

Local government audit committee briefing



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Contents at a glance



Government and
economic news **2**

Accounting,
auditing and
governance **4**

Other **6**

Key questions
for the Audit
Committee **9**

Find out
more **9**



This sector briefing is one of the ways that we support you and your organisation in an environment that is constantly changing and evolving.

It covers issues which may have an impact on your organisation, the Local Government sector, and the audits that we undertake.

The briefings are produced by our public sector audit specialists within EY's national Government and Public Sector (GPS) team, using our public sector knowledge, and EY's wider expertise across UK and international business.

The briefings bring together not only technical issues relevant to the Local Government sector but wider matters of potential interest to you and your organisation.

Links to where you can find out more on any of the articles featured can be found at the end of the briefing.

We hope that you find the briefing informative and should this raise any issues that you would like to discuss further, please contact your local audit team.



Government and economic news

EY ITEM Club – Local Government Economic Briefing Q3

The outlook for the UK economy appears to be worsening in 2018, as challenges continue for consumption, investment and trade. Local authorities are increasingly under pressure to deliver local economic growth and improved services within this uncertain environment.

A cloudier outlook for the UK economy may impact local authority MTFPs

The UK has witnessed a recovery in services output and consumer activity, partially in response to the sunny weather and the World Cup; however, weaker overseas growth (exacerbated by escalating fears of global trade disputes) has contributed to a slowing momentum in some sectors.

The ultimate impact is a continued slowdown in real GDP growth during 2018, with the EY ITEM Club revising its forecast for GDP growth to 1.4% in July 2018, down from the 1.6% expected in April 2018. The increasingly uncertain global outlook has led the EY ITEM Club to also renew its interest rate position, predicting that there will be only one rate rise in 2018 rather than the two

forecasted previously. Local authority short-term borrowing increased by 31% in 2017/18, meaning that such a delay in interest rate hikes will likely be positive news to many local authorities. On August 2018, the Bank of England has since raised the interest rate by a quarter of a percentage point, from 0.5% to 0.75% – the highest level since March 2009, which will be re-considered by the EY ITEM Club in our next forecast.

Whilst it is still early days as far as predicting 2018/19's fiscal performance, a downgraded forecast for GDP growth this year and next, compared to the expectation three months ago, implies a bigger fiscal deficit.

On the whole, a weaker outlook for the UK economy should signal caution for local authorities. Increased pressure on real incomes and affordability has dampened activity in the housing market, with house price inflation slowing to 2%. However the ratio of prices to average earnings is still stretched by historical standards. Despite a record high employment rate, annual pay growth has not responded in turn, falling to 2.5% in April. These dynamics suggest that pressure on social housing will continue in the medium-term.

Slower growth should be considered in the light of local authorities' proposed or existing commercial activity. Dampened economic activity may also impact local businesses, leading to an

increase in high street vacancies. Furthermore, local authorities should also factor a more negative economic outlook into its supply chain risk assessments, with the potential of it increasing the chances of firms collapsing.

How do local authorities respond to the struggling retail sector?

As the retail sector undergoes significant structural change, local authorities need to consider how they can respond to this and adapt both their regeneration and investment plans accordingly.

The increasing drive towards online shopping along with rising operating costs for retailers has led to decreasing footfall in shopping centres and high streets as well as record levels of shop closures. Noteworthy retailers, including House of Fraser, Poundworld, Maplin and Toys R Us as well as a number of chain restaurants, have proposed restructures or shop closures, or have fallen into administration. There are concerns that the number of shops is too high as sustained vacancy rates continue.

Over the past two years, local authorities in England have made debt funded investment of around £1.7bn in commercial property assets. This has included a number of investments in shopping centres and other retail focused assets. These investments are likely to see a period of underperformance, with estimations suggesting a potential 10% fall in shopping centre capital value, driven by higher vacancy rates. Yields are likely to be lower than anticipated, along with there being a requirement for an increase in active management of these units, further eating into returns.

