



# Stevenage Borough Council

External audit plan

Year ended 31 March 2024

December 2023



## Your key team members

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## Contents

Introduction	3
Audit scope and general approach	5
Significant and other risks of material misstatement	9
Our approach to Value for Money	15
Audit team and timetable	17
Audit independence and objectivity and other services provided	18
Fees	19
<b>Appendices</b>	
Appendix I: Materiality	20
Appendix II: Group audit scope and risk assessment	21

# Introduction

## **Adding value through the audit**

*All our clients demand of us a positive contribution to meeting their ever-changing business needs. Our aim is to add value to the Council through our external audit work by being constructive and forward looking, by identifying areas of improvement and by recommending and encouraging good practice. In this way, we aim to help the Council promote improved standards of governance, better management and decision making and more effective use of resources.*

## **Purpose**

This audit plan highlights the key elements of our proposed audit strategy and provides an overview of the planned scope and timing of the statutory external audit of Stevenage Borough Council ('the Council') for the year ended 31 March 2024 for those charged with governance.

The core elements of our work include:

- An audit of the 2023/24 Statement of Accounts for the Council and its Group; and
- An assessment of the Council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources (our Value for Money work).

We will conduct our audit in accordance with International Standards on Auditing (ISAs) (UK), the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the 'Act'), and the National Audit Office Code of Audit Practice. The Code of Audit Practice sets out what local auditors of relevant local public bodies are required to do to fulfil their statutory responsibilities under the Act.

## **Auditor responsibilities**

As auditor we are responsible for performing an audit, in accordance with the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014, the Code of Audit Practice issued by the National Audit Office and ISAs UK. Our primary responsibility is to form and express an independent opinion on the Council's and its Group's financial statements, stating whether they provide a true and fair view and have been prepared properly in accordance with applicable law and the CIPFA Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the UK (the 'CIPFA Code').

We are also required to:

- Report on whether the other information included in the Statement of Accounts (including the Narrative Report and Annual Governance Statement) is consistent with the financial statements;
- Report by exception if the disclosures in the Annual Governance Statement are incomplete or if the Annual Governance Statement is misleading or inconsistent with our knowledge acquired during the audit;
- Report by exception any significant weaknesses identified in arrangements for securing value for money and a summary of associated recommendations;
- Report by exception on the use of our other statutory powers and duties; and
- Certify completion of our audit.

*continued..... 3*

# Introduction

*We will conduct our audit in accordance with International Standards on Auditing (ISAs) (UK), the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the 'Act'), and the National Audit Office Code of Audit Practice. The Code of Audit Practice sets out what local auditors of relevant local public bodies are required to do to fulfil their statutory responsibilities under the Act.*

*This planning letter has been prepared for the sole use of those charged with governance and management and should not be relied upon by third parties. No responsibility is assumed by Azets Audit Services to third parties.*

## Auditor responsibilities (*....continued*)

We will issue our Audit Findings Report and an Auditors Annual Report to the Audit Committee setting out the findings from our work.

Under the Act we have a broad range of reporting responsibilities and powers that are unique to the audit of local authorities in the United Kingdom. These include:

- Reporting matters in the public interest;
- Making written recommendations to the Council;
- Making an application to the court for a declaration that an item of account is contrary to law;
- Issuing and advisory notice; or
- Making an application for judicial review.

The Act also requires us to give an elector, or any representative of the elector, the opportunity to question us about the accounting records of the Council and consider any objection made to the accounts.

On completion of our audit work, we will issue an Audit Findings Report (prior to the approval of the financial statements), detailing our significant findings and other matters arising from the audit on the financial statements, together with an Auditor's Annual Report including our commentary on the value for money arrangements.

If, during the course of the audit, we identify any significant adverse or unexpected findings that we conclude should be communicated, we will do so on a timely basis, either informally or in writing.

The audit does not relieve management or the Audit Committee of your responsibilities, including those in relation to the preparation of the financial statements.

## Council responsibilities

The Council has responsibility for:

- Preparing financial statements which give a true and fair view, in accordance with the applicable financial reporting framework and relevant legislation;
- Preparing and publishing, along with the financial statements, an annual governance statement and narrative report;
- Maintaining proper accounting records and preparing working papers to an acceptable professional standard that support its financial statements and related reports disclosures; and
- Ensuring the proper financial stewardship of public funds, complying with relevant legislation and establishing effective arrangements for governance, propriety and regularity.

