

Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee



St Edmundsbury
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Title of Report:	Arrangements for appointment of External Auditors	
Report No:	PAS/SE/16/021	
Report to and date/s:	Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee	21 September 2016
	Cabinet	1 November 2016
	Full Council	20 December 2016
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Purpose of report:	To consider the options available for appointing External Auditors in time to make a first appointment by 31 December 2017, following the closure of the Audit Commission, and the end of the transitional arrangements.	

Recommendation:		Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee	
		<p>It is <u>RECOMMENDED</u> that:</p> <p>(1) Arrangements for appointing External Auditors at the conclusion of the 2017/18 audit are <u>noted</u>; and</p> <p>(2) Option 3, to 'opt-in' to the sector led body (Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd (PSAA)) for the independent appointment of the Council's External Auditor, beginning with responsibilities for the financial year 2018/19, is recommended to Full Council for approval.</p>	
Key Decision:		<i>Is this a Key Decision and, if so, under which definition?</i>	
<i>(Check the appropriate box and delete all those that do not apply.)</i>		Yes, it is a Key Decision - <input type="checkbox"/> No, it is not a Key Decision - <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Consultation:		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation has taken place across Suffolk and similar papers are being presented to all councils to similar timetables 	
Alternative option(s):		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Auditors must be appointed using one of the options detailed in the report 	
Implications:			
<i>Are there any financial implications? If yes, please give details</i>		Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As set out in the body of this report. 	
<i>Are there any staffing implications? If yes, please give details</i>		Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 	
<i>Are there any ICT implications? If yes, please give details</i>		Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 	
<i>Are there any legal and/or policy implications? If yes, please give details</i>		Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As set out in the body of this report. 	
<i>Are there any equality implications? If yes, please give details</i>		Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 	
Risk/opportunity assessment:		<i>(potential hazards or opportunities affecting corporate, service or project objectives)</i>	
Risk area	Inherent level of risk (before controls)	Controls	Residual risk (after controls)
	Low/Medium/ High*		Low/Medium/ High*
Successful transition not achieved to timescales		Early consideration of preferred approach by all Suffolk Councils	Low

Option 3 is not available	Medium	Shared approach across Suffolk gives reassurance of market need	Low
Audit fees increase as a result of a retender process	Medium	Collaborative procurement offers opportunity to keep Audit Fees down	Low
Ward(s) affected:		All Wards	
Background papers: <i>(all background papers are to be published on the website and a link included)</i>		http://www.psa.co.uk/supporting-the-transition/procurement-and-appointment-of-auditors/	
Documents attached:		None	

1. Key issues and reasons for recommendations

1.1 It is the Council's statutory responsibility to appoint a local auditor to audit its 2018/19 accounts by the 31 December 2017.

1.2 Alternative Options

1.2.1 The Council can choose one of the following options:

- a) Establish a stand-alone Auditor Panel to make the appointment on behalf of the Council;
- b) Commence work on exploring the establishment of local joint procurement arrangements with neighbouring authorities; or
- c) Use an existing independent panel of the Authority (this will only be applicable where a suitably constituted panel already exists).

1.3 Background

1.3.1 The Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 brought to a close the Audit Commission and established transitional arrangements for the appointment of external auditors and the setting of audit fees for all local government and NHS bodies in England. On 5 October 2015, the Secretary of State Communities and Local Government (CLG) determined that the transitional arrangements for local government bodies would be extended by one year to also include the audit of the accounts for 2017/18.

1.3.2 The Council's current external auditor is Ernst & Young LLP; this appointment having been made under a contract let by the Audit Commission. Following closure of the Audit Commission, the contract is currently managed by Public Sector Audit Appointments Limited (PSAA), the transitional body set up by the LGA with delegated authority from the Secretary of State CLG. Over recent years, the Council has benefited from a significant reduction in fees compared with historic levels. This has been the result of a combination of factors including new contracts negotiated nationally with the firms of accountants and savings from the closure of the Audit Commission. The Council's current external audit fees are £75k per annum including the certification of the housing benefit subsidy claim.

