scrutinising Public Accounts: A Guide to Government Accounts	Online publication resource available.
8.	CIPFA Fraud and Corruption Tracker 2017/18	Annual report. Increase in fraud detected or prevented.
Mazars		
9.	Summary of NHS long-term plan	Views on the deliverability of the plan will vary.

2. NATIONAL PUBLICATIONS

1. Local auditor reporting in England 2018, NAO, January 2019

Since 2015, the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) has been responsible for setting the standards for local public audit, through maintaining a Code of Audit Practice and issuing associated guidance to local auditors.

The report describes the roles and responsibilities of local auditors and relevant national bodies in relation to the local audit framework and summarises the main findings reported by local auditors in 2017-18. It also considers how the quantity and nature of the issues reported have changed since the C&AG took up his new responsibilities in 2015, and highlights differences between the local government and NHS sectors. The report highlights a number of points as summarised below.

- Auditors gave unqualified opinions on financial statements in 2015-16, 2016-17 and 2017-18. This provides assurance that local public bodies are complying with financial reporting requirements. As at 17 December 2018, auditors had yet to issue 16 opinions on financial statements, so this does not yet represent the full picture for 2017-18.
- Auditors qualified their conclusions on arrangements to secure value for money at an increasing number of local public bodies: up from 170 (18%) in 2015-16 to 208 (22%) in 2017-18. Again, as at 17 December 2018, auditors had yet to issue 20 conclusions on arrangements to secure value for money, so this number may increase further for 2017-18. This level of qualifications reinforces the need to ensure that local auditors' reporting informs as much as possible relevant departments' understanding of the issues facing local public bodies.
- Auditors qualified their conclusions at 40 (8%) of local government bodies. The proportion of qualifications was highest for single-tier local authorities and county councils where auditors qualified 27 (18%) of their value for money arrangements conclusions. The qualifications were for weaknesses in governance arrangements, often also highlighted by inspectorates' ratings of services as inadequate.
- More local NHS bodies received qualified conclusions on arrangements to secure VfM than local government bodies. In 2017-18, auditors qualified 168 (38%) of local NHS bodies' conclusions; up from 130 (29%) in 2015-16, mainly because of not meeting financial targets such as keeping spending within annual limits set by Parliament; not delivering savings to balance the body's budget; or because of inadequate plans to achieve financial balance. The increase between 2015-16 and 2017-18 is particularly steep at clinical commissioning groups, with qualifications for poor financial performance increasing from 21 (10%) in 2015-16 to 67 (32%) in 2017-18.
- Local auditors are using their additional reporting powers, but infrequently. Since April 2015, local auditors have issued only three Public Interest Reports, and made only seven Statutory Recommendations. These Public Interest Reports have drawn attention to issues such as unlawful use of parking income, governance failings in the oversight of a council-owned company, management of major projects or members' conduct. Auditors have made Statutory Recommendations in relation to failing to deliver planned cost savings, poor processes for producing the annual financial statements and failure to address weaknesses highlighted by independent reviews.
- A significant proportion of local bodies may not fully understand the main purpose of the auditor's conclusion on arrangements to secure value for money and the importance of addressing those issues. 102 local public bodies were contacted where auditors had reported concerns about their arrangements to ensure value for money:
 - half of the bodies (51) said that the auditor's report identified issues that they already knew about;
 - fifty-seven (95%) of those responding said they had plans in place to address their weaknesses but only three were able to say that they had fully implemented their plans; and
 - twenty-six (25%) did not respond at all to the NAO's request.
- The extent to which central government departments responsible for the oversight of local bodies have formal arrangements in place to draw on the findings from local auditor reports varies. Processes in the relevant central government departments differ. The Department of Health & Social Care, NHS Improvement and NHS England have arrangements in place to monitor the in-year financial performance of local NHS bodies, and use information from local auditor reports to confirm their understanding of risks in the system. The Home Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government consider the output from local auditors' reports to obtain a broad overview of the issues local auditors are raising, but there is a risk that these two departments may be unaware of all relevant local issues.

