

Darlington Borough Council

Annual Audit Letter for the year
ended 31 March 2020

December 2020

The EY logo consists of the letters 'EY' in a bold, white, sans-serif font. A yellow triangle is positioned above the 'Y', pointing downwards towards the letters.

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Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd (PSAA) have issued a 'Statement of responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies'. It is available from the Chief Executive of each audited body and via the PSAA website (www.psaa.co.uk).

This Statement of responsibilities serves as the formal terms of engagement between appointed auditors and audited bodies. It summarises where the different responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies begin and end, and what is to be expected of the audited body in certain areas.

The 'Terms of Appointment (updated April 2018)' issued by PSAA sets out additional requirements that auditors must comply with, over and above those set out in the National Audit Office Code of Audit Practice (the Code) and statute, and covers matters of practice and procedure which are of a recurring nature.

This Audit Results Report is prepared in the context of the Statement of responsibilities. It is addressed to the Members of the audited body, and is prepared for their sole use. We, as appointed auditor, take no responsibility to any third party.

Our Complaints Procedure - If at any time you would like to discuss with us how our service to you could be improved, or if you are dissatisfied with the service you are receiving, you may take the issue up with your usual partner or director contact. If you prefer an alternative route, please contact Hywel Ball, our Managing Partner, 1 More London Place, London SE1 2AF. We undertake to look into any complaint carefully and promptly and to do all we can to explain the position to you. Should you remain dissatisfied with any aspect of our service, you may of course take matters up with our professional institute. We can provide further information on how you may contact our professional institute.



A background image showing a pair of hands holding a white tablet computer. The hands are positioned as if presenting the device. The background is a blurred office or meeting room with windows and other people in the distance.

Section 1

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

We are required to issue an annual audit letter to Darlington Borough Council (the Council) following completion of our audit procedures for the year ended 31 March 2020.

Covid-19 had an impact on a number of aspects of our 2019/20 audit. We set out these key impacts below.

Area of impact	Commentary
Impact on the delivery of the audit	
▶ Changes to reporting timescales	As a result of Covid-19, new regulations, the Accounts and Audit (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 No. 404, have been published and came into force on 30 April 2020. This announced a change to publication date for final, audited accounts from 31 July to 30 November 2020 for all relevant authorities. We worked with the Council to deliver our audit in line with the revised reporting timescale.
Impact on our risk assessment	
▶ Valuation of Property Plant and Equipment	The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), the body setting the standards for property valuations, issued guidance to valuers highlighting that the uncertain impact of Covid-19 on markets might cause a valuer to conclude that there is a material uncertainty. Caveats around this material uncertainty have been included in the year-end valuation reports produced by the Council's external valuer.
▶ Disclosures on Going Concern	Financial plans for 2020/21 and medium term financial plans will need revision for Covid-19. We considered the unpredictability of the current environment gave rise to a risk that the council would not appropriately disclose the key factors relating to going concern, underpinned by managements assessment with particular reference to Covid-19.
Impact on the scope of our audit	
▶ Information Produced by the Entity (IPE)	We identified an increased risk around the completeness, accuracy, and appropriateness of information produced by the entity due to the inability of the audit team to verify original documents or re-run reports on-site from the Council's systems. We undertook the following to address this risk: <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Used the screen sharing function of Microsoft Teams to evidence re-running of reports used to generate the IPE we audited; and▶ Agree IPE to scanned documents or other system screenshots.
▶ Consultation requirements	Additional EY consultation requirements concerning the impact on auditor reports.

Executive Summary (cont'd)

The tables below set out the results and conclusions on the significant areas of the audit process.

Area of Work	Conclusion
Opinion on the Council's:	
▶ Financial statements	Unqualified - the financial statements give a true and fair view of the financial position of the Council as at 31 March 2020 and of its expenditure and income for the year then ended.
▶ Consistency of other information published with the financial statements	Other information published with the financial statements was consistent with the financial statements.
▶ Concluding on the Council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness	We concluded that you have put in place proper arrangements to secure value for money in your use of resources.

