



Auditor's Annual Report for Maldon District Council

Year-ended 31 March 2024

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This report is addressed to Maldon District Council (the Council). We take no responsibility to any member of staff acting in their individual capacities, or to third parties.

External auditors do not act as a substitute for the audited body's own responsibility for putting in place proper arrangements to ensure that public business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently and effectively.

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01

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

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Purpose of the Auditor's Annual Report

This Auditor's Annual Report provides a summary of the findings and key issues arising from our 2023-24 audit of Maldon District Council (the 'Council'). This report has been prepared in line with the requirements set out in the Code of Audit Practice published by the National Audit Office and is required to be published by the Council alongside the annual report and accounts.

Our responsibilities

The statutory responsibilities and powers of appointed auditors are set out in the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. In line with this we provide conclusions on the following matters:



Accounts - We provide an opinion as to whether the accounts give a true and fair view of the financial position of the Council and of its income and expenditure during the year. We confirm whether the accounts have been prepared in line with the CIPFA/LASSAC Code of Practice in Local Authority Accounting ('the Code').



Narrative report - We assess whether the narrative report is consistent with our knowledge of the Council.



Value for money - We assess the arrangements in place for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness (value for money) in the Council's use of resources and provide a summary of our findings in the commentary in this report. We are required to report if we have identified any significant weaknesses as a result of this work.



Other powers - We may exercise other powers we have under Local Audit and Accountability Act. These include issuing a Public Interest Report, issuing statutory recommendations, issuing an Advisory Notice, applying for a judicial review, or applying to the courts to have an item of expenditure declared unlawful.

In addition to the above, we respond to valid objections received from electors.

Findings

We have set out below a summary of the conclusions that we provided in respect of our responsibilities.

Accounts	We issued an disclaimed opinion on the Council's accounts on [Date]. The reason we disclaimed our opinion was due to insufficient time available to obtain sufficient appropriate audit evidence over the financial statements from the date of publication of the draft financial statements and the backstop date. This includes being unable to obtain sufficient appropriate evidence over the disclosed comparative figures for the year ended 31 March 2023 due to the Backstop date. We have provided further details of the key risks we identified and our response on pages 18 and 19.
Narrative report	We did not identify any significant inconsistencies between the content of the narrative report and our knowledge of the Council. We highlight that the Council's Annual Governance Statement does not refer to the identified value for money significant weakness.
Value for money	We are required to give an opinion as to whether the Council has appropriate arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the use of resources. Our opinion is that the Council does not have appropriate arrangements in place. We identified a significant weakness in respect of arrangements to secure economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the use of resources. Further details are set out on page 20.
Other powers	See overleaf.

Executive Summary

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There are several actions we can take as part of our wider powers under the Local Audit and Accountability Act:

Public interest reports

We may issue a Public Interest Report if we believe there are matters that should be brought to the attention of the public.

If we issue a Public Interest Report, the Council is required to consider it and to bring it to the attention of the public.

We have not issued a Public Interest Report this year.

Judicial review/Declaration by the courts

We may apply to the courts for a judicial review in relation to an action the Council is taking. We may also apply to the courts for a declaration that an item of expenditure the Council has incurred is unlawful.

We have not applied to the courts this year.

Recommendations

We can make recommendations to the Council. These fall into two categories:

1. We can make a statutory recommendation under Schedule 7 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act. If we do this, the Council must consider the matter at a general meeting and notify us of the action it intends to take (if any). We also send a copy of this recommendation to the relevant Secretary of State.
2. We can also make other recommendations. If we do this, the Council does not need to take any action, however should the Council provide us with a response, we will include it within this report.

We made no recommendations under Schedule 7 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act.

We have raised 3 other recommendations relating to value for money.

Advisory notice

We may issue an advisory notice if we believe that the Council has, or is about to, incur an unlawful item of expenditure or has, or is about to, take a course of action which may result in a significant loss or deficiency.

If we issue an advisory notice, the Council is required to stop the course of action for 21 days, consider the notice at a general meeting, and then notify us of the action it intends to take and why.

We have not issued an advisory notice this year.

In addition to these powers, we can make performance improvement observations to make helpful suggestions to the Council. Where we raise observations we report these to management and the Performance, Governance and Audit Committee. The Council is not required to take any action to these, however it is good practice to do so and we have included any responses that the Council has given us.