2. NATIONAL PUBLICATIONS

1. Local auditor reporting in England 2018, NAO, January 2019 (continued)

- Under the current local audit and performance framework, there is no direct consequence of receiving a non-standard report from the local auditor. Before 2010, a qualified value for money arrangements conclusion would have a direct impact on the scored assessments for all local public bodies published by the Audit Commission at that time. While departments may intervene in connection with the issues giving rise to a qualification, such as failure to meet expenditure limits, there are no formal processes in place, other than the local audit framework, that report publicly whether local bodies are addressing the weaknesses that local auditors are reporting.

A list of all local bodies that received a non-standard local auditor report for 2017-18 was published alongside the report.

<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/local-auditor-reporting-in-england-2018/>

2. Local authorities - governance, NAO, January 2019

The NAO has recently published a report on local authority governance, which examines whether local governance arrangements provide local taxpayers and Parliament with assurance that local authority spending achieves value for money and that authorities are financially sustainable.

The report finds that local authorities have faced significant challenges since 2010. For example, they have seen a real-terms reduction in spending power of 29% and a 15% increase in the number of children in care. These pressures raise the risk of authorities' failing to remain financially sustainable and deliver services.

The way authorities have responded to these challenges have tested local governance arrangements. Many authorities have pursued large-scale transformations or commercial investments that carry a risk of failure or under-performance and add greater complexity to governance arrangements. Spending by authorities on resources to support governance also fell by 34% in real terms between 2010-11 and 2017-18, potentially increasing the risks faced by local bodies.

In 2017-18, auditors issued qualified VFM arrangements conclusions for around one in five single tier and county councils. A survey, carried out by the NAO, of external auditors indicates that several authorities did not take appropriate steps to address these issues.

Some external auditors have raised concerns about the effectiveness of the internal checks and balances at the local authorities they audit, such as risk management, internal audit and scrutiny and overview. For example, 27% of auditors surveyed by the NAO do not agree that their authority's audit committees provided sufficient assurance about the authorities' governance arrangements. Auditors felt that many authorities are struggling in more than one aspect of governance, demonstrating the stress on governance at a local level.

Some authorities have begun to question the contribution of external audit to providing assurance on their governance arrangements. 51% of chief finance officers from single tier and county councils responding to our survey indicated that there are aspects of external audit they would like to change. This includes a greater focus on the value for money element of the audit (26%). External auditors recognise this demand within certain local authorities. However, their work must conform to the auditing standards they are assessed against and any additional activity may have implications for the fee needed for the audit.

The report also finds that MHCLG does not systematically collect data on governance, meaning it can't rigorously assess whether issues are isolated incidents or symptomatic of failings in aspects of the system. MHCLG recognises that it needs to be more active in leading co-ordinated change across the local governance system. The report recommends that MHCLG works with local authorities and other stakeholders to assess the implications of, and possible responses to, the various governance issues identified. It should examine ways of introducing greater transparency and openness to its formal and informal interventions in local authorities and should adopt a stronger leadership role in overseeing the network of organisations managing key aspects of the governance framework.

<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/local-authority-governance-2/>

2. NATIONAL PUBLICATIONS

3. NHS financial sustainability, NAO, January 2019

This is the NAO's seventh report on the financial sustainability of the NHS. In its recent reports, in December 2015, November 2016 and January 2018, the NAO concluded that financial problems in the NHS were endemic and that extra in-year cash injections to trusts had been spent on coping with current pressures rather than the transformation required to put the health system on a sustainable footing. To address this, local partnerships of clinical commissioning groups (CCGs), NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts (trusts) and local authorities were set up to develop long-term strategic plans and transform the way services are provided more quickly.