1.3.3 When the current transitional arrangements come to an end on 31 March 2018, the Council will move to the local appointment of its auditor. There are a number of routes by which this can be achieved, each with varying risks and opportunities. Current fees are based on discounted rates offered by the firms in return for substantial market share. When the contracts were last negotiated nationally by the Audit Commission, they covered NHS and local government bodies and offered maximum economies of scale.

1.3.4 The scope of the audit will still be specified nationally, the National Audit Office (NAO) is responsible for writing the Code of Audit Practice which all firms appointed to carry out the Council's audit must follow. Not all accounting firms will be eligible to compete for the work, they will need to demonstrate that they have the required skills and experience and be registered with a Registered Supervising Body approved by the Financial

Reporting Council. The registration process has not yet commenced and so the number of firms is not known but it is reasonable to expect that the list of eligible firms may include the top 10 or 12 firms in the country, including the Council's current auditor. It is unlikely that small local independent firms will meet the eligibility criteria.

1.4 Overall considerations

1.4.1 Risk management

1.4.2 There is no immediate risk to the Council. However, early consideration by the Council of its preferred approach will enable detailed planning to take place so as to achieve successful transition to the new arrangement in a timely and efficient manner.

1.4.3 Providing the Local Government Association (LGA) with a realistic assessment of our likely way forward will enable the LGA to invest in developing appropriate arrangements to support the Council.

1.5 Legal implications

1.5.1 Section 7 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the Act) requires a relevant authority to appoint a local auditor to audit its accounts for a financial year not later than 31 December in the preceding year. Section 8 governs the procedure for appointment including that the Authority must consult and take account of the advice of its auditor panel on the selection and appointment of a local auditor. Section 8 provides that where a relevant authority is a local authority operating executive arrangements, the function of appointing a local auditor to audit its accounts is not the responsibility of an executive of the authority under those arrangements;

d) Section 12 makes provision for the failure to appoint a local auditor: the authority must immediately inform the Secretary of State, who may direct the authority to appoint the auditor named in the direction or appoint a local auditor on behalf of the authority.

e) Section 17 gives the Secretary of State the power to make regulations in relation to an 'appointing person' specified by the Secretary of State. This power has been exercised in the Local Audit (Appointing Person) Regulations 2015 (SI 192) and this gives the Secretary of State the ability to enable a Sector Led Body to become the appointing person.

1.6 Financial Implications

1.6.1 Current external fee levels are likely to increase when the current contracts end in 2018.

1.6.2 The cost of establishing a local or joint Auditor Panel outlined in options 1 and 2 above would need to be estimated and included in the Council's budget moving forward if either of those options are progressed. This would include the cost of recruiting independent appointees (members), servicing the Panel, running a bidding and tender evaluation process, letting a contract and paying members fees and allowances.

- 1.6.3 Opting-in to a national Sector Led Body provides maximum opportunity to limit the extent of any increases by entering in to a large scale collective procurement arrangement and would remove the costs of establishing an auditor panel.

1.7 Options for local appointment of External Auditors

- 1.7.1 There are three broad options open to the Council under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the Act):

1.7.2 Option 1 To make a stand-alone appointment

- 1.7.2.1 In order to make a stand-alone appointment the Council will need to set up an Auditor Panel. The members of the panel must be wholly (or a majority) independent members as defined by the Act. Independent members for this purpose are independent appointees; this excludes current and former elected members (or officers) and their close families and friends. This means that elected members will not have a majority input to assessing bids and choosing which firm of accountants to award a contract for the Council's external audit. A new independent auditor panel established by the Council will be responsible for selecting the auditor.

1.7.2.2 Advantages/benefit

Setting up an auditor panel allows the Council to take maximum advantage of the new local appointment regime and have local input to the decision.

1.7.2.3 Disadvantages/risks

Recruitment and servicing of the Auditor Panel, running the bidding exercise and negotiating the contract is estimated by the LGA to cost in the order of £15,000 plus on going expenses and allowances

- 1.7.2.4 The Council will not be able to take advantage of reduced fees that may be available through joint or national procurement contracts.