02

Audit of the financial statements

Audit of the financial statements

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KPMG provides an independent opinion on whether the Council's financial statements:

- Give a true and fair view of the financial position of the Council as at 31 March 2024 and of Council's income and expenditure for the year then ended; and
- Have been properly prepared in accordance with the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2023/24.

We conduct our audit in accordance with International Standards on Auditing (UK) ("ISAs (UK)") and applicable law. We also fulfil our ethical responsibilities under, and ensure we are independent of the Council in accordance with, UK ethical requirements including the FRC Ethical Standard. We are required to ensure that the audit evidence we have obtained is a sufficient and appropriate basis for our opinion.

Our audit opinion on the financial statements

We have issued a disclaimed opinion on the Council's financial statements on [Date].

The full audit report is included in the Council's Annual Report and Accounts for 2023/24 which can be obtained from the Council's website.

Further information on our audit of the financial statements is set out overleaf.

Audit of the financial statements

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The table below summarises the key financial statement audit risks that we identified to our audit opinion as part of our risk assessment and how we responded to these through our audit.

Significant financial statement audit risk	Procedures undertaken	Findings
<p>Valuation of land and buildings</p> <p>The carrying amount of revalued land and buildings differs materially from the fair value.</p>	<p>Specifically in relation to 2023/24 we have only been able to complete our planning and risk assessment work. We have identified the design of the council's key control to address this risk to be ineffective.</p>	
<p>Management override of controls</p> <p>Fraud risk related to unpredictable way management override of controls may occur.</p>	<p>Specifically in relation to 2023/24 we have only been able to complete our planning and risk assessment work.</p>	
<p>Valuation of post retirement benefit obligations</p> <p>An inappropriate amount is estimated and recorded for the defined benefit obligation.</p>	<p>Specifically in relation to 2023/24 we have only been able to complete our planning and risk assessment work. We have identified the design of the council's key control to address this risk to be ineffective.</p>	



03

Value for Money

Value for Money



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Introduction

We are required to consider whether the Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources or ‘value for money’. We consider whether there are sufficient arrangements in place for the Council for the following criteria, as defined by the National Audit Office (NAO) in their Code of Audit Practice:



Financial sustainability: How the Council plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services.



Governance: How the Council ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks.



Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness: How Council uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services

Approach

We undertake risk assessment procedures in order to assess whether there are any risks that value for money is not being achieved. This is prepared by considering the findings from other regulators and auditors, records from the organisation and performing procedures to assess the design of key systems at the organisation that give assurance over value for money.

Where a significant risk is identified we perform further procedures in order to consider whether there are significant weaknesses in the processes in place to achieve value for money.

We are required to report a summary of the work undertaken and the conclusions reached against each of the aforementioned reporting criteria in this Auditor’s Annual Report. We do this as part of our commentary on VFM arrangements over the following pages.

We also make recommendations where we identify weaknesses in arrangements or other matters that require attention from the Council. We make performance improvement observations where we identify opportunities to improve in areas where we have not identified any weaknesses.

Summary of findings

	Financial sustainability	Governance	Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness
Commentary page reference	12	14	16
Identified risks of significant weakness?	✓ Yes	✓ Yes	✗ No
Actual significant weakness identified?	✗ No	✓ Yes	✗ No
2022-23 Findings	No significant weakness identified	No significant weakness identified	No significant weakness identified
Direction of travel	↔	↑	↔

Value for Money

National context

We use issues affecting Councils nationally to set the scene for our work. We assess if the issues below apply to this Council.

Financial performance

Over recent years, Councils have been expected to do more with less. Central government grants have been reduced, and the nature of central government support has become more uncertain in timing and amount. This has caused Councils to cut services and change the way that services are delivered in order to remain financially viable. Some Councils have initiated innovative plans to raise new funds, such as through increasing commercial activity. Some have questioned whether commercialisation activities open Councils to excessive risk or could be a poor use of taxpayer monies.

Some Councils have issued what are known as “section 114” notices, in this instance a declaration that they cannot generate sufficient resources to meet the costs they need to incur. In some instances, this has resulted in a need for exceptional financial support from central government (such as approval to sell council buildings to meet costs) and severe cutbacks to services.

Infrastructure assets

Councils make use of their infrastructure assets data to support decisions in relation to roads, parks, and pavements they are responsible for. Some Councils have experienced issues with the quality of their records for infrastructure. From a financial reporting perspective, temporary arrangements have been put in place to ensure financial statements can be prepared whilst infrastructure records are improved. However, if records are not up to date, Councils will struggle to identify assets they are responsible for and when assets are life-expired and require replacement. That may result in a worsening quality of infrastructure that everyone depends on.

