

Audit Committee update

Durham County Council

Audit 2011/12

The Audit Commission is a public corporation set up in 1983 to protect the public purse.

The Commission appoints auditors to councils, NHS bodies (excluding NHS foundation trusts), police authorities and other local public services in England, and oversees their work. The auditors we appoint are either Audit Commission employees (our in-house Audit Practice) or one of the private audit firms. Our Audit Practice also audits NHS foundation trusts under separate arrangements.

We also help public bodies manage the financial challenges they face by providing authoritative, unbiased, evidence-based analysis and advice.

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Introduction

- 1 The purpose of this paper is to provide the Audit Committee with a report on progress in delivering our responsibilities as your external auditors. It includes an update on the externalisation of the Audit Practice.
- 2 This paper also seeks to highlight key emerging national issues and developments which may be of interest to members of the Audit Committee. The paper concludes by asking a number of questions which the Committee may wish to consider in order to assess whether it has obtained sufficient assurance on emerging issues.
- 3 If you require any additional information regarding the issues included within this briefing, please contact me or your Audit Manager using the contact details at the end of this update.
- 4 Finally, please also remember to visit our website (www.audit-commission.gov.uk) which now enables you to sign up to be notified of any new content that is relevant to your type of organisation.

Cameron Waddell
District Auditor

18 July 2012

Progress report

Financial statements

- 5 We have completed our walkthrough testing of the Council's significant financial systems (including those relating to the Pension Fund) and presented our Interim Governance report to members at the last Audit Committee meeting in May.
- 6 We carried out some early substantive testing on material balances and transactions to reduce pressure on officers at the post-statements.
- 7 We are now in the post-statements stage of our work and will report findings in due course to the committee in September.
- 8 We will continue to liaise with the Corporate Director Resources, Principal Finance Officer (Strategic Finance) and Manager of Internal Audit and Risk to discuss audit issues and ongoing developments at the Council.

VFM conclusion

- 9 Our work on the VFM conclusion continues to focus on updating our understanding on an ongoing basis until the point at which the VFM conclusion is issued, and will largely comprise:
 - outcomes from our review of agendas, minutes and other reports; and
 - outcomes from our programme of established liaison meetings with officers.
- 10 Our view continues to be that Durham County Council has sound arrangements to address financial resilience and arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Our audit work challenges whether this continues to be the case.

Update on outsourcing the work of the Audit Practice

11 Following the award of geographical contracts for the audit of principal local authorities and NHS bodies, the Audit Commission has held meetings in each contract area to introduce the winning firms to audited bodies.

12 It has in parallel commenced consultation on the appointment of auditors to individual bodies with a view to making those appointments at its Board meeting on 26 July 2012. Firms will take up audit appointments for the 2012/13 audit year from 1 September 2012 when the interim appointment of the current auditor will come to an end.

13 Following consultation with audit suppliers, the Audit Commission has put in place arrangements to facilitate the smooth transfer of any part-completed 2011/12 work from the Audit Practice to incoming audit firms so that they can maximise reliance on the work of the Audit Practice and complete the work expeditiously.

Update on the residual Audit Commission

14 The Commission is reducing and reshaping its workforce so that it can deliver its remaining core functions of audit regulation, contract management and sector support.

15 The Department of Communities and Local Government has advertised for a new Chairman of the Audit Commission to lead through the period of transition and downsizing, in advance of its proposed abolition. The new Chairman will take up post following the end of the term of office of the current Chairman in September 2012.

Other matters of interest

2012/13 audit fees

Fee scales for 2012/13 audits of local government and NHS bodies

16 Following a consultation exercise, the Audit Commission has agreed the work programme and fee scales for 2012/13 audits of local government and NHS bodies. It sent out letters notifying organisations of the new fees on Wednesday 11 April 2012.

17 As previously advised, the outsourcing of the Audit Commission's in-house Audit Practice means that these fees will be fixed for a five-year period, irrespective of the rate of inflation.

Fee scales for 2012/13 National Fraud Initiative

18 The Audit Commission's consultation on its proposals for the 2012/13 National Fraud Initiative (NFI) work programme and scale of fees ended in March 2012 and the results of this exercise were published on 30 May 2012.

19 The Commission did not propose to introduce any new mandatory data matches in the NFI for 2012/13, so the main work programme will remain unchanged from 2010/11.

20 In recognition of the financial pressures that public bodies are facing in the current economic climate, the scale of fees for mandatory participants will also remain the same as for NFI 2010/11.

2010/11 National Fraud Initiative

21 In May 2012 the Audit Commission published the results of the NFI for 2010/11.

22 The NFI is a data matching exercise which is hosted on a secure website. It compares information held by around 1,300 organisations including councils, the police, hospitals and 77 private companies. This helps to identify potentially fraudulent claims, errors and overpayments.

23 When there is a 'match', there may be something that warrants investigation and examples of the data matches the NFI undertakes are set out in the table overleaf.

Table 1: **Examples of data matches covered by the NFI**

Data match	Possible fraud or error
Pension payments to records of deceased people.	Obtaining the pension payments of a deceased person.
Housing benefit payments to payroll records.	Claiming housing benefit by failing to declare an income.
Council tax records to electoral register.	A council taxpayer gets single person discount whilst living with other countable adults and thus being ineligible.
Payroll records to other payroll records.	An employee is working for one organisation while being on long-term sick leave at another.