Local authorities need to consider the changing retail sector in light of their regeneration plans. There is a consensus that too much high street and town centre space is dedicated to retail. The think tank Centre for Cities has stated that shops take up twice as much space as offices in struggling town centres, whilst successful town centres tend to have three times as much office space than retail. Local authorities need to ensure that regeneration plans have appropriately considered the medium and longer term outlook for the retail sector.

The structural changes evident in the retail sector shouldn't deter local authorities from maintaining an active role in driving town centre regeneration nor in retail investment. Rather, local authorities should be integral to undertaking active investment ensuring the aim is focused on socio-economic regeneration as opposed to merely revenue generation. It is vital that local authorities are at the helm of repurposing town centres, ensuring that the public realm centres on public spaces, homes and community assets, rather than retail. This will help to ensure the sustainability of our town centres, whilst at the same time helping local authorities to achieve their regeneration and financial goals.

Brexit

A CIPFA survey has found that three quarters of public service leaders feel that central government is not engaged or has not communicated sufficiently over Brexit. CIPFA's Brexit Advisory Commission has commented that in order for local authorities to plan effectively and identify opportunities, communication channels need to be open between the government and public service leaders. Anticipating an increase in cost, public service leaders are purchasing more from suppliers now to prevent potential higher costs in the future.

Public service leaders are also anticipated a staffing pressures. Nationally it is estimated that 7% of the social care sector's workforce are non-UK EU nationals. However, in some regions of the UK non-UK EU nationals make up a significantly larger proportion.

Another major concern is regarding replacement of EU funding which is currently worth £8.4bn. In a recent white paper the Government has proposed a UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) to replace the existing EU regional funding. Details of how local authorities can bid to secure this funding has yet to be determined.



Accounting, auditing and governance

EY's response to CIPFA consultation on its proposed local authority financial resilience index

On 24 August CIPFA closed its consultation on its plans to launch an authoritative measure of local authority financial resilience through the creation of a new index. CIPFA's proposals include using a range of indicators for the index and a dashboard enabling comparison with similar authorities. CIPFA has reported that it has had an unprecedented number of responses- not a surprise given the current profile of local authority financial resilience and the noise in the sector over CIPFA's proposals. We summarise EY's response below.

Whilst we support CIPFA's ambition to support senior officers and members with an early warning system for financial resilience issues we are unconvinced that the proposed indicators provide sufficient depth and sophistication to reflect the complexities of local authorities. In particular it is unclear how the indicators take account of the different type of reserves (earmarked, un-earmarked, usable and unusable), general fund and housing balances, income generated from other sources and borrowing plans (including recognising the different types of borrowing). Reference should also be made to the scale of borrowing to

invest in commercial property, as well as exposure to material outsourcing contracts and associated supplier risk, noting that current focus on the risk that these issues are generating in the sector. There is no reference to how the culture of an organisation impacts its financial plans and its appetite for risk. In addition, many authorities work significantly in partnership with others. In our experience, whilst the proposed indicators may provide a crude indication of financial resilience, senior officers and members would value an output that takes into account these other major influencers of financial resilience.

We have suggested that the proposed index could be treated as the first step to developing a more sophisticated index, using some of the same principles but taking into account the complexities outlined above. While CIPFA have stated that the index is not designed to predict financial issues, we would welcome the development of forward looking indicators using information from an authority's medium term financial plan as well as taking into account historic performance in achieving planned savings, unplanned use of un-earmarked reserves as well as an assessment of forward looking demographic and economic forecasts for a locality. In addition, a developing index can incorporate important changes in the way local authorities operate, for example greater integration between health and social care and the impact of CQC reviews on local health systems.

We supported the proposal for a single dashboard showing the individual authority and the relevant comparator group performance. However, we questioned the use of the terms 'best' and 'worst' performers if the index is to avoid 'naming and shaming' authorities.

We look forward to seeing CIPFA's response to the consultation and will share our views of their next steps.

EY's response to CIPFA consultation on implementation of the new adoption of IFRS 16

On 7 September CIPFA closed its consultation on proposals for developing the new edition of the Local Authority Accounting Code for 2019/20 in relation to implementing the new leasing accounting standard, IFRS 16.