Area of Work	Conclusion
Reports by exception:	
▶ Consistency of Governance Statement	The Governance Statement was consistent with our understanding of the Council.
▶ Public interest report	We had no matters to report in the public interest.
▶ Written recommendations to the Council, which should be copied to the Secretary of State	We had no matters to report.
▶ Other actions taken in relation to our responsibilities under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014	We had no matters to report.

Area of Work	Conclusion
Reporting to the National Audit Office (NAO) on our review of the Council's Whole of Government Accounts return (WGA).	We had no matters to report. The Council is below the specified audit threshold of £500mn. Therefore, we did not perform any audit procedures on the consolidation pack.

Executive Summary (cont'd)

As a result of the above we have also:

Area of Work	Conclusion
Issued a report to those charged with governance of the Council communicating significant findings resulting from our audit.	Our Audit Results Report was issued on 15 October 2020.
Issued a certificate that we have completed the audit in accordance with the requirements of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and the National Audit Office's 2015 Code of Audit Practice.	Our certificate was issued on 23 November 2020.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Council staff for their assistance during the course of our work.

Helen Henshaw
Associate Partner
For and on behalf of Ernst & Young LLP

Section 2

Purpose and Responsibilities



Purpose

The Purpose of this Letter

The purpose of this annual audit letter is to communicate to Members and external stakeholders, including members of the public, the key issues arising from our work, which we consider should be brought to the attention of the Council.

We have already reported the detailed findings from our audit work in our 2019/20 Audit Results Report to the 18 November 2020 Audit Committee, representing those charged with governance. We do not repeat those detailed findings in this letter. The matters reported here are the most significant for the Council.

Responsibilities

Responsibilities of the Appointed Auditor

Our 2019/20 audit work has been undertaken in accordance with the Audit Plan that we issued on 30 April 2020 and is conducted in accordance with the National Audit Office's 2015 Code of Audit Practice, International Standards on Auditing (UK), and other guidance issued by the National Audit Office.

As auditors we are responsible for:

- ▶ Expressing an opinion:
 - ▶ On the 2019/20 financial statements; and
 - ▶ On the consistency of other information published with the financial statements.
- ▶ Forming a conclusion on the arrangements the Council has to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.
- ▶ Reporting by exception:
 - ▶ If the annual governance statement is misleading or not consistent with our understanding of the Council;
 - ▶ Any significant matters that are in the public interest;
 - ▶ Any written recommendations to the Council, which should be copied to the Secretary of State; and
 - ▶ If we have discharged our duties and responsibilities as established by the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and Code of Audit Practice.

Alongside our work on the financial statements, we also review and report to the National Audit Office (NAO) on your Whole of Government Accounts return. The Council is below the specified audit threshold of £500mn. Therefore, we did not perform any audit procedures on the return.

Responsibilities of the Council

The Council is responsible for preparing and publishing its statement of accounts accompanied by an Annual Governance Statement (AGS). In the AGS, the Council reports publicly each year on how far it complies with its own code of governance, including how it has monitored and evaluated the effectiveness of its governance arrangements in year, and any changes planned in the coming period.

The Council is also responsible for putting in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

Section 3

Financial Statement Audit



Financial Statement Audit

Key Issues

The Council's Statement of Accounts is an important tool for the Council to show how it has used public money and how it can demonstrate its financial management and financial health.

We audited the Council's Statement of Accounts in line with the National Audit Office's 2015 Code of Audit Practice, International Standards on Auditing (UK), and other guidance issued by the National Audit Office and issued an unqualified audit report on 23 November 2020.

Our detailed findings were reported to the 18 November 2020 Audit Committee.

The key issues identified as part of our audit were as follows:

Significant Risk	Conclusion
Misstatements due to fraud or error	We did not identify any material weaknesses in controls or evidence of material management override.
The financial statements as a whole are not free of material misstatements whether caused by fraud or error.	We did not identify any instances of inappropriate judgements being applied.
As identified in ISA (UK) 240, management is in a unique position to perpetrate fraud because of its ability to manipulate accounting records directly or indirectly and prepare fraudulent financial statements by overriding controls that otherwise appear to be operating effectively. We identify and respond to this fraud risk on every audit engagement.	We did not identify any other transactions during our audit which appeared unusual or outside the Council's normal course of business. We did not identify any issues regarding the appropriateness of journal entries recorded in the general ledger and other adjustments made to the financial statements from our testing performed.