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Local context

Maldon District Council forms the middle layer of a three-tier structure of local government.

The Council showed a deficit of £0.5m for the 2023-24 financial year. The provisional general fund balance stood at £7.8m, which is above the minimum level per the Council’s policy of £2.6m.

The Council has underspent against its Capital Plan for 2023-24, with a number of projects carried forward into 2024-25.

The Council tax collection rates and Non-Domestic rates collection rates are higher than the median for 2023-24.

The Council was subject to a Finance peer review by the Local Government Association in March 2023, which raised a number of recommendations which have been acted upon during the financial year.

Financial Sustainability

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How the Council plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services.

We have considered the following in our work:

- How the Council ensures that it identifies all the significant financial pressures that are relevant to its short and medium-term plans and builds these into them;
- How the Council plans to bridge its funding gaps and identifies achievable savings;
- How the Council plans finances to support the sustainable delivery of services in accordance with strategic and statutory priorities;
- How the Council ensures that its financial plan is consistent with other plans such as workforce, capital, investment, and other operational planning which may include working with other local public bodies as part of a wider system; and
- How the Council identifies and manages risks to financial resilience, e.g. unplanned changes in demand, including challenge of the assumptions underlying its plans.

Budget setting

The Council has a budget setting timetable which sets out key tasks and deliverables for stakeholders across the organisation. For 2023/24, the Council began the budget setting process in July 2022.

Executive Directors were responsible for setting budgets for the Service Lines they lead, with budgets adjusted for known pressures within the Directorate and any efficiencies required. Growth and capital bids were also submitted by service lines, before review by the Finance Member Group and Corporate Leadership Team for challenge before submission to the Strategy and Resources Committee. The Council approved the 2023/24 Budget Estimate in February 2023 which showed a projected cost of services of £12.5m and a gap to be funded from the general fund of £0.4m.

Efficiency plan

The Finance team set targets for savings plans. These are provided to the Service lines as part of the budget setting process and service lines are expected to produce proposals that will deliver the savings. The savings are reviewed by the Executive Leadership Team and the Finance Member Group before formal approval by the Strategy and Resources Committee. For the 2023/24 year, each approved savings proposal had a RAG rating. There is no formal criteria for the RAG rating, but the rating is based on the potential likelihood and impact on the Council's services and delivery. Qualitative risk factors are detailed and each proposal has a breakdown on the saving, the impact on future financial years and details whether the saving is recurrent. In 2023/24, a high proportion of savings were recurrent but were primarily service reduction or a result of disbanded programmes. We have raised a performance improvement observation around the savings plans for FY23-24.

Consistency across the financial and operational plans

The Medium Term Financial Strategy is linked to corporate strategies by the inclusion of budget growth and savings items, which are aligned to service plans provided by budget managers. The Council has a Corporate Plan, which is supported at a service line level by Service Plans. The Council published its Corporate Plan in 2023, this details the Council's strategic ambitions and mission. It included the requirements for success in the provision of good value council services, including aims around workforce, operational plans and includes detail to support capital and estates.

Financial Sustainability

Risks to financial sustainability

The Council has a Medium-Term Financial Strategy which shows key financial decisions set out in the context of a plan that looks forward. The Council's 23-24 Medium Term Financial Strategy for the three years to 2025/26 indicated that the Council was reliant on the use of general reserves, with a budget expectation of a transfer of £2.2m from the General Fund in 2023/24 to fund service provision, and would subsequently reach below the minimum general fund target by 2025/26, indicating a financial sustainability risk, which we have raised as a significant risk. The Council's actual outturn resulted in a net decrease to the general fund of £0.4m, but this was not as a result of the surplus on the provision of services but was as a result of adjustments between the accounting basis and funding basis under regulations.

Budget monitoring

The Council use Pinnacle Budgetary Control reporting where service lines can review budgets against actuals on a monthly basis. Quarterly updates are presented to the Strategy and Resources Committee for discussion and challenge. Forecasts are updated each month and Finance Business Partners will meet with managers to discuss budgets and any required actions.

Managing financial sustainability risks

Balanced budgetary control features as a high-rated risk on the Corporate Risk Register. These risks are presented to the Performance, Governance and Audit Committee on a quarterly basis. We have provided commentary on the Council's risk management process at page 14. The Local Government Association also highlighted the financial sustainability as a risk in their peer review.