IFRS 16 aims to increase the transparency of financial reporting on leases. It removes the previous lease classifications of operating and finance leases for lessees and it requires that a right-of-use asset (i.e., a lessee's right to use an asset over the life of a lease) be recognised for all leases (there are exemptions for short-term and low value leases) with a corresponding lease liability representing the lessee's obligation to make lease payments for the asset. This will be a significant change for local authorities and present practical challenges for processes, systems and data collection.

IFRS 16 will mean that current value depreciation and depreciation is charged to the Surplus or Deficit on the Provision of Services. It will also impact on the statutory reporting and capital finance requirements for leased assets which currently refer to finance leases. The recognition of right-to-use assets will bring leases into the scope of the Prudential Framework. The cost (on initial recognition) of the right-to-use asset will meet the definition of capital expenditure in contrast to the current revenue treatment of operating leases.

We generally support the CIPFA proposals with the following matters to highlight:

- ▶ **Clarification of what 'low value' is.** There are exemptions under IFRS 16 for 'low value' leases but there is no clear definition. The proposals do not make reference to assets that may be of low value, but are only used or used to maximum

effect by being part of a network e.g., photocopiers can be used off-line but are more usually used on-line; laptops could have a similar position. The Code needs to clarify what low value is and what being part of a network is as this would be a potential area of disagreement and inconsistency. A number of clients have suggested using their de minimis level for capitalisation as the 'low value'. The Code should emphasise that these are two different concepts.

- ▶ **Measurement of the lease liability.** The lease liability is calculated from the present value of the lease payments payable over the lease term. This is discounted at the interest rate implicit in the lease or the authority's incremental borrowing rate. In our experience many authorities do not have information on the rate implicit in their operating leases. For consistency and cost effectiveness mandating the use of the incremental borrowing rate for all leases would be a positive step.
- ▶ **Subsequent measurement.** To measure the right-of-use asset we support the approach of current value measurement with materiality based practical expedients. This would be consistent with the current approach for PPE assets. It would be unsupportable to have different valuation models for the same asset types based on whether they were controlled directly or controlled via lease.
- ▶ **Housing authorities and the Capital Financing Requirement (CFR).** The HRA CFR was effectively capped following HRA self-financing under Regulation. As many HRA authorities are at their HRA CFR limit the addition of right-of-use assets would lead to breaches of the HRA CFR cap. Given the categorisation of such assets as capital in nature this change will restrict the ability of HRA authorities to enter such leases which in some cases may severely impact on their 30 year HRA financial plan. Amending Regulations could be laid that allow the HRA CFR cap to be increased by the value of any right-of-use assets identified. This would maintain the integrity of the current system regarding capital expenditure but also maintain the current flexibility in respect of operating leases. We have suggested that CIPFA should seek discussions with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to address this issue.

Consultation on proposed statutory overrides for IFRS 9

Local authorities will be required to implement the new IFRS 9 Financial Instruments standard for the 2018/19 financial year. The sector has made representations to government on the anticipated negative impacts of the new standard which could result in income statement volatility, earlier recognition of impairment losses on receivables and loans and significant new disclosure requirements. Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has set a response date of 28 September 2018 for the following matters:

Time limited statutory override on fair value movements for pooled investment funds

One of the consequences of IFRS 9 is that fair value changes in pooled investments fund will be accounted for at fair value through profit and loss which will impact non-ringfenced revenue reserves, annual balanced budget calculations and ultimately mean there is less money available to fund services.

MHCLG is proposing a three year grace period to adapt to the accounting changes, requiring local authorities to reverse out fair value movements on pooled investments to unusable reserves until 1 April 2021. MHCLG believes this should give local authorities sufficient time to divest themselves of these types of funds or alternatively build up sufficient revenue reserves to mitigate the impact. To aid in transparency, fair value movements relating to IFRS 9 should be separately disclosed in the Unusable Reserves note.

Earlier recognition of impairments on loans and trade receivables

MHCLG does not intend to mitigate the impact of early impairment recognition of loans and receivables, owing any substantial impairment a direct result to the authorities risk appetite. Local authorities will need to keep a close eye on the budgetary position to accommodate this accounting change.