# Audit scope and general approach

This section of our letter sets out the scope and nature of our audit and should be considered in conjunction with the [Terms of Appointment](#) and [Statement of Responsibilities](#) issued by Public Sector Audit Appointments Limited (PSAA).

## General approach

Our objective when performing an audit is to obtain reasonable assurance about whether the financial statements as a whole are free from material misstatement and to issue an auditor's report that includes our auditor's opinion.

As part of our risk-based audit approach, we will:

- Perform risk assessment procedures including updating our understanding of the Council and its Group, including its environment, the financial reporting framework and its system of internal control;
- Review the design and implementation of key internal controls;
- Identify and assess the risks of material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error, at the financial statement level and the assertion level for classes of transaction, account balances and disclosures;

- Design and perform audit procedures responsive to those risks, to obtain audit evidence that is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for our opinion; and
- Exercise professional judgment and maintain professional scepticism throughout the audit recognising that circumstances may exist that cause the financial statements to be materially misstated.

We will undertake a variety of audit procedures designed to provide us with sufficient evidence to give us reasonable assurance that the financial statements are free from material misstatement, whether caused by fraud or error.

Reasonable assurance is a high level of assurance, but is not a guarantee that an audit conducted in accordance with ISAs (UK) will always detect a material misstatement when it exists. Misstatements can arise from fraud or error and are considered material if, individually or in the aggregate, they could reasonably be expected to influence the economic decisions of users taken on the basis of these financial statements. The risk of not detecting a material misstatement resulting from fraud is higher than for one resulting from error, as fraud may involve collusion, forgery, intentional omissions, misrepresentations, or the override of internal control.

We include an explanation in the auditor's report of the extent to which the audit was capable of detecting irregularities, including fraud and respective responsibilities for prevention and detection of fraud.

# Audit scope and general approach

## Materiality

We apply the concept of materiality both in planning and performing the audit, and in evaluating the effect of identified misstatements on the audit and of uncorrected misstatements.

Judgments about materiality are made in the light of surrounding circumstances and are affected by our perception of the financial information needs of users of the financial statements, and by the size or nature of a misstatement, or a combination of both. **The basis for our assessment of materiality for the year is set out in Appendix I.**

Any identified errors greater than:

# £100k

will be recorded and discussed with you and, if not adjusted, confirmed as immaterial as part of your letter of representation to us.

## Accounting systems and internal controls

The purpose of an audit is to express an opinion on the financial statements. We will follow a substantive testing approach to gain audit assurance rather than relying on tests of controls. As part of our work, we consider certain internal controls relevant to the preparation of the financial statements such that we are able to design appropriate audit procedures. However, this work does not cover all internal controls and is not designed for the purpose of expressing an opinion on the effectiveness of internal controls. If, as part of our consideration of internal controls, we identify significant deficiencies in controls, we will report these to you in writing.

## Specialised skill or knowledge required to complete the audit procedures

We will use audit specialists to assist us in our audit work in the following areas:

- The audit of the actuarial assumptions used in the calculation of the defined benefit pension liability/asset; and
- The audit of investment or property valuations, should the need arise during the course of the audit.

We will consult internally with our Technology Risk team for them to support the audit team by assessing the information technology general controls (ITGC) of the key financial systems.



# Audit scope and general approach

## Significant changes in the financial reporting framework

There have been no significant changes in the financial reporting framework this year, including the CIPFA Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom (the 'CIPFA Code'). As permitted by the CIPFA Code the council has chosen to defer the implementation of IFRS 16 'Leases' until 2024/25.

## Significant changes in the Council's (and Group's) functions or activities

There have been no significant changes to the functions and activities of the Council or its group structure. We have not been made aware of any significant changes in the functions or activities of the other components in the Council's group.

Our group audit scope and risk assessment is set out in Appendix II.

## Going concern

### Management responsibility

Management is required to make and document an assessment of whether the Council [and group] is a going concern when preparing the financial statements. The review period should cover at least 12 months from the date of approval of the financial statements. Management are also required to make balanced, proportionate and clear disclosures about going concern within the financial statements where material uncertainties exist in order to give a true and fair view.

## Going concern

### Auditor responsibility

Under ISA (UK) 570, we are required to consider the appropriateness of management's use of the going concern assumption in the preparation of the financial statements and consider whether there are material uncertainties about the Council [and group]'s ability to continue as a going concern that need to be disclosed in the financial statements.

In assessing going concern, we will consider the guidance published in the CIPFA Code and Practice Note 10 (PN10), which focusses on the anticipated future provision of services in the public sector rather than the future existence of the entity itself.

