

Audit and Governance Committee Update for Exeter City Council

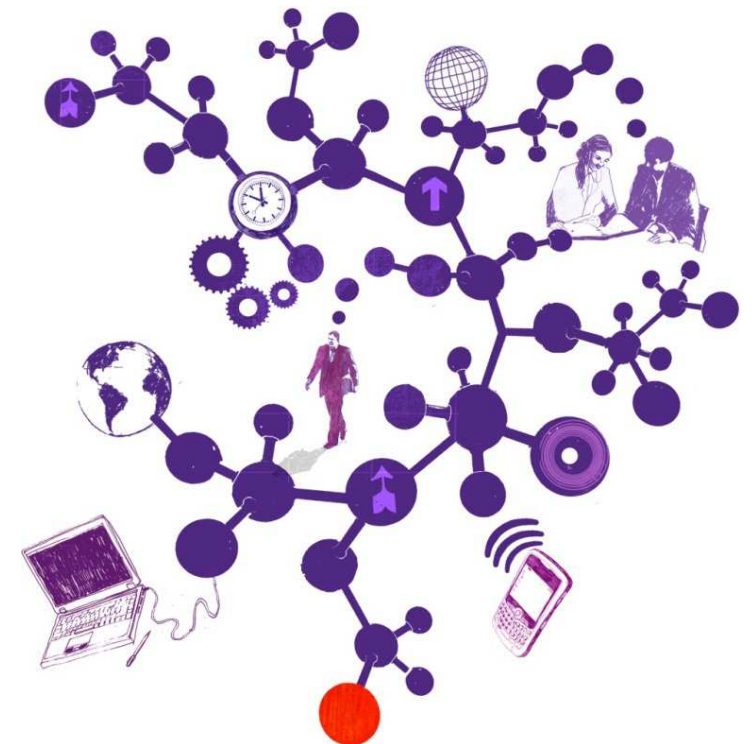
Year ended 31 March 2015

Committee Date: 2 December 2015

Geraldine Daly
Engagement Lead
T 0117 305 7741
E geri.n.daly@uk.gt.com

David Bray
Senior Audit Manager
T 07880 456 126
E david.bray@uk.gt.com

Tori Redler
Executive
T 0117 305 7744
E victoria.j.redler@uk.gt.com



The contents of this report relate only to the matters which have come to our attention, which we believe need to be reported to you as part of our audit process. It is not a comprehensive record of all the relevant matters, which may be subject to change, and in particular we cannot be held responsible to you for reporting all of the risks which may affect your business or any weaknesses in your internal controls. This report has been prepared solely for your benefit and should not be quoted in whole or in part without our prior written consent. We do not accept any responsibility for any loss occasioned to any third party acting, or refraining from acting on the basis of the content of this report, as this report was not prepared for, nor intended for, any other purpose.

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Introduction

This paper provides the Audit and Governance Committee with a report on progress in delivering our responsibilities as your external auditors.

The paper also includes:

- a summary of emerging national issues and developments that may be relevant to you; and
- a number of challenge questions in respect of these emerging issues which the Committee may wish to consider.

Members of the Audit Committee can find further useful material on our website www.grant-thornton.co.uk, where we have a section dedicated to our work in the public sector (<http://www.grant-thornton.co.uk/en/Services/Public-Sector/>). Here you can download copies of our publications referred to in these updates.

If you would like further information on any items in this briefing, or would like to register with Grant Thornton to receive regular email updates on issues that are of interest to you, please contact either your Engagement Lead or Audit Manager.

Geraldine Daly, Engagement Lead: T 0117 305 7741 geri.n.daly@uk.gt.com

David Bray, Senior Audit Manager: T 07880 456 126 david.bray@uk.gt.com

Progress at 18 November 2015

Work	Due By	Complete	Comments
<p>2014-15 final accounts audit</p> <p>Including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • audit of the 2014-15 financial statements • proposed opinion on the Council's accounts • proposed Value for Money conclusion • Whole of Government Accounts (WGA) opinion 	<p>30 September 2015</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>We reported our findings to the Council's Audit and Governance Committee on 23 September 2015.</p> <p>We issued an unqualified audit opinion on the Council's financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2015 on 25 September 2015, ahead of the national deadline of 30 September.</p> <p>We also made the necessary submission to the National Audit Office regarding the Whole of Government Accounts on 25 September, ahead of the national deadline of 2 October.</p>
<p>2014-15 VFM Conclusion</p> <p>We are required to assess whether Exeter City Council has proper arrangements in place for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • securing financial resilience • challenging how it secures economy, efficiency and effectiveness 	<p>30 September 2015</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>We reported our findings to the Council's Audit and Governance Committee on 23 September 2015.</p> <p>We issued an unqualified VFM conclusion for the year ended 31 March 2015 on 25 September 2015, ahead of the national deadline of 30 September.</p>