Budget outturn

The outturn for 2023/24 showed a budget underspend of £0.7m with respect to net expenditure. In addition, interest on investments overachieved by the budget by £0.9m.

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Key financial and performance metrics:	2023-24	2022-23
Planned (surplus)/deficit on provision of services	£0.4m	£(0.9)m
Actual (surplus)/deficit on provision of services	£(0.5)m	£(2.3)m
Usable reserves	£18.0m	£18.3m
Year-end borrowings	£0m	£0m
Year-end cash position	£14.7m	£15.6m

Governance

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

We have considered the following in our work:

- how the Council monitors and assesses risk and how the body gains assurance over the effective operation of internal controls, including arrangements to prevent and detect fraud;
- how the Council approaches and carries out its annual budget setting process;
- how the Council ensures effective processes and systems are in place to ensure budgetary control; to communicate relevant, accurate and timely management information (including non-financial information where appropriate); supports its statutory financial reporting requirements; and ensures corrective action is taken where needed, including in relation to significant partnerships;
- how the Council ensures it makes properly informed decisions, supported by appropriate evidence and allowing for challenge and transparency; and
- how the Council monitors and ensures appropriate standards, such as meeting legislative/regulatory requirements and standards in terms of management or Board members' behaviour.

Risk management

The Council assesses and manages risks through its Risk Management Policy and associated procedures during the financial period. Risks are scored based on likelihood and scale using a 5 x 5 matrix scoring system, which produces a range of scores from 1 to 25. This is supplemented by a risk assessment table which helps employees rate a score by way of examples.

The Council has created a culture in which employees are responsible for identifying, assessing, measuring, monitoring and reporting and escalating significant risks associated with their functions or activities which feed into directorate and corporate risks. Service risks are detailed in the business plan and recorded on SharePoint, and are regularly reviewed between the manager and director.

Service risks can be escalated to the Corporate Risk Register via monthly highlight reporting if the risk score changes. Corporate risks are risks that could potentially prevent the Council achieving the corporate goals and objectives stated in the Corporate Plan. The Corporate Risk Register is available on the SharePoint, which is visible to employees, but not members. The mitigating actions are recorded and both the overall risk scores and the progress of the mitigating actions are updated quarterly by the risk owner or the officer responsible for taking the actions forward. The Council does not have target risk scores for each risk, or show the risk scores before or after mitigations. We have raised a performance improvement observation over the risk reporting at the Council.

Quarterly risk reports are submitted to the Performance, Governance and Audit Committee outlining the current risk scores, changes to scores since the last quarter and progress on mitigating actions. The Corporate Risk Register is presented at a higher level to the Committee, and whilst the minutes are indicative of challenge, the level of detail could be improved to allow for enhanced decision making and to show the risk score over a longer time period.

Review and approval of the 2023/24 financial plan

The draft budget for 2023/24 was presented to the Strategy and Resources Committee in January 2023, and the Council formally approved the budget in February 2023. The budget includes details on growth pressures, changes from the prior year and details of key inputs into the budget.

Monitoring performance against budgets and taking actions

Any overspends are highlighted as part of the monthly meetings between the relevant Finance Business Partner and the service line, and are controlled as much as possible within the service line, or within other directorates where relevant. If uncontrolled overspends are identified, they would be escalated to the Strategy and Resources Committee in line with the financial regulations for approval. In 2023-24, overspends were limited and there were no material adverse variances. An outturn report was presented in July 2024 to the Strategy and Resources Committee, which detailed the key variances from the budget.

Governance

Controls in place to prevent and detect fraud

The Council has dedicated policies in place, including an Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy to assist in the detection, prevention and management of fraud, which was approved by the Performance, Governance and Audit Committee in 2023. It is noted that the Council did not have a dedicated counter fraud resource from the advisory report produced by the Council's internal auditors, and that the Council's counter-fraud work is more reactive than proactive, and the Council have developed an action plan as a result of this review. We have raised a performance improvement observation over the audit trail of policies we have inspected to confirm that policies have been reviewed and amended in a timely manner.