# Audit scope and general approach

## Related party transactions

ISA 550 requires that the audit process starts with the audited body providing a list of related parties to the auditor, including any entities under common control. During our initial audit planning you have informed us of the individuals and entities that you consider to be related parties. Please advise us of any changes as and when they arise.

## Additional procedures for the NAO

The National Audit Office (the 'NAO') issues group audit instructions which set out additional audit requirements. We expect the procedures for this year to be similar to previous years.

The NAO audit team for the WGA request us to undertake specific audit procedures in order to provide them with additional assurance over the amounts recorded in WGA schedules. The extent of these procedures will depend on whether the Council has been selected by the NAO as a sampled component for 2023/24. As at the date of this report, the draft instructions have not yet been issued by the NAO and the NAO have not yet confirmed which entities will be sampled components.

We will seek to comply with the instructions and to report to the NAO in accordance with their requirements once instructions have been issued.

## Auditor reporting delays for previous periods and the impact on our audit

Although we are planning to complete your audit for the year ended 31 March 2024 in line with the timetable set out ON PAGE 17, so that we can report our initial findings to your Audit Committee in November 2024, please note that we will not be able to fully complete our audit, issue our auditor's report and certify the closure of the audit until your predecessor auditor has completed their audit for the year ended 31 March 2023. Once the 2023 audit has been completed we will need to review the predecessor auditor's audit file to gain assurance over your opening balances as at 1 April 2023, and consider the impact on our audit of any modifications to their auditor's report.

Further, once the 2023 audit, and any earlier years, has been completed, we will revisit our planning procedures and audit plan to assess whether any additional procedures are required over and above those we have identified in this audit plan. Should additional procedures or changes to the plan be required, we will report these to you. The cost of additional work to revisit planning upon completion of the prior year audits will also be reported to you.



# Significant risks of material misstatement

Significant risks are risks that require special audit consideration and include identified risks of material misstatement that:

- Our risk assessment procedures have identified as being close to the upper range of the spectrum of inherent risk due to their nature and a combination of the likelihood and potential magnitude of misstatement; or
- Are required to be treated as significant risks due to requirements of ISAs (UK), for example in relation to management override of internal controls.

## Significant risks at the financial statement level

The table below and overleaf summarises significant risks of material misstatement identified at the financial statement level. These risks are considered to have a pervasive impact on the financial statements as a whole and potentially affect many assertions for classes of transaction, account balances and disclosures.

Identified risk	Planned audit procedures
<p><b>Management override of controls</b></p> <p>Auditing Standards require auditors to treat management override of controls as a significant risk on all audits. This is because management is in a unique position to perpetrate fraud by manipulating accounting records and overriding controls that otherwise appear to be operating effectively.</p> <p>Although the level of risk of management override of controls will vary from entity to entity, the risk is nevertheless present in all entities.</p> <p>Specific areas of potential risk including manual journals, management estimates and judgements and one-off transactions outside the ordinary course of the business.</p> <p><b>Risk of material misstatement: Very High</b></p>	<p>Procedures performed to mitigate risks of material misstatement in this area will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documenting our understanding of the journals posting process and evaluating the design effectiveness of management controls over journals;</li> <li>• Analysing the journals listing and determining the criteria for selecting high risk and/or unusual journals;</li> <li>• Testing high risk and/or unusual journals posted during the year and after the draft accounts stage back to supporting documentation for appropriateness, corroboration and to ensure approval has been undertaken in line with the Council's journals policy;</li> <li>• Gaining an understanding of the key accounting estimates and critical judgements made by management. We will also challenge assumptions and consider for reasonableness any indicators of bias which could result in material misstatement due to fraud; and</li> <li>• Evaluating the rationale for any changes in accounting policies, estimate or significant unusual transactions.</li> </ul>