Progress at 18 November 2015

Work	Due By	Complete	Comments
2014-15 Annual Audit Letter	31 October 2015	Yes	Our Annual Audit Letter summarises the findings of our audit work in the year. This is a separate agenda item for the Council's Audit and Governance Committee and will be presented on 2 December 2015.
2014-15 certification work This work is expected to cover: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing benefits (mandated by the Audit Commission) • Housing capital receipts (audit related additional work) 	30 November 2015	Not at the time of writing	We will report the findings of our Housing Benefits work to the December 2015 Audit and Governance Committee in our certification report.
Other activities			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have provided the Council's incoming External Auditors, KPMG, with copies of our audit reports for the last two financial years (i.e. 2013/14 and 2014/15) • In order to help facilitate the change of External Auditors, we met with the audit team from KPMG on 17 November 2015. 			

Knowing the Ropes – Audit Committee Effectiveness Review

Grant Thornton

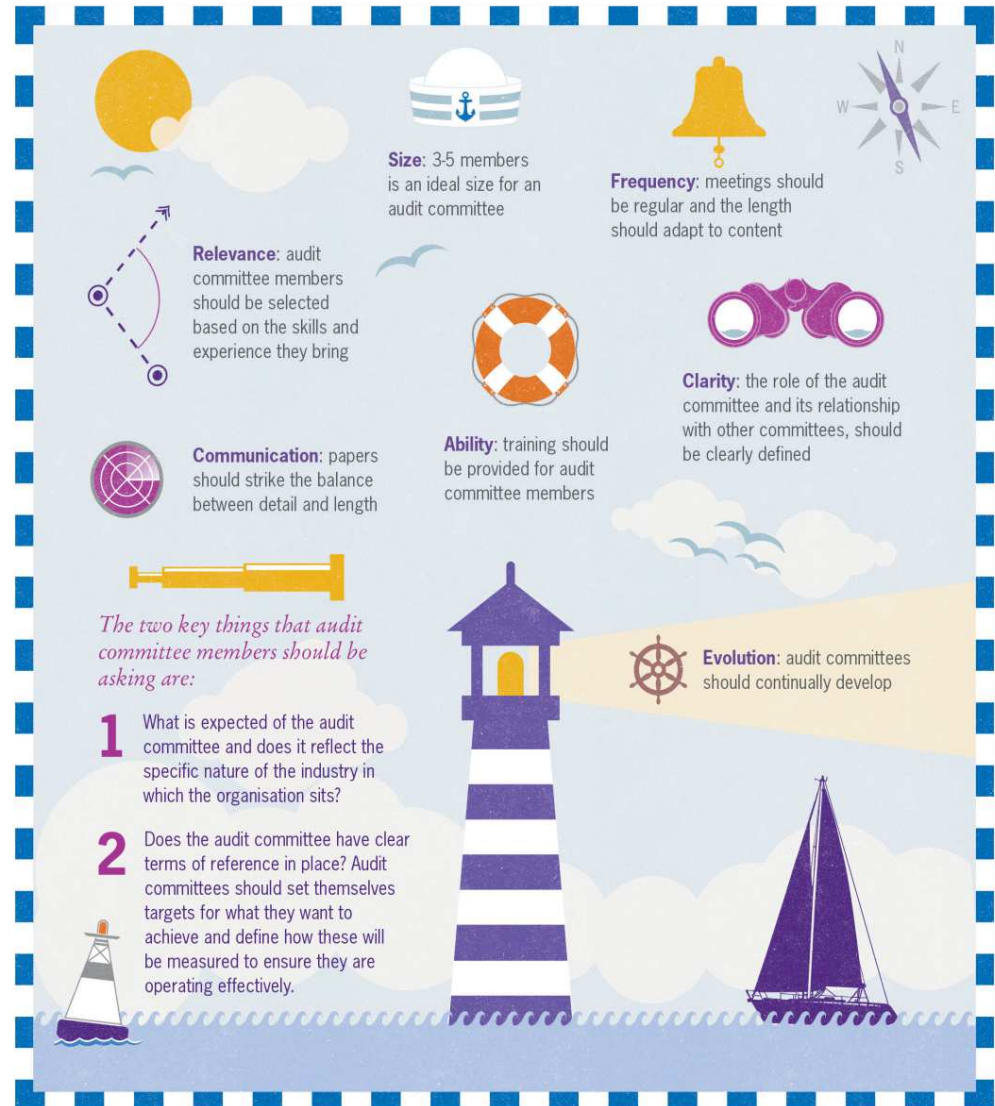
This is our first cross-sector review of audit committee effectiveness encompassing the corporate, not for profit and public sectors. It provides insight into the ways in which audit committees can create an effective role within an organisation's governance structure and understand how they are perceived more widely. It is available at <http://www.grantthornton.co.uk/en/insights/knowning-the-ropes--audit-committee-effectiveness-review-2015/>

The report is structured around four key issues:

- What is the status of the audit committee within the organisation?
- How should the audit committee be organised and operated?
- What skills and qualities are required in the audit committee members?
- How should the effectiveness of the audit committee be evaluated?

