

Local Government Audit Committee Briefing

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Introduction

This sector briefing is one of the ways that we hope to continue to 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 public sector audit specialists who transferred from the Audit Commission form part of EY's national Government and Public Sector (GPS) team. Their extensive public sector knowledge is now supported by the rich resource of wider expertise across EY's UK and international business. This briefing reflects this, bringing 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, as well as some examples of areas where EY can provide support to Local Authority bodies. We hope that you find the briefing informative and should this raise any issues that you would like to discuss further please do contact your local audit team.



Building a better
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Government and economic news

EY Item Club: Autumn 2014 Forecast

ITEM Club is the only nongovernmental economic forecasting group to use the HM Treasury model of the UK economy, independent of any political, economic or business bias. The Autumn 2014 report summarises the latest quarterly forecast and gives EY's assessment.

The ONS's recent revisions to the UK's historical economic data have given a very different perspective on the shape of the recession and subsequent recovery.

Consumer spending remains subdued by falling real wages, which has helped to keep inflation at bay. Inflation as measured by the CPI was just 1.2% in September, the lowest reading in five years and ninth successive month that it has been below 2%. Whilst falling prices for food and petrol have played a role in keeping inflation down, underlying price pressures are also well contained. Since consumer spending has been subdued, business investment has now taken over as the engine of recovery; with capital spending accounting for almost half the rise in GDP in the past year. UK GDP has been revised up, meaning it actually passed its previous high-point in 2013, and that output is now well above the 2008 peak.

This picture is more consistent with the strong growth in employment. The upward revisions to business investment have been particularly pronounced; meaning the scope for catch up is less than previously thought. Despite the growing risks and uncertainties, EY Item club is projecting GDP growth of 3.1% in 2014, followed by a slight easing to 2.4% growth in 2015 and 2.3% in 2016, and then a modest uptick in 2017.

Contracting out public services to the private sector

In the last briefing we considered the response of the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (the 'PAC') to evidence including the National Audit Office report 'The role of major contractors in the delivery of public services' and submissions from central government bodies.

The PAC made a range of recommendations in four key areas. In the previous briefing we looked at contract management and delivery. We will now consider Capability, Transparency and Ethical Standards.

Capability

The PAC found that, often, there is a lack of expertise within central government to extract the greatest value from contracting with private providers.

We often find that both public and private sector organisations lack clear lines of responsibility for contract management, which falls between procurement, operations and finance functions. A greater focus on contract governance would enable local authorities to ensure that accountability is clear and that experienced contract managers have the necessary training and skills for this important role.

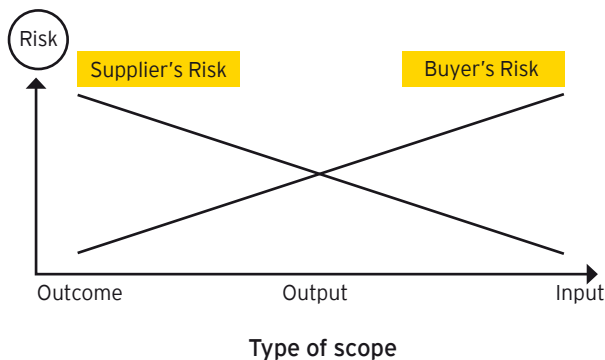
Transparency

Calls for increased transparency include recommendations that the public sector makes greater use of 'open-book' accounting. This is something we would endorse, especially where contracts are constructed around the purchase of 'inputs' such as labour on a daily or hourly rate.



Government and economic news

Furthermore, we would recommend that the public sector considers whether it can purchase services based around outcomes, rather than inputs, as these can help to mitigate the buyer's risk as illustrated below:



Ethical standards

The PAC emphasised the value of effective whistleblowing policies. Our experience shows that many private sector suppliers have whistleblowing policies. However, these tend not to provide a direct link from the potential whistleblower to the public sector buyer, sometimes reducing the effectiveness of these policies.

However, in order for whistleblowing to be a truly effective contract management tool, the buyer needs to have appropriate routes to provide rights of access to a contractor's employees as well as its accounting records, plus the teams with the necessary skills and experience to investigate contract performance.