# Significant risks of material misstatement

Identified risk	Planned audit procedures
<p><b>Prior year opinion on the financial statements</b></p> <p>As at the date of writing, you have not been able to obtain an unmodified opinion from your predecessor auditor for the 2022/23 financial year. In addition, the opinions for the financial years 2021/22 and 2020/21 have not yet been issued.</p> <p>There is therefore a risk that issues not yet identified in the open audit years arise in the completion of those audits which may impact the current (2023/24) audit year.</p> <p><b>There is a further risk that, in the event an ‘audit backstop’ is implemented for 31 March 2024, the prior year period opinions may be qualified by a ‘limitation of scope’ or disclaimed in full.</b></p> <p><b>In this eventuality:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• there may be limited assurance available over the Council's opening balances, including those balances which involve higher levels of management judgement and more complex estimation techniques (e.g. defined benefit pensions valuations and property, plant and equipment valuations, amongst others).</li> <li>• significant transactions, accounting treatment and management judgements may not have been subject to audit for one or more years – or at all. This may include management judgements and accounting treatment in respect of significant new schemes (such as major capital initiatives), changes to group structures or other significant accounting treatments which came into effect during the qualified or disclaimed period, going back to 2019/20.</li> </ul> <p><b>The potential absence of prior year assurance raises a significant risk of material misstatement at the financial statements level that may require additional audit procedures.</b></p> <p><b>Risk of material misstatement: High</b></p>	<p>Procedures performed to mitigate risks of material misstatement in this area will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Considering the findings and outcomes of unfinished prior year audits and their impact on the 2023/24 audit;</li> <li>• Considering the impact on our work of the impact of qualified or disclaimed audit opinions, particularly regarding opening balances and ‘unaudited’ transactions and management judgements made in the previous years which continue into 2023/24; and</li> <li>• Considering the impact of any changes in Code requirements for financial reporting in previous and current audit years</li> </ul>

# Significant risks of material misstatement

## Significant risks at the assertion level for classes of transaction, account balances and disclosures

The table below summarises significant risks of material misstatement at the assertion level for classes of transaction, account balances and disclosures.

Identified risk	Planned audit procedures
<p><b>Fraud in revenue recognition and expenditure (rebutted)</b></p> <p>Material misstatement due to fraudulent financial reporting relating to revenue recognition is a <b>rebuttable presumed risk in ISA (UK) 240</b>.</p> <p>Having considered the nature of the revenue streams at the Council, we consider that the risk of fraud in revenue recognition can be rebutted on all income streams because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• there is little opportunity available to manipulate revenue recognition;</li> <li>• there is limited incentives to manipulate revenue recognition</li> <li>• the Council's existing income transactions do not provide a significant opportunity to manipulate income between years in any meaningful way or to adopt aggressive recognition policies.</li> </ul> <p>We have also considered Practice Note 10, which comments that for certain public bodies, the risk of manipulating expenditure could exceed the risk of the manipulation of revenue. We have therefore also considered the risk of fraud in expenditure at the Council, and we are satisfied that this is not a significant risk for the reasons set out above.</p> <p><b>Inherent risk of material misstatement:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Revenue and expenditure recognition: Low</b></li> </ul>	<p>Whilst we have rebutted the risk of fraud in income and expenditure, we will perform the below procedures based on their value within the financial statements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documenting our understanding of the Council's systems for income and expenditure to identify significant classes of transactions, account balances and disclosures with a risk of material misstatement in the financial statements</li> <li>• Evaluating the Council's accounting policies for recognition of income and expenditure and compliance with the CIPFA Code.</li> <li>• Substantively testing material income and expenditure streams using analytical procedures and sample testing of transactions recognised for the year.</li> </ul>

# Significant risks of material misstatement

Identified risk	Planned audit procedures
<p><b>Valuation of other land and buildings and investment property (key accounting estimate)</b> Council and group</p> <p>The Council carries out a rolling programme of revaluations to ensure all property, plant and equipment required to be measured at fair value is revalued at each 1 April and it undertakes a full revaluation of its investment property annually.</p> <p>Management engages Wilks Head and Eve for their investment property and land and buildings valuations whereas Savills values their HRA housing stock.</p> <p>The valuations involve a wide range of assumptions and source data and are therefore sensitive to changes in market conditions. ISAs (UK) 500 and 540 require us to undertake audit procedures on the use of external expert valuers and the methods, assumptions and source data underlying the fair value estimates.</p> <p>This represents a key accounting estimate made by management within the financial statements due to the size of the values involved, the subjectivity of the measurement and the sensitive nature of the estimate to changes in key assumptions. We have therefore identified the valuation of land and buildings and investment property as a significant risk.</p> <p>We will further pinpoint this risk to specific assets, or asset types, on receipt of the draft financial statements and the year-end updated asset valuations to those assets where the in-year valuation movements falls outside of our expectations.</p> <p><b>Inherent risk of material misstatement:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Land and buildings and investment property (valuation): Very High</b></li> </ul>	<p>Procedures performed to mitigate risks of material misstatement in this area will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consulting with management to update our understanding on the approach taken by the management in its valuation of Council land and buildings and investment properties, including review and challenge of the methodology that the client uses.</li> </ul> <p>Reviewing;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The scope and terms of work with the asset management team</li> <li>• How management use the asset management team report to value land and buildings and investment properties in the financial statements</li> <li>• The valuation approach and assessment in respect of capital additions within the year to ensure we understand how valuations have been updated and amended as the assets have been brought into use</li> <li>• Consider engaging Azets valuation specialists to assist the audit team on a sample of assets, based on our assessment of the asset valuations subject to a higher degree of risk for their valuations as at 31 March 2024.</li> <li>• Contacting the asset management team to obtain information on the methodology and their procedures to ensure objectivity and quality, including compliance with professional standards</li> <li>• Where material, we will also test a sample of valuation movements to gain assurance that the accounting treatment is appropriate, and we will also consider evidence of regional valuation trends.</li> </ul>