24 The latest NFI in England identified almost £229 million of fraud, overpayments and errors. This is made up of £139 million for 2010/11 plus £90 million not previously reported from earlier exercises. Over the same period, £47 million was identified in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, raising the UK-wide total to £275 million.

25 The highest value categories identified in England continue to be pensions (£98 million), council tax single person discount (£50 million) and housing benefit (£31 million).

26 The latest report is accompanied by a series of case studies from the private and public sectors and a briefing for elected members. The briefing includes a series of questions that members can put to officers.

27 Since the initiative's start in 1996, the programme has helped detect £939 million, taking it a step closer to achieving a £1 billion payback to the public purse.

Public Sector Internal Audit Standards

28 The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and the Chartered Institute of Internal Auditors (IIA) announced a formal collaboration in May 2011.

29 This collaboration has recently led to the formation of the UK Internal Audit Standards Advisory Board, which will provide oversight and challenge to the development of UK-wide Public Sector Internal Audit Standards.

30 The new unified set of internal audit standards will be based on the mandatory elements of the IIA's International Professional Practices Framework and it is proposed that they will apply across the UK to central and local government and the NHS (excluding foundation trusts).

Payment by Results

31 The Audit Commission published *Local payment by results* on 5 April 2012. This is a briefing paper which considers potential issues arising from local authorities using payment by results (PbR) as a method of commissioning and paying for services.

32 PbR is a new approach, where commissioners pay service providers according to how well they achieve specified outcomes, rather than by outputs or volumes of service. These outcomes may be social, economic, financial, or a combination of all three. PbR is not the only contract type that rewards good performance, and commissioners should always consider other options alongside PbR to choose the most suitable approach.

33 What sets PbR apart from other contract types is that a significant amount of payment is withheld until the results are delivered. The payment is directly related to the level of success.

34 National PbR schemes are developing quickly. Some early schemes include reducing reoffending; diverting young offenders from custodial sentences; helping the unemployed to find work; preventing children from being taken into care; keeping frail older people in their own homes; and improving the management of chronic health conditions.

35 The briefing sets out to help councils understand what PbR might entail. As most schemes are at an early stage, the Audit Commission has identified a range of issues that local commissioners should consider if they are to use PbR successfully, drawing on some national and international examples.

36 The briefing suggests that there are five principles that any PbR scheme needs to meet if it is likely to succeed:

- a clear purpose;
- a full understanding of the risks;
- a well-designed payment and reward structure;
- sound financing; and
- effective management and evaluation.

37 The Audit Commission has sent the briefing to council chief executives and other key stakeholders.

The rights of local electors

38 The Audit Commission has published an updated version of *Council accounts: a guide to your rights*. The publication aims to help local electors by explaining their rights and how to engage with auditors in relation to the accounts. It also points electors to other sources of advice and more information where they have concerns that are not about the accounts.

39 The publication is accompanied by a Notice of an Objection form designed to assist electors wishing to present their objection to an item or items of accounts to the auditor.

40 Members of the Audit Committee may find it helpful to familiarise themselves with the document which can be found on the Audit Commission's website.

NAO role in local VFM studies

41 The NAO currently carries out around 60 VFM studies on central government initiatives and programmes each year. From next year, it will produce an increasing number of studies focusing on the local government sector.

42 A new Local Government Reference Panel has been set up to give councils an input to the NAO's programme of local government value for money studies. The panel, which will meet twice a year, includes representatives from nine local authorities as well as from CIPFA, Community Service Volunteers and the University of Birmingham.

43 The programme comprises three studies in 2012/13, the first being communication between central and local government, rising to four in 2013/14 and six in 2014/15.

44 Subject to Parliamentary approval, the NAO eventually expects to assume the Audit Commission's role in setting the framework for local audit, through a code of audit practice.

CIPFA's brief guide to Local Government Finance reforms

45 As the Local Government Finance Bill enters its concluding stages in the House of Commons, CIPFA has published a guide to some of the proposed changes.

46 CIPFA's *Brief Guide to Local Government Finance Reforms* seeks to answer some common questions that local government officers and elected members may have surrounding the localisation of support for council tax and business rate retention.

47 The guide explains the purpose of the proposals and their impact. It includes simplified examples of the proposed changes. At the time of writing, all the legislation and guidance has yet to be published, so the guide represents the latest known position. CIPFA will publish additional guidance once the detail becomes known.

Key considerations

48 The Audit Committee may wish to consider the following questions in respect of the issues highlighted in this briefing paper.

- Has the Committee asked officers the questions set out in the Audit Commission's NFI briefing for elected members? Is the Committee satisfied with the answers?
- Have officers considered the Audit Commission's briefing paper on local payment by results agreements?

Contact details

49 If you would like further information on any items in this briefing, please contact either your District Auditor/Engagement Lead or Audit Manager.

50 Alternatively, all Audit Commission reports - and a wealth of other material - can be found on our website: www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

Cameron Waddell

District Auditor

0844 798 1632

c-waddell@audit-commission.gov.uk

Catherine Banks

Audit Manager

0844 798 1601

c-banks@audit-commission.gov.uk

If you require a copy of this document in an alternative format or in a language other than English, please call:
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Audit Commission

1st Floor
Millbank Tower
Millbank
London
SW1P 4HQ

Telephone: 0844 798 3131

Fax: 0844 798 2945

Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946