Summary

At a time when local authorities continue to look for savings, the PAC Report provides a timely reminder that effective contract management can both:

- ▶ Be a means by which savings can be achieved
- ▶ Help to improve public confidence in the use of public funds

Councils face a £5.8 billion shortfall in funding says LGA

The Local Government Association (LGA) has published its Future Funding Outlook 2014, which notes that the funding gap, created by a combination of funding cuts and spending pressures, is growing at an average rate of £2.1 billion per year. Spending on social care and waste management, both of which have significant statutory elements, is taking up an increasing proportion of the funding available to councils, which means that according to the LGA model, funding for other council services will drop by 43% in cash terms by the end of the decade. Council expenditure has fallen significantly since 2010-11 in all areas other than public transport, children's social care, adult social care and waste management and other environmental services. However, assuming consistent service levels, and taking into account cost drivers and assumed efficiency levels, the LGA model predicts that total expenditure will rise from £51.1 billion in 2013-14 to £55.7 billion in 2019-20, whereas total funding will fall by £10.6 billion when the impact of ring-fenced funding for public health is excluded. Bringing together the predicted income and expenditure trends, the LGA forecasts a gap of £12.4 billion between funding and net expenditure by 2019-20. LGA research indicates that in many authorities savings are starting to come from service reductions rather than efficiencies, and that in 2015-16, savings will be achieved more through service reductions than through efficiencies. The funding gap by the end of 2015-16 is forecast to be £5.8 billion, of which £1.9 billion relates to adult social care.



Government and economic news

Independent commission on local government finance

The Local Government Association and the Chartered Institute for Public Finance Accountancy have together established the Independent Commission on Local Government Finance, which is chaired by Darra Singh, a partner in EY's Government and Public Sector team. The Commission aims to build on the work of the LGA and CIPFA, who individually set out proposals for public service reform, and will consider five key challenges:

- ▶ Promoting economic growth and investment in infrastructure
- ▶ Ensuring sufficient housing is provided in every place
- ▶ Integrating the health and social care systems to promote independent living, including preventing unnecessary health intervention
- ▶ Achieving a welfare benefits system that promotes work and protects the vulnerable
- ▶ Supporting families and developing young lives through early intervention

The Commission aims to shape the debate on local government finance, and to influence the next government. It published an interim report in October, and its final recommendations are due out in early 2015.

The interim report contains the following key points:

- ▶ The need for reform is urgent and creates an opportunity to establish a funding system for local government which is largely self-sufficient.
- ▶ Councils have a role to play in addressing the chronic housing shortage, and should be able to borrow to invest in social housing.
- ▶ The Commission will be looking at the option of creating central funds which offer to match-fund local partnership contributions in order to support early intervention for children and families.
- ▶ Larger investment in transformation is needed for the delivery of integrated care.



Accounting, Auditing and Governance

Future of Local Audit

As part of its consultation on Local Audit Regulations associated with the Local Audit and Accountability Act, which ended on 18 July 2014, the government is proposing to bring forward the dates for the accounts to be signed and certified by the Responsible Financial Officer, then approved and published, from 30 June and 30 September respectively to 31 May and 31 July respectively. They propose that this change would take place from the 2017-18 accounts, but hope that authorities will move to the new timetable as soon as possible.

The consultation also covers collective auditor procurement by a specified person. Under the intended regulations, authorities would be able to opt in to sector-led procurement arrangements, and have an auditor appointed on their behalf, rather than appointing their own auditor locally. Under the draft regulations, the Secretary of State may specify the Appointing Person, and may specify different appointing persons for different groups or types of audited bodies.

Grant claim certification results

The Audit Commission has published a report on its findings from the 2012-13 grant claim certification process. As well as adjustments to claims worth £17.3 million, auditors issued qualification letters for 360 claims and returns. This included:

- ▶ 255 Housing Benefit subsidy claims, 78% of the total,
- ▶ 55 Teachers' Pensions returns, 36% of the total,
- ▶ 39 National Non-domestic Rates returns, 12% of the total

From 2013-14, non-domestic rates returns no longer require auditor certification. Teachers' Pensions has decided to make its own certification arrangements for 2013-14, however the Audit Commission and, after March 2015, its successor transitional body will continue to make certification arrangements for housing

benefit subsidy. Council tax benefit was replaced in 2013-14 with local authority run schemes, which do not require auditor certification. Other grant paying bodies will need to make their own assurance arrangements from 2014-15 onwards.