# Significant risks of material misstatement

Identified risk	Planned audit procedures
<p><b>Valuation of the defined pension fund net liability/asset (key accounting estimate)</b> Council and group</p> <p>An actuarial estimate of the net defined pension liability/asset is calculated on an annual basis under IAS 19 'Employee Benefits', and on a triennial funding basis, by an independent firm of actuaries with specialist knowledge and experience. The triennial estimates are based on the most up to date membership data held by the pension fund and a roll forward approach is used in intervening years, as permitted by the CIPFA Code.</p> <p>The calculations involve a number of key assumptions, such as discount rates and inflation and local factors such as mortality rates and expected pay rises. The estimates are highly sensitive to changes in these assumptions and the calculation of any asset ceiling when determining the value of a pension asset. ISAs (UK) 500 and 540 require us to undertake audit procedures on the use of external experts (the actuary) and the methods, assumptions and source data underlying the estimates.</p> <p>This represents a key accounting estimate made by management within the financial statements due to the size of the values involved, the subjectivity of the measurement and the sensitive nature of the estimate to changes in key assumptions. We have therefore identified the valuation of the net pension liability/asset as a significant risk.</p> <p><b>Inherent risk of material misstatement:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Defined pension fund net liability/asset (valuation): High</b></li> </ul>	<p>Procedures performed to mitigate risks of material misstatement in this area will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluating managements processes for the calculation of the estimate, the instructions issued to management's expert (the actuary) and the scope of their work;</li> <li>• Evaluating the competence, capabilities and objectivity of the actuary;</li> <li>• Assessing the controls in place to ensure that the data provided to the actuary by the Council and their pension fund was accurate and complete;</li> <li>• Evaluating the methods, assumptions and source data used by the actuary in their valuations, with the support of an auditors' expert;</li> <li>• Evaluating whether any asset ceiling was appropriately considered (if applicable) when determining the value of any pension asset included in the financial statements;</li> <li>• Assessing the impact of any significant differences between the estimated gross asset valuations included in the financial statements and the Council's share of the investment valuations in the audited pension fund accounts' and</li> <li>• Ensuring pension valuation movements for the year and related disclosures have been correctly reflected in the financial statements.</li> </ul>

# Other risks of material misstatement

## Other identified risks

Other identified risks are those which, although not considered to be significant, will require specific consideration during the audit.

Identified risk	Planned audit procedures
<p><b>Other risk 1:</b></p> <p>The Council has entered a complex and financially significant income strip scheme. This requires the recognition of an asset, a significant finance lease liability and management judgement on accounting for various transactions related to this scheme.</p>	<p>Procedures performed to mitigate risks of material misstatement in this area will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reviewing management’s accounting treatment for this transaction, including revenue flows in year and the value of long and short-term assets and liabilities associated with the scheme</li><li>• Assessing management’s accounting treatment against the requirements of the CIPFA Code and International Financial Reporting Standards.</li></ul>

## Other material balances and transactions

Under International Standards on Auditing, “irrespective of the assessed risks of material misstatement, the auditor shall design and perform substantive procedures for each material class of transactions, account balance and disclosure”. All other material balances and transaction streams will therefore be audited. However, the procedures will not be as extensive as those adopted for the risks identified in this report.



# Value for Money arrangements

Under the Code of Audit Practice, we must satisfy ourselves that the Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources (referred to here as “Value for Money”, or “VFM”).

NAO Auditor Guidance Note 03 ‘Auditors’ Work on Value for Money Arrangements’ (“AGN 03”) was updated and issued on 18 January 2023 and requires us to provide an annual commentary on arrangements, which will be published as part of the Auditor’s Annual Report. Such commentary will highlight any significant weaknesses in arrangements, along with recommendations for improvements.