Compliance with laws and regulations

The Council are members of the Public Law Partnership, where they are provided updates and attend meetings to share knowledge with other local authorities on legal matters. Policies are reviewed regularly to consider any legal updates. The Council received no whistleblowing reports in 2023/24. The Council has a constitution which sets out a scheme of delegation and responsibility for ensuring lawful decisions are made. The Council also has a dedicated Monitoring Officer who is responsible for monitoring general compliance and making reports to the Council where relevant. The Council published their draft 2023/24 financial statements for audit on the 15th December 2024. This publication was not in accordance with the Audit and Accounts Regulations. The accounts were advertised and held an inspection period for members of the public in line with these regulations.. The delay in the production and publication of the draft accounts was due to constraints on resourcing. We have raised a significant weakness over this. The Council has not had any significant reorganisation in the financial year.

Scrutiny of decisions

The Council's decision-making processes are derived from the Council's Constitution, which includes the Articles, Responsibilities and Functions and Rules of Procedure. Codes and Protocol and the decision-making framework of the Council are clearly articulated in the Constitution and the Constitution sets out the relevant and delegated responsibilities of the Council and relevant Committees and officers. Key decisions are escalated to the Council after approval from sub-committees. Our review of decisions made within 2023/24 confirmed that there was a decision template that had been completed appropriately. The proposed decision includes the impact on the strategic priorities set out in the Corporate Plan and implications on customers, equalities, risk and financial and human resources. We note that the Council maintain a register of decisions, which is held on the Council website for public review

	2023-24	2022-23
Control deficiencies reported in the Annual Governance Statement	No significant control deficiencies	No significant control deficiencies
Head of Internal Audit Opinion	Moderate assurance	Moderate assurance
Local Government Ombudsman findings	No significant findings	No significant findings



Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness

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How the Council uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services

We have considered the following in our work:

- how financial and performance information has been used to assess performance to identify areas for improvement;
- how the Council evaluates the services it provides to assess performance and identify areas for improvement;
- how the Council ensures it delivers its role within significant partnerships and engages with stakeholders it has identified, in order to assess whether it is meeting its objectives; and
- where the Council commissions or procures services, how it assesses whether it is realising the expected benefits.

Summary of risk assessment

Corporate plan and performance reporting

The Council's Corporate Plan covers the period from 2023-27 and contains the vision to be a sustainable council, promoting growth and investment at every opportunity and to support their communities through excellent partnership working and to maintain and improve quality of life. The Corporate Plan lists the six strategic priorities. A quarterly performance review is presented to the Performance, Governance and Audit Committee including an overall RAG rating and progress against relevant Key Performance Indicators to measure the Council's performance against plan. The report is sufficiently detailed and includes a number of performance metrics presented clearly.

Monitoring of performance and services

Service lines provide highlight reporting which are reviewed by the Corporate Leadership Team. This includes an overall service plan RAG status for the month, service highlights and lowlights and key items for escalation and discussion, including risks for escalation, budget updates and concerns and health and safety updates or issues.

Engagement with stakeholders in development of the organisation

In February 2023, the Local Government Association performed a Finance Peer Challenge over the Council's financial leadership, financial strategy, planning & forecasting, decision making, financial outcomes and partnership and innovation. In addition to these areas, the Council asked the peer team to provide a view on the Council's current budget setting process and a check over the robustness of the strategic financial processes.

A number of key recommendations and suggestions were made by the Local Government Association to improve the financial sustainability and improve cohesiveness between the strategies and plans and enhance collaborative working at the Council. We have raised a significant risk in respect of this.

Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness

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Partnership working and monitoring

The Council works with a number of partners to deliver strategic priorities. For instance, the Community Safety Partnership includes the Council and a number of local agencies and organisations to tackle crime and disorder to help create safer communities. Priorities are set on a yearly basis and a Strategic Assessment is undertaken each year which includes data analysis of levels of crimes from a resident's survey to allow the Partnership to set its priorities.

We note that no new significant outsourcing arrangements have been initiated in 2023/24.

Significant Value for Money Risk

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1 Financial Sustainability linked to use of reserves

Risk that value for money arrangements may contain a significant weakness linked to Financial Sustainability

Significant Value for Money Risk

Our risk assessment procedures identified pressure on the Council's general fund, with the 2023-24 Medium Term Financial Strategy showing the possibility of the Council hitting below its minimum target of reserves of £2.6m by 2025/26 and the budget for 2023/24 showing an in year need of £0.4m to be funded from the general fund.

Availability of financial resources is key to ensure that services can be delivered to a high standard.

The Council has been experiencing financial pressures caused by (amongst other factors) inflation and pressure on services after the pandemic, which led to an expected contribution from the General Fund, which is a trend in the Council's budgeting processes.