In June 2018, the Prime Minister announced a long-term funding settlement for the NHS, which will see NHS England's budget rise by an extra £20.5 billion by 2023-24. Between 2019-20 and 2023-24, this equates to an average annual real-terms increase of 3.4%. The government asked NHS England to produce a 10-year plan that aims to ensure that this additional funding is well spent. In return for this extra funding, the government has set the NHS five financial tests to show how the NHS will do its part to put the service onto a more sustainable footing.

This report covers 2017-18, so the NAO first concludes on financial sustainability for that year. The NAO considers that the growth in waiting lists and slippage in waiting times, and the existence of substantial deficits in some parts of the system, offset by surpluses elsewhere do not add up to a picture that can be described as sustainable. Recently, the long-term plan for the NHS has been published, and government has committed to longer-term stable growth in funding for NHS England.

In the NAO's view these developments are positive, and the planning approach seen so far looks prudent. The NAO further states that it will really be able to judge whether the funding package will be enough to achieve the NHS' ambitions when we know the level of settlement for other key areas of health spending that emerges from the Spending Review later in the year. This will help inform whether there is enough to deal with the embedded problems from the last few years and move the health system forward.

<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/nhs-financial-sustainability/>

4. A review of the role and costs of clinical commissioning groups, NAO, December 2018

Clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) are clinically-led statutory bodies that have a legal duty to plan and commission most of the hospital and community NHS services in the local areas for which they are responsible. CCGs are led by a Governing Body made up of GPs, other clinicians including a nurse and a secondary care consultant, and lay members. They were established as part of the Health and Social Care Act in 2012 and replaced primary care trusts on 1 April 2013. Since their formation, there have been eight formal mergers of CCGs, which have reduced their number from 211 to 195 as at April 2018. The smallest CCG (Corby) covers a population of 78,000, while the largest (Birmingham and Solihull) covers a population of 1.3 million.

Since commissioning was introduced into the NHS in the early 1990s, there have been frequent changes to the structure of commissioning organisations. This looks set to continue, with the role of CCGs evolving as the NHS pursues a more integrated system across commissioners and providers. Consequently, there are likely to be more CCG mergers and increased collaborative working between CCGs and their stakeholders, for example healthcare providers and local authorities

This review sets out:

- changes to the commissioning landscape before CCGs were established;
- the role, running costs and performance of CCGs; and
- the changing commissioning landscape and the future role of CCGs.

CCGs were created from the reorganisation in how healthcare services are commissioned in the NHS. They were designed to give more responsibility to clinicians to commission healthcare services for their communities and were given resources to do this. NHS England's assessment of CCGs' performance shows a mixed picture. Over half of CCGs were rated either 'outstanding' or 'good', but 42% (87 of 207) are rated either 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate', with 24 deemed to be failing, or at risk of failing. Many CCGs are struggling to operate within their planned expenditure limits despite remaining within their separate running cost allowance. Attracting and retaining high-quality leadership is an ongoing issue.

2. NATIONAL PUBLICATIONS

4. A review of the role and costs of clinical commissioning groups, NAO, December 2018 (continued)

There has been a phase of CCG restructuring with increased joint working and some CCGs merging. If current trends continue, this seems likely to result in fewer CCGs covering larger populations based around STP footprints. This larger scale is intended to help with planning, integrating services and consolidating CCGs' leadership capability. However, there is a risk that commissioning across a larger population will make it more difficult for CCGs to design local health services that are responsive to patients' needs, one of the original objectives of CCGs.

CCGs have the opportunity to take the lead in determining their new structures. NHS England is expected to set out its vision for NHS commissioning in its long-term plan for the NHS to be published in December 2018. NHS England has said it will step in where CCGs diverge from its vision of effective commissioning. However, it has not set out fully the criteria it will use to determine when to step in.

The NAO's previous work on the NHS reforms brought in under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 highlighted the significant upheaval caused by major organisational restructuring. It is therefore important that the current restructuring of CCGs creates stable and effective organisations that support the long-term aims of the NHS. Following almost three decades of change, NHS commissioning needs a prolonged period of organisational stability. This would allow organisations to focus on transforming and integrating health and care services rather than on reorganising themselves. It would be a huge waste of resources and opportunity if, in five years' time, NHS commissioning is going full circle and undergoing yet another cycle of restructuring.