When reporting on such arrangements, the Code of Practice requires us to structure our commentary under three specified reporting criteria:

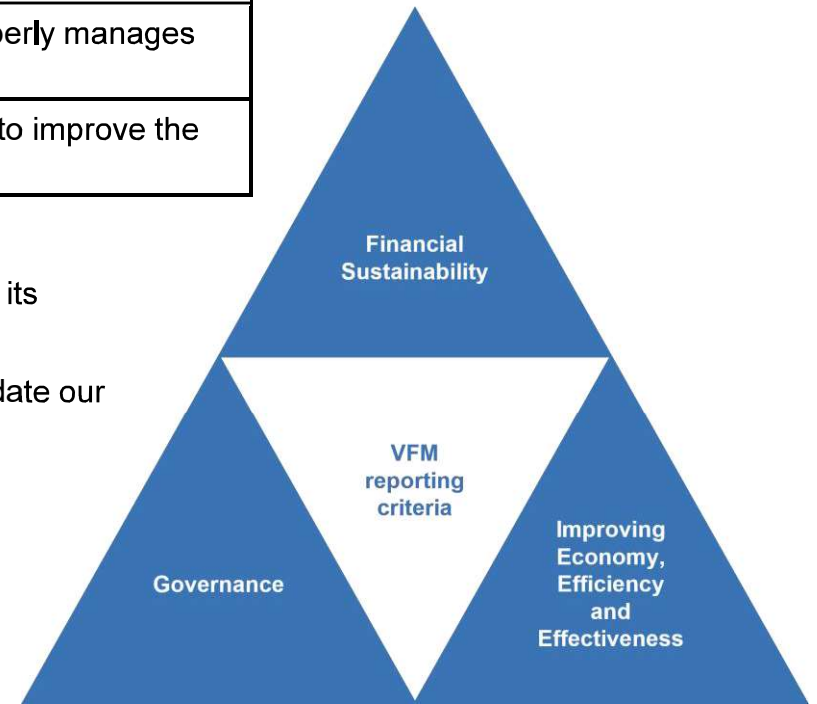
<b>Financial sustainability</b>	How the body plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services
<b>Governance</b>	How the body ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks
<b>Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness</b>	How the body uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services

As part of the planning process, we are required to perform procedures to identify potential risks of significant weaknesses in the Council’s arrangements to secure VFM through the economic, efficient and effective use of its resources.

We are required to re-evaluate this risk assessment during the course of the audit and, where appropriate, update our work to reflect emerging risks or findings that may suggest a significant weakness in arrangements.

Where we identify significant weaknesses in arrangements as part of our work, we are required to make recommendations setting out:

- Our judgement on the nature of the weakness identified;
- The evidence on which our view is based;
- The impact on the local body; and
- The action the body needs to take to address the weakness.



# Value for Money arrangements

## Risks of significant weakness in VFM arrangements

We have carried out an initial risk assessment to identify any risks of significant weakness in respect of the three specific areas of proper arrangements using the guidance contained in AGN 03. A significant weakness is a risk requiring audit consideration and procedures to address the likelihood that proper arrangements are not in place at the body to deliver value for money.

We will re-evaluate this risk assessment during the course of the audit and, where appropriate, update our work to reflect emerging risks or findings that may suggest a significant weakness in arrangements.

When considering the Council's arrangements, we will have regard to the three reporting criteria set out in AGN03, as well as performing additional work in the areas identified below which are the potential areas of significant weaknesses, we have identified at the planning stage.

Criteria	Risk of significant weakness	Our risk based procedures and evaluation approach includes (but is not limited to)
Financial sustainability	None identified	Whilst we have not identified, at this stage, any risks of significant weakness, we will consider as part of our review the arrangements in place to monitor and mitigate the commercial, economic and other risks relating to the Council's significant income strip scheme.
Governance	None identified	We have not at this stage identified any risks of significant weakness that require specific audit procedures
Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness	None identified	We have not at this stage identified any risks of significant weakness that require specific audit procedures

Weaknesses or risks identified by auditors are only those which have come to their attention during their normal audit work in accordance with the Code of Audit Practice and may not be all that exist.