Financial Statement Audit (cont'd)

Significant Risk

Risk of fraud in revenue and expenditure recognition

Under ISA 240 there is a presumed risk that revenue may be misstated due to improper revenue recognition. In the public sector, this requirement is modified by Practice Note 10 issued by the Financial Reporting Council, which states that auditors should also consider the risk that material misstatements may occur by the manipulation of expenditure recognition.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to balance their annual budget and are operating in a financially challenged environment with reducing levels of government funding and increasing demand for services. Achievement of budget is critical to minimising the impact and usage of the Council's usable reserves and provides a basis for the following year's budget. Any deficit outturn against the budget is therefore not a desirable outcome for the Council and management, and therefore this desire to achieve budget increases the risk that the financial statements may be materially misstated.

The key issues identified as part of our audit were as follows:

Other Key Findings

Valuation of Land, Buildings and Investment Property

The fair value of Property, Plant and Equipment (PPE) and Investment Properties (IP) represent a significant balance in the Council's accounts, and are subject to valuation changes, impairment reviews and depreciation charges. Management is required to make material judgemental inputs and apply estimation techniques to calculate the year-end balances recorded in the balance sheet.

Covid-19 related constraints on property valuation: The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), the body setting the standards for property valuations, has issued guidance to valuers highlighting that the uncertain impact of Covid-19 on the markets might cause a valuer to conclude that there is material uncertainty.

The valuation reports received by the Council from their valuers included a statement on material uncertainties in relation to their valuation.

Conclusion

Our testing has not identified any material misstatements from revenue and expenditure recognition.

Overall our audit work did not identify any material issues or unusual transactions to indicate any misreporting of the Council's financial position.

However, our work performed on the HRA statement identified a number of errors which cumulatively were above our SAD limit. This resulted in expenditure being overstated by £413k and income being overstated by £406k. These errors have been corrected by management in the final set of accounts.

Conclusion

We identified differences in our valuations work relating to two assets (Drinkfield Civic Amenity Site, and Central House Annexe). The valuation of the building element of the Drinkfield Amenity was not included within the fixed asset register or the financial statements resulting in an understatement of £492k. The valuation of Central House Annexe had arithmetic errors, which amounted to an overstatement of £142k. Although this was below our reporting threshold, management chose to correct this and we have therefore included it in our report. We also noted a disclosure issue in the note of the accounts whereby PFI assets had been understated by £252k.

We noted an overstatement of £1.4m relating to the valuation of the Railway Museum within Note 18, Heritage Assets. The overstatement was due to an out of date valuation report being used. We have no other matters to bring to your attention regarding the valuation of land and buildings and investment properties.

Financial Statement Audit (cont'd)

The key issues identified as part of our audit were as follows: (cont'd)

Other Key Findings	Conclusion
<p>Pension Liability Valuation</p> <p>The Local Authority Accounting Code of Practice and IAS19 require the Council to make extensive disclosures within its financial statements regarding its membership of the Local Government Pension Scheme administered by Durham County Council.</p> <p>The Council's pension fund deficit is a material estimated balance and the Code requires that this liability be disclosed on the Council's balance sheet. At 31 March 2020, this totalled £186.74m. The information disclosed is based on the IAS19 report issued to the Council by the actuary.</p> <p>Accounting for this scheme involves significant estimation and judgement and therefore management engages an actuary to undertake the calculations on their behalf. ISAs 500 and 540 requires us to undertake procedures on the use of management experts and the assumptions underlying fair value estimates.</p>	<p>We were satisfied that the required IAS 19 disclosures have been reflected in the financial statements and were based on accurate supporting information.</p>
<p>Group Accounting</p> <p>To assess if group accounting is required, the CIPFA Code requires an assessment of arrangements on a qualitative basis first, and then on a quantitative basis.</p> <p>Management should revisit the Group assessment annually, based on the most up-to-date information, to determine if the Group financial statements require additional entities to be incorporated within the consolidation.</p>	<p>We have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reviewed the Council's Group boundary assessment to ensure that it is complete and all Group entities have been identified;• Reviewed the Council's assessment of qualitative factors such as whether the Council is exposed to any commercial risk through its involvement with the potential Group entities, in order to ensure the assessment is appropriate; and• Tested the Council's quantitative assessment by agreeing all values included in the assessment to audited financial statements for each of the potential Group entities. <p>We have no other matters to bring to your attention relating to group accounts.</p>