<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/a-review-of-the-role-and-costs-of-clinical-commissioning-groups/>

5. Local Audit Quality Forum, Public Sector Audit Appointments, December 2018

The Local Audit Quality Forum (LAQF) is a forum within which representatives of relevant audit bodies can work together and collaborate with others to share good practice and strive to enable improvements in the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of audit arrangements and practices in principal local authorities and police bodies in England. PSAA wants to develop a momentum and a passion for continuous improvement in audit arrangements throughout the entities and sectors for which PSAA has a mandate.

Slides of the Manchester December 2018 event are available on the PSAA website as per the link below.

The theme of the Manchester event was financial resilience and sustainability, a major challenge for all local authorities and police bodies in the current climate and a key strategic concern as bodies prepare 2019/20 budgets and update medium term plans. The event explored:

- the nature and scale of the sustainability challenges facing local bodies;
- the strategies and disciplines which can help to address them successfully; and
- the roles and responsibilities of Chief Finance Officers and Auditors in helping to maintain resilience and sustainability.

<https://www.psa.co.uk/local-audit-quality-forum3/local-audit-quality-forum/>

6. Oversight of audit quality, quarterly compliance reports 2017/18, Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd

There are no significant issues arising in the latest quarterly compliance report issued by PSAA.

<https://www.psa.co.uk/audit-quality/contract-compliance-monitoring/principal-audits/mazars-audit-quality/>

2. NATIONAL PUBLICATIONS

7. Scrutinising Public Accounts: A Guide To Government Finances, CIPFA, November 2018

This guide provides an overview of the different processes for budgeting and performance reporting in central and local government, health bodies and includes key questions to ask when scrutinising government financial statements using examples based on UK public sector accounts.

This publication is only available online.

<https://www.cipfa.org/policy-and-guidance/publications/s/scrutinising-public-accounts-a-guide-to-government-finances>

8. CIPFA Fraud and Corruption Tracker 2017/18, CIPFA, October 2018

The CIPFA Fraud and Corruption Tracker (CFaCT) survey gives a national picture of fraud, bribery and corruption across UK local authorities and the actions being taken to prevent it. It aims to:

- help organisations understand where fraud losses could be occurring;
- provide a guide to the value of detected and prevented fraud loss;
- help senior leaders understand the value of anti-fraud activity; and
- assist operational staff to develop pro-active anti-fraud plans.

The 2017/18 report shows that fraud continues to pose a major financial threat to local authorities, with £302m detected or prevented by councils in 2017/18. While this was £34m less than last year's total, the report revealed an overall increase in the number of frauds detected or prevented – up to 80,000, from the 75,000 cases found in 2016/17. Among these cases there are reminders of some of the challenges being faced by local authorities, with the number of serious or organised crime cases doubling to 56, and a significant increase in the amount lost to business rates fraud, which jumped to £10.4m in 2017/18 from £4.3m in 2016/17.

<https://www.cipfa.org/about-cipfa/press-office/latest-press-releases/local-councils-detect-or-prevent-£302m-in-fraud-in-2017-18>

9. Summary of NHS long-term plan, Mazars, January 2019

The NHS Long Term Plan was published on 7 January 2019. It sets out the priorities for the new funding settlement announced in June 2018 – a real terms increase of £20.5bn by 2023/24 representing an average increase of revenue funding of 3.4% per annum, compared to an average of 2.2% in recent years.