It raises key questions that audit committees, board members and senior management should ask themselves to challenge the effectiveness of their audit committee.

Our key messages are summarised opposite.



Making devolution work: A practical guide for local leaders

Grant Thornton market insight

Our latest report on English devolution is intended as a practical guide for areas and partnerships making a case for devolved powers or budgets.

The recent round of devolution proposals has generated a huge amount of interest and discussion and much progress has been made in a short period of time. However, it is very unlikely that all proposals will be accepted and we believe that this the start of an iterative process extending across the current Parliament and potentially beyond.

With research partner Localis we have spent recent months speaking to senior figures across local and central government to get under the bonnet of devolution negotiations and understand best practice from both local and national perspectives. We have also directly supported the development of devolution proposals. In our view there are some clear lessons to learn about how local leaders can pitch successfully in the future.

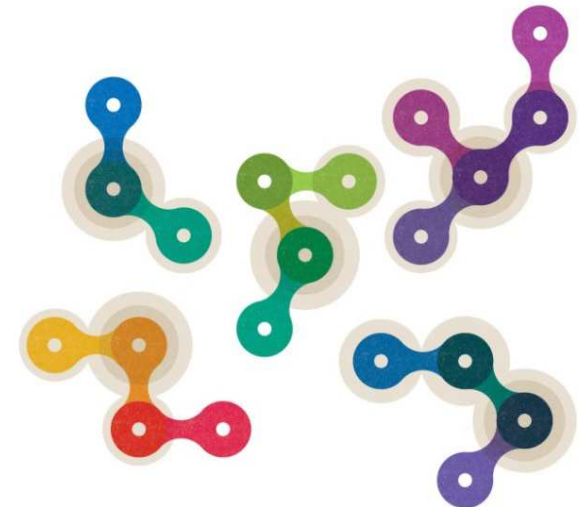
In particular, our report seeks to help local leaders think through the fundamental questions involved:

- what can we do differently and better?
- what precise powers are needed and what economic geography will be most effective?
- what governance do we need to give confidence to central government

The report 'Making devolution work: A practical guide for local leaders' can be downloaded from our website:

<http://www.grantthornton.co.uk/en/insights/making-devolution-work/>

Hard copies of our report are available from your Engagement Lead and Audit Manager



Turning up the volume: The Business Location Index

Grant Thornton market insight

Inward investment is a major component of delivering growth, helping to drive GDP, foster innovation, enhance productivity and create jobs, yet the amount of inward investment across England is starkly unequal.

The Business Location Index has been created to help local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, central government departments and other stakeholders understand more about, and ultimately redress, this imbalance. It will also contribute to the decision-making of foreign owners and investors and UK firms looking to relocate.

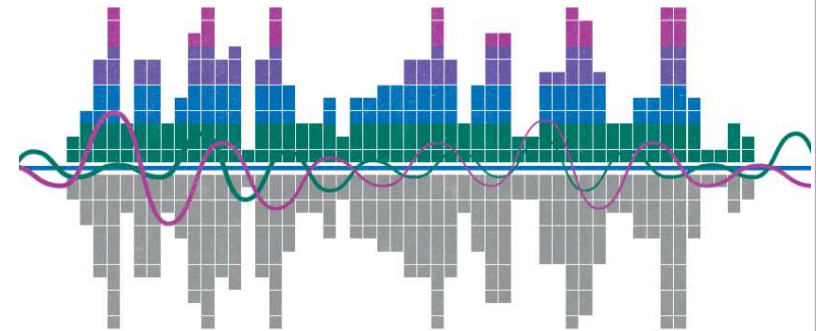
Based on in-depth research and consultation to identify the key factors that influence business location decisions around economic performance, access to people and skills and the environmental/infrastructure characteristics of an area, the Business Location Index ranks the overall quality of an area as a business location. Alongside this we have also undertaken an analysis of the costs of operating a business from each location. Together this analysis provides an interesting insight to the varied geography that exists across England, raising a number of significant implications for national and local policy makers.