Disclosure Requirements

MHCLG does not intend to reduce any disclosure requirements, despite the administrative burden that may arise in first time implementation, as the new and enhanced disclosure requirements will benefit the users of the accounts.

The first year of local government faster close

After almost two years preparation, numerous discussions between auditors and finance teams, several reminders to audit committees and a significant amount of hard work, the end of July, the new deadline for local authorities to publish audited accounts, came and went. Across the 150 EY local authority audit portfolio, the new deadline was met at 132 authorities (88%). Nationally, we hear, and it's an unaudited figure, the outcome was 15% missed the earlier deadline, compared with 5% that missed the previous year's end of September deadline.

Auditors are already meeting with finance teams to de-brief and learn lessons for FY19. We outline below our immediate views on the key factors for both authorities and auditors that contributed to meeting the faster close deadlines.

- 1. Project management:** Authorities with a clear, well thought through, detailed and actively managed action plan, involving their auditors, were more likely to be successful in delivering closedown, accounts preparation and the audit to time. Project plans that made preparation of supporting working papers an integral part of the process resulted in better quality financial statements. When things were going off track, decisive action was taken to make a change and get progress moving in the right direction. Often project management resided with one or two key individuals in finance and audit teams who had the ability to influence others and make decisions on priorities and resource allocation.
- 2. Communication:** Early and honest communication on progress, key judgements and potential problems enabled officers and auditors to find solutions and agree on matters promptly and efficiently rather than having limited time to deal with late and unexpected issues.
- 3. Capacity and contingency:** The shorter period between accounts preparation and publication of audited accounts increased pressure on teams and squeezed the time to deal with late issues. Successful delivery was more likely where officers and auditors built capacity and contingency into their respective scheduling plans.

4. Dealing with accounting estimates: Authorities and auditors need to be clearer on their approach to preparing and auditing accounting estimates. Notably in respect of the two biggest estimates an authority makes relating to pensions and the valuation of property, plant and equipment. Both rely on the work of a specialist and are determined by an authority as part of closedown. Both are also estimates that auditors will always challenge and draw on the latest available information.

5. Streamlining the accounts: We were surprised that we didn't see much evidence of authorities using the opportunity to review their accounts and taking out non-material disclosures. This may be an area that authorities and auditors would find it helpful to discuss as part of planning for 2018/19.

We encourage audit committees to consider the five key factors in relation to their plans for preparing their 2018/19 statement of accounts and supporting the associated audit.

CIPFA Governance Guidance for LEPs

Over the years, the amount of public expenditure that Local Enterprise Schemes (LEPs) are responsible for has increased and the role of the section 151 officer has become of greater importance in the LEP assurance model. CIPFA, in collaboration with the Cities and Local Growth Unit, has developed five key principles for LEP section 151 officers which would result in more proportional financial governance for LEPs. The five key principles are as follows:

1. Enshrining a corporate position for the section 151 officer in LEP assurance.

- ▶ This will result in a shared responsibility arrangement between the chair, the chief executive, and the section 151 officer. Section 151 officers will also be required to provide an Annual Assurance Statement.

2. Creating a formal/structured mandate for the section 151 officer.

- ▶ This will allow the section 151 officer to attend board meetings and provide recommendations on financial administration.

3. Embedding good governance into decision making.

- ▶ This will result in section 151 officers taking an active role in the financial and risk-based decision making.

4. Ensuring effective review of governance.

- ▶ Internal audit will need to include a risk-based audit plan which will provide assurance to the board and the section 151 officer. Where there are serious concerns, such as non-compliance with legal requirements or fraud, the section 151 officer will be required to report these to the Cities and Local Growth Unit.

5. Appropriate skills and resourcing.

- ▶ This will ensure LEPs have the appropriate skills and resources, including audit, to enable the Section 151 officer to carry out their function.



Other

Social Care Spending

Age UK has published a report on a study conducted by health policy and communication specialists, Incisive Health, which shows that the social care system in the England 'lags behind' other countries. The report states that countries such as Germany and Japan have made sustainable social care policy changes in 1995 and 2000, respectively; whilst the social care system in England has remained largely unchanged despite several government consultations and green or white papers.