# Audit team and logistics

## Your audit team

Role	Name	Contact details
Key Audit Partner	Paul Grady	<a href="mailto:Paul.grady@azets.co.uk">Paul.grady@azets.co.uk</a>
Engagement Manager	Martha Charima	<a href="mailto:Martha.Charima@azets.co.uk">Martha.Charima@azets.co.uk</a>
In-charge auditor	Ava Campbell	<a href="mailto:Ava.Campbell@azets.co.uk">Ava.Campbell@azets.co.uk</a>

## Timetable

Event	Date
Planning and risk assessment	Oct – Nov 2023
Reporting of plan to Audit Committee	Jan- Mar 2024
Interim audit	Mar 2024
Year end audit	Sep – Nov 2024
Reporting of Audit Findings (ISA260)	Nov 2024
Auditor's Annual Report (AAR)	Nov 2024
Target date of approval of accounts	Nov 2024
Accounts publication deadline (as specified in the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015)	TBC (likely 30 November 2024)

## Our expectations and requirements

For us to be able to deliver the audit in line with the agreed fee and timetable, we require the following:

- Draft financial statements to be produced to a good quality by the deadlines you have agreed with us. These should be complete including all notes, the Narrative Statement and the Annual Governance Statement;
- The provision of good quality working papers at the same time as the draft financial statements. These will be discussed with you in advance to ensure clarity over our expectations;
- The provision of agreed data reports at the start of the audit, fully reconciled to the values in the accounts, to facilitate our selection of samples for testing;
- Ensuring staff are available and on site (as agreed) during the period of the audit;
- Prompt and sufficient responses to audit queries within two working days (unless otherwise agreed) to minimise delays.

The audit process is underpinned by effective project management to ensure that we co-ordinate and apply our resources efficiently to meet your deadlines. It is therefore essential that the audit team and the Council's finance team work closely together to achieve this timetable.

**Please note that we will be unable to complete our 2023/24 audit until your audits for all previous financial years have been completed by your predecessor auditors and auditor's reports covering both the financial statements audit and value for money work have been issued. The National Audit Office continues to explore ways to escalate the timely completion of all outstanding local government audits.**

# Independence, objectivity and other services provided

## Auditor independence

We confirm that we comply with the Financial Reporting Council's (FRC) Ethical Standard and are able to issue an objective opinion on the financial statements. We have also complied with the NAOs Auditor Guidance Note 01, issued in September 2022, which contains supplementary guidance on ethical requirements for auditors of local public bodies. We have considered our integrity, independence and objectivity in respect of audit services provided and we do not believe that there are any significant threats or matters which should be brought to your attention

## Other services

We have detailed in the table below any other services provided to the Council (and the Group), the threats to our independence these present and the safeguards we have put in place to mitigate these threats.

Service	Provided to	Fee	Threats identified and safeguards to mitigate threats to independence
<b>Audit related:</b> Certification of Housing Benefit Assurance Process (HBAP) claim (2023/24)	<b>Council</b>	£28,000 plus per diem rate for additional work required	<p><b>Self-interest:</b> Given this is likely to be a recurring fee, we consider a threat present. However, the fee is not significant to Azets Audit Services or Stevenage Borough Council. The fee is fixed (apart from an additional £2,000 for each additional 40+ workbook) and not contingent in nature.</p> <p><b>Self-review:</b> Whilst housing benefit revenue and expenditure streams are within the financial statements, we do not complete the claim form. The focus of our work is solely testing the data in the claim form prepared by the management.</p> <p><b>Management:</b> As above, the claim form is completed by management and any adjustments or amendments identified to the form during the certification work are discussed and agreed by management prior to submission of the certification report.</p> <p>We therefore consider these risks sufficiently mitigated.</p>

# Fees

PSAA set a fee scale for each audit that assumes the audited body has sound governance arrangements in place, has been operating effectively throughout the year, prepares comprehensive and accurate draft accounts and meets the agreed timetable for audit. This fee scale is reviewed by PSAA each year and adjusted, if necessary, based on auditors' experience, new requirements, or significant changes to the audited body. The fee may be varied above the fee scale to reflect the circumstances and local risks within the audited body.

Our estimated fee (excluding VAT) is as follows:

Audit fee	2023/24 £
Base fee for the audit of the Council (and Group's) financial statements (as set out in the fee scales issued by PSAA)	185,235
New auditing standards: ISA315 and ISA240	27,785
Accounting for income strip	18,000
<b>Initial audit fee for Stevenage Borough Council</b>	<b>231,020</b>
Additional work arising from prior year audit outcomes	TBC
<b>Proposed audit fee for Stevenage Borough Council</b>	<b>TBC</b>

This fee is estimated based on our understanding at this point in time and may be subject to change. Our planned fee is on the basis that our expectations set out on page 17 are met and your group structure is unchanged.