The purpose of qualification letters is to make a grant paying body aware of issues with a claim or return, typically issues for which it is not possible or cost-effective to quantify the full financial impact. The Department for Work and Pensions issued a subsidy circular (HB S4-2014) in May 2014, reiterating the responsibilities of local authorities to ensure their subsidy claims are:

- ▶ Completed accurately and in accordance with HB subsidy guidance and circulars
- ▶ Supported by systems of internal control, including systems of financial control and internal audit
- ▶ Completed in a timely manner
- ▶ Supported by adequate working papers
- ▶ Subject to supervision and review before completion of the authority's certificate
- ▶ Certificate given by an appropriate officer, typically the responsible finance officer

The circular also states the Department's intention to contact all local authorities whose subsidy claims have been qualified. It will require an outline of the actions taken to address the issues raised. In cases with recurrent qualification issues, the Department will also visit those authorities.

Protecting the public purse: 25 years on

Detection of fraud in England in 2013-14 by Councils and other local government bodies was at its highest level since the recording of fraud was established some 25 years ago by the Audit Commission. The total figure of £188mn was a 10 fold increase on



Accounting, Auditing and Governance

the first recorded figure in 1990. The Audit Commission was and is the sole provider of comprehensive data on all types of fraud detected by local authorities. This is due to the statutory powers the Commission has, to demand that local government bodies provide such data.

The Audit Commission's Chairman, Jeremy Newman commented: 'I urge the government to mandate the provision of fraud data from all local authorities, after the Commission's closure, to ensure that future reports are able to provide as complete and authoritative a picture of fraud detection as 'Protecting the Public Purse'. This would help preserve the high levels of transparency and accountability that English councils currently exhibit in their approach to countering fraud and prevent those councils that are not yet playing their part in the fight against fraud, from avoiding public scrutiny.'

The Audit Commission has also released a checklist for elected members, designed to help them analyse their council's results and assess how the NFI is integrated into the council's processes and counter-fraud policies. The Commission recommends that public audited bodies should consider whether it is possible to make better use of matches, and use NFI matches in conjunction with matching services from other providers. It also recommends that local authorities should ensure they retain sufficient capability to investigate non-housing benefit fraud, after the introduction of the Single Fraud Investigation Service.

The Commission's Fraud Team will be moving to CIPFA as part of the closure of the Audit Commission.

The Cabinet Office and the Audit Commission will be working together to ensure the smooth transfer of the NFI functions when the Audit Commission closes in March 2015.

Audit fees at a 25 year low as part of the Audit Commission's legacy

In its last full year of operation before being officially wound down on 31 March 2015 the Audit Commission has announced that it is reducing audit fees by approximately £30 million between 2015-2017. If the government decides to extend and lock in the 2012 and 2014 audit contracts until 2020, it is expected that the total value of savings to local government, police, fire and NHS bodies would be approximately £440mn.

Chairman of the Audit Commission, Jeremy Newman says: 'We have driven down prices for audit services, showing again that bulk procurement is the best way to maintain a competitive market and provide taxpayers with value for money. The resulting savings are part of the legacy the Commission will leave after March 2015, and will be enjoyed by local authorities and NHS bodies for years after our closure. Fees should be preserved at this level for 2016-17 and we hope the government will take the opportunity we have secured to lock in and extend the savings we have achieved up to 2020.'

In addition to the above savings, the Commission also intends to return approximately £6mn as a rebate to Local Government and NHS bodies in 2014-15

A transitional body, Public Sector Audit Appointments Limited (PSAAL), has been established by the Local Government Association to oversee the management of the Audit Commission's external audit contracts until they end in 2017 or are possibly extended until 2020. The PSAAL will be responsible for setting fees, appointing auditors and monitoring the quality of auditors' work. They will also be responsible for publishing the Commission's Value for Money Profile tool.



Regulation News

Open and Accountable Government

The government has introduced a new law allowing the press and public to film and digitally report (including tweeting and blogging) from all public meetings of local government bodies. These rules will apply to all public meetings including town and parish councils, and fire and rescue authorities. The regulations also give members of the press and public rights to see information related to significant decisions made outside meetings by officers acting under general or specific delegated powers.