In response to this report, the Local Government Association (LGA) has attributed the delay in progression of adult social care system to underfunding, a rise in demand and increased cost for care and support. The LGA has estimated that there is a £3.5bn funding gap facing adult social care by 2025 to maintain the existing standards of care.

Research conducted by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services has estimated that English councils in 2018/19 have cut social care spending by £700m which is equivalent to 5% of the total £14.5bn budget and that since 2010 social care spending has decreased by £7bn. The survey also found that half of councils in England overspent on adult social care budgets in 2017/18, half of which have drawn on council reserves to meet overspends. This is a concerning statistic given that the National Audit Office (NAO) has warned that 10% of councils will exhaust their reserves at the current rate of use.

To help bridge the funding gap, the LGA is currently consulting on its own proposals which includes an increase to national insurance by 1% on the basic rate and an additional social care premium for over-40s.

Social housing

There are 1.2 million people on waiting lists for social housing and for these people affordable housing is becoming more and more unaffordable as their incomes are squeezed. To address this issue the Government has released a consultation green paper which has proposed the building of new affordable housing by 'exploring flexibilities' on how local authorities spend the money from homes sold under the Right to Buy (RTB) scheme. Current funding allows for local authorities to keep one third of each RTB receipt to build a replacement RTB home; but does not allow authorities to borrow money to make up the shortfall for financing the replacement RTB home. The green papers also contains proposals to allow tenants to purchase as little as 1% of their property each year through shared ownership.

The LGA response to the Government's green paper was that the consultation showed positive signs, however the government could do much more for example allowing local authorities to keep all of the RTB receipts to allow councils to more easily finance replacement RTB homes and scraping the housing borrowing cap. The current proposals do not directly allocate funding to local authorities to build more social housing.

Organisational Transformation Guidance for Audit Committees

Transformation plans of any organisation can be highly complicated and risky, even more so for large organisations. Transformation plans can be broad in scope, evolve over time and it can be difficult to measure the impact of transformational change. The exercising of good governance by Audit Committees is essential for the success of major transformation projects. To aid Audit Committees, the NAO has issued guidance which sets out the initial questions that could be asked of officers in the 'set up' phase, 'delivery' phase and 'live running and benefit realisation' phase.

Further details of this guidance can be found through the link in the [Find out more](#) section below.

EY cybersecurity strategies

There's a new way of thinking about cybersecurity. New security approaches are moving from thinking about cybersecurity as a defensive approach, to thinking about it as a source of transformation. Here are some ways to position your cybersecurity strategies for a distinct advantage.

Make it a team sport that everyone is a part of

The number one cause of large security breaches remains phishing, according to the EY 2017/18 Global Information Security Survey of over 1,200 companies. On mobile devices, phishing attacks have increased by an average of 85% year on year for the last seven years, so you are still more likely to be made vulnerable by a member of staff opening a rogue email than anything else.

This is often the result of a lack of cybersecurity awareness – whether about generic malware, scams related to fake LinkedIn profiles, or hacks on public Wi-Fi.

Therefore, developing a culture where staff at all levels understand how to protect data and systems, including mobile devices, through up-to-date training, drills and regular communication, will help build and maintain a cybersecurity advantage.

Cyber policies are vital as a living, breathing reference to help manage a fraught and fast-moving situation, yet these aren't effective if staff outside of the cyber function don't know about them.

Embedding a cyber conscious culture that heightens awareness and behaviours amongst all employees can help you pull ahead of the competition, instead of scoring an own goal.

Keep to a small window for damage control

The UK's national cyber security centre recently described a need to act collaboratively and collectively against cyber threats, urging organisations to raise the bar.

Cyber threats don't respect borders, jurisdictions or organisational boundaries, and there is a small window in which to minimise the damage.

Under GDPR, the new mandatory 72-hour breach reporting could be too long a timeline in the court of public opinion, and focusing on the first 2 to 5 hours instead could provide a much needed advantage.

Outlining key stages of your breach response in the first few hours across functions from IT, security, PR to legal, and identifying at which points to get an external view, could make the difference between a forgiving public or not.