At the more local level, the index helps local authorities and local enterprise partnerships better understand their strengths and assets as business locations. Armed with this analysis, they will be better equipped to turn up the volume on their inward investment strategy, promote their places and inform their devolution discussions.

The report 'Turning up the volume: The Business Location Index' can be downloaded from our website:

<http://www.grantthornton.co.uk/globalassets/1.-member-firms/united-kingdom/pdf/publication/2015/business-location-index-turning-up-the-volume.pdf>

Hard copies of our report are available from your Engagement Lead and Audit Manager



Improving efficiency of council tax collection

Local government issues

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) have published "Improving Efficiency for Council Tax Collection", calling for consultation on the proposals to facilitate improvements in the collection and enforcement processes in business rates and council tax.

The consultation is aimed at local authorities, as well as other government departments, businesses and any other interested parties. The consultation document states that council tax collection rates in 2014-15 are generally high (at 97 per cent), however the government wishes to explore further tools for use by local authorities and therefore seeks consultation from local authorities on DCLG's proposals. The consultation closed on 18 November 2015.

The Government proposes to extend the data-sharing gateway which currently exists between HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and local authorities. Where a liability order has been obtained, the council taxpayer will have 14 days to voluntarily share employment information with the council to enable the council to make an attachment to earnings. If this does not happen, the Government proposes to allow HMRC to share employment information with councils. This would help to avoid further court action, would provide quicker access to reliable information, and would not impose any additional costs on the debtor.

The principle of this data-sharing is already well-established for council taxpayers covered by the Local Council Tax Support scheme, and it would make the powers applying to all council tax debtors consistent. Based on the results of the Manchester/HMRC pilot, Manchester estimate that £2.5m of debt could potentially be recouped in their area alone.

Code of Audit Practice

National Audit Office

Under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 the National Audit Office are responsible for setting the Code of Audit Practice which prescribes how local auditors undertake their functions for public bodies, including local authorities.

The NAO have published the Code of Audit Practice which applies for the audit of the 2015/16 financial year onwards. This is available at <https://www.nao.org.uk/code-audit-practice/wp-content/uploads/sites/29/2015/03/Final-Code-of-Audit-Practice.pdf>

The Code is principles based and will continue to require auditors to issue:

- Opinion on the financial statements
- Opinion on other matters
- Opinion on whether the Trust has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources (the "VFM conclusion".)

The NAO plan to supplement the new Code with detailed auditor guidance in specific areas. The published draft audit guidance for consultation on the auditor's work on value for money arrangements in August 2015, which is due to be finalised in November 2015. The draft guidance includes the following.

- Definition of the nature of the opinion to be given – i.e. a "reasonable assurance" opinion as defined by ISAE 300 (revised)
- Definitions of what could constitute "proper arrangements" for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources
- Guidance on the approach to be followed by auditors in relation to risk assessment, with auditors only required to carry out detailed work in areas where significant risks have been identified
- Evaluation criteria to be applied
- Reporting requirements.

Grant Thornton submitted a response to the consultation which closed on 30 September 2015.

Supporting members in governance

Grant Thornton and the Centre for Public Scrutiny

We have teamed up with the Centre for Public Scrutiny to produce a member training programme on governance. Elected members are at the forefront of an era of unprecedented change, both within their own authority and increasingly as part of a wider local public sector agenda. The rising challenge of funding reductions, the increase of alternative delivery models, wider collaboration with other organisations and new devolution arrangements mean that there is a dramatic increase in the complexity of the governance landscape.

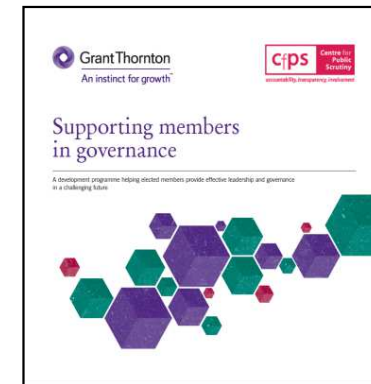
Members at local authorities – whether long-serving or newly elected – need the necessary support to develop their knowledge so that they achieve the right balance in their dual role of providing good governance while reflecting the needs and concerns of constituents.

To create an effective and on-going learning environment, our development programme is based around workshops and on-going coaching. The exact format and content is developed with you, by drawing from three broad modules to provide an affordable solution that matches the culture and the specific development requirements of your members.

- Module 1 – supporting members to meet future challenges
- Module 2 – supporting members in governance roles
- Module 3 – supporting leaders, committee chairs and portfolio holders

The development programme can begin with a baseline needs assessment, or be built on your own understanding of the situation.

Further details are available from your Engagement Lead and Audit Manager





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