- 1.7.2.5 The assessment of bids and decision on awarding contracts will be taken by independent appointees and not solely by elected members.

1.7.3 Option 2 Set up a Joint Auditor Panel/local joint procurement arrangements

- 1.7.3.1 The Act enables the Council to join with other authorities to establish a joint auditor panel. Again this will need to be constituted of wholly (or a majority) of independent appointees (members). Further legal advice will be required on the exact constitution of such a panel having regard to the obligations of each Council under the Act and the Council will need to liaise with other local authorities to assess the appetite for such an arrangement.

1.7.3.2 Advantages/benefits

The costs of setting up the panel, running the bidding exercise and negotiating the contract will be shared across a number of authorities.

- 1.7.3.3 There is greater opportunity for negotiating some economies of scale by being able to offer a larger combined contract value to the firms.

1.7.3.4 **Disadvantages/risks**

The decision making body will be further removed from local input, with potentially no input from elected members where a wholly independent auditor panel is used, or possibly only one elected member representing each Council, depending on the constitution agreed with the other bodies involved.

- 1.7.3.5 The choice of auditor could be complicated where individual Councils have independence issues. An independence issue occurs where the auditor has recently or is currently carrying out work such as consultancy or advisory work for the Council. Where this occurs, some auditors may be prevented from being appointed by the terms of their professional standards. There is a risk that if the joint auditor panel selects a firm that is conflicted for this Council, then the Council may still need to make a separate appointment with all the attendant costs and loss of economies possible through joint procurement.

1.7.4 **Option 3 Opt-in to a sector led body**

- 1.7.4.1 In response to the consultation on the new appointment arrangement, the LGA successfully lobbied for Councils to be able to 'opt-in' to a Sector Led Body (SLB) appointed by the Secretary of State under the Act. An SLB would have the ability to negotiate contracts with the firms nationally, maximising the opportunities for the most economic and efficient approach to procurement of external audit on behalf of the whole sector.

1.7.4.2 **Advantages/benefits**

The costs of setting up the appointment arrangements and negotiating fees would be shared across all opt-in authorities

- 1.7.4.3 By offering large contract values, the firms would be able to offer better rates and lower fees than are likely to result from local negotiation
- 1.7.4.4 Any conflicts at individual authorities would be managed by the SLB who would have a number of contracted firms to call upon.
- 1.7.4.5 The appointment process would not be ceded to locally appointed independent members. Instead a separate body is set up to act in the collective interests of the 'opt-in' authorities.

1.7.4.6 **Disadvantages/risks**

Individual elected members will have less opportunity for direct involvement in the appointment process other than through the LGA and/or stakeholder representative groups.

- 1.7.4.7 In order for the SLB to be viable and to be placed in the strongest possible negotiating position the SLB will need Councils to indicate their intention to opt-in before final contract prices are known.

1.8 The way forward

- 1.8.1 The Council has until December 2017 to make an appointment. In practical terms this means one of the options outlined in this report will need to be in place by Spring 2017 in order that the contract negotiation process can be carried out during 2017.
- 1.8.2 The LGA are working with the PSAA. The DCLG have recently approved the PSAA to become the Sector Led Body. In a recent survey, 58% of respondents expressed an interest in this option. Greatest economies of scale will come from the maximum number of councils acting collectively and opting-in to a SLB.
- 1.8.3 The Suffolk Councils' Section 151s and internal audit staff have already met with the LGA to discuss the advantages of the sector led approach. Collectively the officers are in support of this approach.

1.9 Conclusion

- 1.9.1 The Council must, by the 31 December 2017, take action to implement new arrangements for the appointment of external auditors from April 2018. In order that more detailed proposals can be developed, the Council is asked to give early consideration to the preferred approach.
- 1.9.2 The Council has been asked by the LGA for an indication of the preferred approach in order that it can invest resources in providing appropriate support to Councils. The LGA is strongly supportive of the SLB approach as it believes this offers best value to Councils by reducing set-up costs and having the potential to negotiate lowest fees.