Financial Statement Audit (cont'd)

The key issues identified as part of our audit were as follows: (cont'd)

Other Key Findings	Conclusion
<p>Going Concern Disclosure</p> <p>Covid-19 has created a number of financial pressures throughout Local Government. It is creating financial stress through a combination of increasing service demand leading to increased expenditure in specific services, and reductions in income sources.</p> <p>CIPFA's Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2019/20 states that organisations that can only be discontinued under statutory prescription shall prepare their accounts on a going concern basis.</p> <p>However, International Auditing Standard 570 Going Concern, as applied by Practice Note 10: Audit of financial statements of public sector bodies in the United Kingdom, still requires auditors to undertake sufficient and appropriate audit procedures to consider whether there is a material uncertainty on going concern that requires reporting by management within the financial statements, and within the auditor's report. We are obliged to report on such matters within the section of our audit report 'Conclusions relating to Going Concern'.</p> <p>To do this, the auditor must review management's assessment of the going concern basis applying IAS1 Presentation of Financial Statements.</p>	<p>We did not identify a material uncertainty in relation to Going Concern. We agree with management's assessment that the financial statements should be prepared on a going concern basis.</p>

Financial Statement Audit (cont'd)

Our application of materiality

When establishing our overall audit strategy, we determined a magnitude of uncorrected misstatements that we judged would be material for the financial statements as a whole.

Item	Thresholds applied
Planning materiality	We determined planning materiality to be £4.6m, which is 2% of gross operating expenditure. We consider gross operating expenditure to be one of the principal considerations for stakeholders in assessing the financial performance of the Council.
Reporting threshold	We agreed with the Audit Committee that we would report to the Committee all audit differences in excess of £0.232m.

We also identified the following areas where misstatement at a level lower than our overall materiality level might influence the reader. For these areas we developed an audit strategy specific to these areas. The areas identified and audit strategy applied include:

- ▶ Remuneration disclosures including any severance payments, exit packages and termination benefits: We agreed all disclosures back to source data and approved amounts.
- ▶ Related party transactions. We tested the completeness of related party disclosures and the accuracy of all disclosures by checking back to supporting evidence.

We evaluate any uncorrected misstatements against both the quantitative measures of materiality discussed above and in light of other relevant qualitative considerations.

A close-up photograph of a woman's face, focusing on her eyes and nose. She has light brown hair and green eyes. A bright yellow rectangular overlay is positioned on the left side of the image, partially covering her face. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and white.

Section 4

Value for Money

Value for Money

We are required to consider whether the Council has put in place 'proper arrangements' to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. This is known as our value for money conclusion.

Proper arrangements are defined by statutory guidance issued by the National Audit Office. They comprise your arrangements to:

- ▶ Take informed decisions;
- ▶ Deploy resources in a sustainable manner; and
- ▶ Work with partners and other third parties.

On 16 April 2020 the National Audit Office published an update to auditor guidance in relation to the 2019/20 Value for Money assessment in the light of Covid-19. This clarified that in undertaking the 2019/20 Value for Money assessment auditors should consider Local Authorities' response to Covid-19 only as far as it relates to the 2019-20 financial year; only where clear evidence comes to the auditor's attention of a significant failure in arrangements as a result of Covid-19 during the financial year, would it be appropriate to recognise a significant risk in relation to the 2019-20 VFM arrangements conclusion.

We identified one significant Value for Money risk which is covered on page 18.