The precarious value of the General Fund Reserve, combined with expected gaps to be funded from the General Fund in future years raises the risk that there were not adequate arrangements in place in 2023/24 in relation to the financial sustainability of the Council.

Our response

We will perform the following procedures:

- Review the Council's historic budget setting process against actual outturn to assess the accuracy of the forecasting process
- Review the savings proposals and monitoring of savings to confirm that savings are realistic and achievable
- Review the refreshed financial strategies and actual outturn to confirm whether the risk has been mitigated

Our findings

Findings

- Our review of the Council's historic budget setting process indicated prudence in the budgeting process. When we analysed budget versus actuals, the actual net cost of service and use of reserves in recent years was less than budgeted, resulting in actual results being more positive than budgeted.
- Our review of the savings proposals and monitoring of savings indicates that savings are being achieved but that there is a risk that these are primarily due to reduction in services that may not be sustainable for the delivery of Council's priorities.
- Our review of the refreshed 2024-25 medium financial term strategy and revised sensitivity analysis indicates that the Council is no longer due to hit below its minimum reserves target in the medium term.

Conclusion

Based on the findings above we have not identified any significant weaknesses in arrangement.

Significant Value for Money Risk

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Local Government Association Peer Review

Risk that value for money arrangements may contain a significant weakness linked to the domain of governance

Significant Value for Money Risk

Our risk assessment procedures identified concerns raised by the Local Government Association in relation to a number of processes at the Council, including a number of key recommendations around financial processes and a number of supplementary recommendations relating to Financial Leadership, Decision Making and Partnership and Innovation.

If the recommendations are not actioned, there is risk that the Council does not efficiently and effectively discharge its responsibilities.

We have therefore identified a significant VFM risk that the Council may not have appropriate arrangements in place in relation to enacting actions from the Finance Peer Review.

Our response

We will perform the following procedures:

- Understand the progress of actions taken against the Peer Review and ensure that there is an appropriate governance framework to monitor the effectiveness of the actions

Our findings

Findings

- Our review of the response to the LGA Peer Review indicated that the Council had an action plan with a designated owner and response to monitor the progress of recommendations and had established a Finance Member Group to review the progress of actions. The progress is also reported and monitored at the Performance, Governance and Audit Committee.
- However, a key recommendation in the review indicated that the structure, capacity and technical skills within the finance team should be considered. Throughout the financial year, the Authority struggled to respond to audit information requests and queries. As a result, there were significant delays to the audit and a disclaimed audit opinion was issued on the financial statements.

Conclusion

Based on the findings above, we have determined that there is a significant weakness in arrangements in respect of securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the Council's use of resources.

Value for Money: Recommendations

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The recommendations raised as a result of our work in respect of significant value for money weaknesses in the current year are as follows:

#	Grading	Issue, Impact and Recommendation	Management Response/Officer/Due Date
1	Statutory	<p>Our review of the Authority's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources identified the following concerns in respect of the capacity of the Authority's finance team:</p> <p>The Authority published its draft Statement of Accounts for 2023/24 on 15 December 2024, which was 6 and a half months late compared to the statutory deadline of 31 May 2024 . These initial draft accounts presented for public scrutiny contained restatements of prior year figures due to errors, and the Authority also identified contained errors in the current year figures, as well as casting errors.</p> <p>These matters are evidence of weaknesses in proper arrangements for reliable and timely financial reporting that supports the delivery of strategic priorities and ensures compliance with statutory deadlines.</p> <p>We recommend that the Authority develops, and then monitors, a detailed action plan outlining how they expect to return to a financial reporting timetable which ensures a good quality set of draft accounts are published in line with the statutory deadline. Where required, the Authority should invest in additional resources within the finance team to ensure future compliance with statutory reporting deadlines</p>	<p>Management Response: As s151 officer, I am confident that the peer review recommendations have been addressed and mitigating actions have been implemented to strengthen the finance team and internal processes.</p> <p>A new Section 151 Officer and Deputy Section 151 Officer have been recruited to provide much-needed support and skills to improve processes, train staff and impart knowledge to the Finance team to ensure the team are operating effectively and efficiently.</p> <p>A growth bid for 3 additional finance staff has been approved and recruitment will begin in the next few weeks. This includes one technical accountant, one senior finance specialist to support the budget monitoring team and one finance specialist (Level 1) to support the other specialists (level 2)</p> <p>Officer: Ben Cookson, Chief Finance Officer (Interim)</p>



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