As we start to see more threats and regulations emerge across the world, how organisations come together, under extreme time pressures, will provide much needed collaborative gains.

Use different approaches for evolving risks

Cyber risks aren't constant. The nature of the risks are always changing – which means resources to fight them can't be allocated on a set basis.

Increasingly, cybersecurity requires bringing together a wide range of capabilities to deliver value.

Whether that be through enhancing cyber resources with new skillsets, leveraging emerging technology from hardware authentication, virtualised intrusion detection, or using AI and machine learning.

With cybersecurity increasingly becoming a competitive battleground, that's all the more reason to start thinking about how your organisation can build an effective cybersecurity advantage.

Key questions for the Audit Committee

Brexit

Has your authority considered the implications of Brexit? What plans does your authority have in plan to mitigate potential risks associated with Brexit?

CIPFA Financial Resilience Index

Does the proposed CIPFA financial resilience index provide your authority with the support needed to achieve a balanced budget?

Consultation on the adoption of IFRS 16

How prepared is your Fire Authority for the changes in processes, systems and data collection as a result of CIPFA implementation of IFRS 16?

Consultation on proposed statutory overrides for IFRS 9

Has your authority assessed the impact of the new accounting standard IFRS 9 Financial Instruments and the potential statutory overrides on your budgets?

LEP Governance

Is your local authority part of a LEP? If so, what arrangements are in place to ensure that the authority has sufficient assurance over the governance of the LEP?

Social Care

Given the spending pressures on social care and the sustainability of funding sources, what is the authority's strategy to ensure the sustainability of social care? How does the authority ensure that it maximises value for money from its social care services and ensures that the quality of care provided is appropriate?

Social Housing

What plans does your local authority have to ensure that there is sufficient social housing in the area? Has your authority responded to the Government's green paper consultation?

Transformation

Is your local authority considering or does your local authority have plans to transform its business? If so, how will the audit committee exercise good governance over these arrangements? Have you used the NAO transformational guidance?

EY cybersecurity strategies

Is your organisation still thinking about cybersecurity as a defensive approach or a source of transformation and distinct advantage?

Find out more

EY Item Club

<https://www.ey.com/uk/en/issues/business-environment/financial-markets-and-economy/item---forecast-headlines-and-projections>

Brexit

<https://www.publicfinance.co.uk/news/2018/06/government-failing-engage-over-brexit>

<https://www.publicfinance.co.uk/news/2018/07/brexit-will-hit-public-finances-conference-hears>

<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lga-responds-brexit-white-paper>

CIPFA consultation on its proposed local authority financial resilience index

<https://www.cipfa.org/about-cipfa/press-office/latest-press-releases/cipfa-launches-consultation-on-new-index-to-measure-councils%E2%80%99-financial-resilience>

Consultation on the adoption of IFRS 16

<https://www.cipfa.org/policy-and-guidance/technical-panels-and-boards/cipfa-lasaac-local-authority-code-board/local-authority-leasing-briefings>

Consultation on proposed statutory overrides for IFRS 9

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/local-authority-budget-setting-mitigating-the-impact-of-fair-value-movements-on-pooled-investment-funds>

LEP Governance Guidance

<https://www.cipfa.org/policy-and-guidance/reports/principles-for-section-151-officers-working-with-leps>

Social care

<https://www.publicfinance.co.uk/news/2018/08/england-lags-behind-other-countries-social-care>

<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lga-responds-age-uk-report-care-funding-comparison>

<https://economia.icaew.com/news/august-2018/lga-proposes-tax-increase-to-support-social-care>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/12/adult-social-care-services-collapse-survey-england-council>

Social Housing

<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lga-responds-social-housing-green-paper>

<https://www.publicfinance.co.uk/news/2018/08/social-housing-paper-fails-provide-cash-needed-homes1>

Transformation Guidance (from the NAO)

<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/transformation-guidance-for-audit-committees/>

EY cybersecurity strategies

<https://www.ey.com/uk/en/services/advisory/cybersecurity/ey-four-cybersecurity-strategies>

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