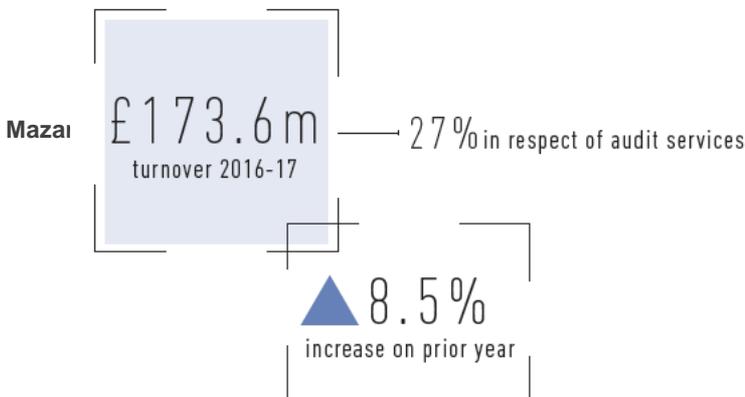
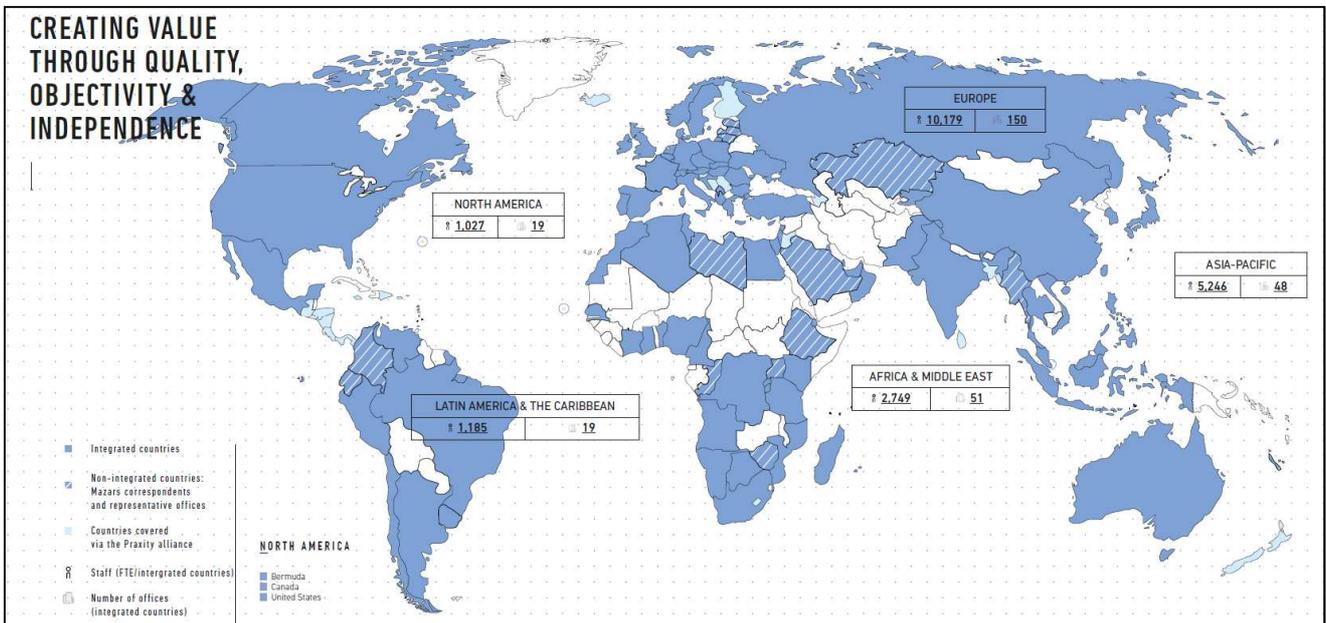
Views on the deliverability of the plan will vary, particularly as some aspects of implementation will depend on spending review decisions later this year and the direction of travel for social care. The plan recognises existing financial pressures and workforce challenges and takes some steps to manage these risks whilst accepting that further nationally-led work is necessary to alleviate these constraints.

<https://www.mazars.co.uk/Home/Industries/Public-Services/Health/NHS-Long-Term-Plan-summary>

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