Whistleblowing

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has recently launched a consultation, which closed at the end of September 2014, seeking views on the practical implementation of a legal power requiring prescribed persons to report annually on whistleblowing disclosures. Because of the duty of confidentiality binding prescribed persons, and a lack of legal obligation to investigate, BIS found that whistle-blowers do not have confidence that their reports are investigated. The Department is therefore introducing a reporting requirement in order to ensure more systematic processes across prescribed bodies, and to provide greater reassurance to whistle-blowers that their reports are being

acted on. The reports would not provide specific detail enabling the whistle-blower or the organisation about which the report is made to be identified, but would contain more generic information about the number of disclosures made, and the characteristics of those disclosures, such as whether they required further investigation or referral to an alternative body.

Meanwhile, the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards (PCBS) has published recommendations for enhancing corporate transparency, governance and integrity. Eleven of the PCBS' recommendations relate specifically to whistleblowing. The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and Prudential Regulation Authority (PRA) have indicated their intention to adopt all eleven and consequently we can expect change to the regulatory landscape in the near future. We also noted earlier, that whistleblowing was an area raised by the PAC, who emphasised the value of effective whistleblowing policies.

Whistleblowing is therefore clearly a key area for consideration, for both the public and private sectors.

EY has produced a whistleblowing flyer to help you to consider your whistleblowing framework's effectiveness, and whether your culture encourages employees to raise concerns.



Key Questions for the Audit Committee

What questions should the Audit Committee be asking itself?

- ▶ Do we have clear lines of responsibility for contract management?
- ▶ Have we considered whether use of outcome based contracts could mitigate our 'buyers' risk'?
- ▶ Have we responded to the questions raised in Appendix 2 of the latest NFI report?
- ▶ How effective is our whistleblowing policy?



Find out more

EY Item Club: Autumn 2014 Forecast

Find EY Item Club's Autumn 2014 forecast at:

[http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-ITEM-Club-Autumn-Forecast-2014-full-report/\\$FILE/EY-ITEM-Club-Autumn-Forecast-2014-full-report.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-ITEM-Club-Autumn-Forecast-2014-full-report/$FILE/EY-ITEM-Club-Autumn-Forecast-2014-full-report.pdf)

Contracting out public services to the private sector Read the NAO report at:

<http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/10296-001-BOOK-ES.pdf>

To find out how EY can help with contract management, contact a member of your engagement team.

Councils face a £5.8 billion shortfall in funding says LGA

Read the LGA's press release, on what they have termed the '£5.8bn funding black hole' at

http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/finance/-/journal_content/56/10180/6309034/NEWS.

Find the full report at:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/5854661/L14-340+Future+funding+-+initial+draft.pdf/1854420d-1ce0-49c5-8515-062dcca2c70>

Independent Commission on Local Government Finance

Read the Commission's interim report at:

http://www.localfinancecommission.org/-/media/iclgf/documents/l14536%20interim_report_web_v2.pdf

Future of Local Audit

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/local-audit-regulations>

Grant Claim Certification Results

Read the full Audit Commission report at:

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Local-government-claims-and-returns-final-17-June-2014.pdf>

The DWP circular is also available at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/309613/s4-2014.pdf



Find out more

Audit fees at a 25 year low as part of the Audit Commission's legacy

Read the full Audit Commission press release at:

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/2014/10/wpsf1516pr/>

Protecting the Public Purse: 25 years on

Read the final NFI report produced by the Audit Commission before its closure in March 2015 at:

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Protecting-the-Public-Purse-2014-Fighting-Fraud-against-Local-Government-online.pdf>

Open and Accountable Government

The guide for press on attending and reporting meetings of local government is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-and-accountable-local-government-plain-english-guide>

Whistleblowing

Feedback from the consultation is currently being analysed. The output from the consultation when it becomes available will be accessed via:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/whistleblowing-prescribed-persons-reporting-requirements>

To download the EY flyer on whistleblowing, visit:

[http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY_-_Whistleblowing_-_change_is_coming/\\$FILE/EY-whistleblowing.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY_-_Whistleblowing_-_change_is_coming/$FILE/EY-whistleblowing.pdf)

For more information on how EY can help you enhance your existing whistleblowing framework, speak to a member of your engagement team.



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