It is our policy to bill for overruns or scope extensions e.g., where we have incurred delays, deliverables have been late or of poor quality, where key personnel have not been available, or we have been asked to do extra work.

Our policy is to raise fees to account at appropriate stages of the audit such as during the audit planning, the interim visit, the final audit and once the financial statements have been signed.

The approximate total fees charged to the Council and group for the provision of services in 2023/24 is as follows:

Audit fee	2023/24 £
Audit of the Council (as above, excluding any additional work arising from prior year audit completion)	231,020
Certification of the HBAP Claim (excluding the per diem rate for additional workbooks)	28,000
<b>Total fees for the Group (excluding any additional work arising from prior year audit completion, and any additional work on the HBAP claim)</b>	<b>259,020</b>

# Appendix I: Materiality

Whilst our audit procedures are designed to identify misstatements which are material to our audit opinion, we also report to those charged with governance and management any uncorrected misstatements of lower value errors to the extent that our audit identifies these. Under ISA (UK) 260 we are obliged to report uncorrected omissions or misstatements other than those which are 'clearly trivial' to those charged with governance. ISA (UK) 260 defines 'clearly trivial' as matters that are clearly inconsequential, whether taken individually or in aggregate and whether judged by any quantitative or qualitative criteria.

An omission or misstatement is regarded as material if it would reasonably influence the users of the financial statements. The assessment of what is material is a matter of professional judgement and is affected by our assessment of the risk profile of the Council and group and the needs of the users. When planning, we make judgements about the size of misstatements which we consider to be material, and which provide a basis for determining the nature and extent of our audit procedures. Materiality is revised as our audit progresses, should we become aware of any information that would have caused us to determine a different amount had we known about it during our planning.

Our assessment, at the planning stage, of materiality for the year ended 31 March 2024 was calculated as follows:

	Group £'000	Council £'000	Explanation
<b>Overall materiality for the financial statements</b>	2,000	1,900	2% of gross revenue expenditure based on the draft financial statements as at 31 March 2022. This will be reassessed upon receipt of the draft accounts.  The financial statements are considered to be materially misstated where total errors exceed this value.
<b>Performance materiality</b>	1,300	1,235	65% of materiality.  Audit work will be performed to capture individual errors at this level
<b>Trivial threshold</b>	100	95	5% of overall materiality for the Council and group.  Individual errors above this threshold are communicated to those charged with governance.

In addition to the above, we consider any areas for specific lower materiality. We have determined that no specific materiality levels need to be set for this audit.



# Appendix II: Group audit scope and risk assessment

As Group auditor under ISA (UK) 600 (Revised November 2019) we are required to obtain sufficient appropriate audit evidence regarding the financial information of the components and the consolidation process to express an opinion on whether the group financial statements are prepared, in all material respects, in accordance with the applicable financial reporting framework.

**Please note the below scope is indicative subject to our detailed review of the Council's proposed accounting treatment for the group structure.**

## Group audit scope

The Group consists of the following entities:

Component	Significant?	Level of response required	Planned audit approach
Stevenage Borough Council	Yes	Comprehensive	Full scope statutory audit
Queensway Properties (Stevenage) LLP	No	Analytical	We will carry out analytical procedures at a group level
Marshgate Plc	No	Analytical	We will carry out analytical procedures at a group level

**Comprehensive** The component is of such significance to the Group as a whole that an audit of the components financial statements is required for group reporting purposes.

**Targeted** The component is significant to the Group, audit evidence will be obtained by performing targeted audit procedures rather than a full audit.

**Analytical** The component is not significant to the Group and audit risks can be addressed sufficiently by applying analytical procedures at the Group level.

## Risks at the component-level

The risks identified at the Council are set out in this external audit plan. There are no other risks identified in any of the other components above in respect of the Group audit.

Note that a component may require a statutory audit under UK or overseas company law irrespective of whether an audit is required for group reporting purposes.

Management should therefore satisfy themselves that all UK and overseas company law requirements are adhered to on a company-by-company basis.

## Involvement in the work of component auditors

The nature, timing and extent of our involvement in the work of component auditors will begin with a discussion on risks, guidance on designing procedures, participation in meetings, followed by the review of relevant aspects of the audit documentation and meeting with appropriate members of the audit team.

# AV AZETS

We are an accounting, tax, audit, advisory and business services group that delivers a personal experience both digitally and at your door.

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