We have performed the procedures outlined in our audit plan. We did not identify any significant weaknesses in the Council's arrangements to ensure it took properly informed decisions and deployed resources to achieve planned and sustainable outcomes for taxpayers and local people.



Value for Money (cont'd)

We therefore issued an unqualified value for money conclusion on 23 November 2020.

Significant Risk	Conclusion
<p>Financial Sustainability</p> <p>The Council continues to operate in a challenging financial environment. The main risks to the Council's finances are reductions in central government funding, increased reliance on locally raised taxes, increased budget pressures and increasing demands for services.</p> <p>In February 2020, the Council published its Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2020/21 to 2023/24.</p> <p>The plan includes £10.3m of net pressures, which includes delivery of savings totalling £12.9m, over the duration of the plan.</p> <p>There is therefore significant pressure on the Council's finances over the coming years. We note that the above plan does not incorporate the potential financial impact of Covid-19, due to the timing of its production.</p>	<p>The Council has successfully managed its financial resources during 2019/20, such that they achieved a surplus on provision of services of £17.691 million at the year end. Also, a small contribution (after accounting adjustments) was made to the general fund balance giving a closing balance of £18.368 million. This is considerably above the current risk assessed minimum working balance of £4.350 million.</p> <p>The Council has maintained a positive cash balance throughout the year and has a significant closing year end balance of £16.263 million.</p> <p>The affect of covid-19 on the Council's 2019/20 accounts was limited with the lockdown being imposed in the last week of the year (23rd March 2020). However, it is clear that the pandemic will have an adverse impact on the council's finances post 2020/21. We understand that work to establish the overall impact on the council is continuing and a revised Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) is due to be presented to Cabinet in December 20. In the current MTFP the Council's strategy has been to balance the budget going forward with the use of reserves and we understand that this will continue.</p> <p>We have reviewed information, such as Central Government guidance on cost pressures, to assess the completeness of the assessment for the remaining period. No areas have been identified that management have not taken into account.</p> <p>We have also reviewed and tested management's detailed cash flow forecast up to 30 November 2021. These forecasts demonstrate the Council will maintain a positive cash balance throughout 2020/21 and we are satisfied the Council have arrangements in place to monitor this going forwards.</p> <p>As a result of the procedures performed we are content that the Council has appropriate arrangements in place to manage its financial resources.</p>

A photograph of a business meeting in progress. Several people are gathered around a large wooden conference table, looking at documents. A woman with blonde hair is leaning forward, resting her chin on her hand, looking intently at the papers. Other people's hands and arms are visible, some pointing at the documents. The background is slightly blurred, showing a bright, modern office environment with large windows and greenery.

Section 5

Other Reporting Issues

Other Reporting Issues

Whole of Government Accounts

We are required to perform the procedures specified by the National Audit Office on the accuracy of the consolidation pack prepared by the Council for Whole of Government Accounts purposes.

The Council is below the specified audit threshold of £500mn. Therefore, we were not required to perform any audit procedures on the consolidation pack.

Annual Governance Statement

We are required to consider the completeness of disclosures in the Council's annual governance statement, identify any inconsistencies with the other information of which we are aware from our work, and consider whether it is misleading.

We completed this work and did not identify any areas of concern.

Report in the Public Interest

We have a duty under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 to consider whether, in the public interest, to report on any matter that comes to our attention in the course of the audit in order for it to be considered by the Council or brought to the attention of the public.

We did not identify any issues which required us to issue a report in the public interest.

Written Recommendations

We have a duty under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 to designate any audit recommendation as one that requires the Council to consider it at a public meeting and to decide what action to take in response.

We did not identify any issues which required us to issue a written recommendation.

Other Reporting Issues (cont'd)

Objections Received

We did not receive any objections to the 2019/20 financial statements from members of the public.

Other Powers and Duties

We identified no issues during our audit that required us to use our additional powers under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

Independence

We communicated our assessment of independence in our Audit Results Report to the Audit Committee on 18 November 2020. In our professional judgement the firm is independent and the objectivity of the audit engagement partner and audit staff has not been compromised within the meaning regulatory and professional requirements.

Control Themes and Observations

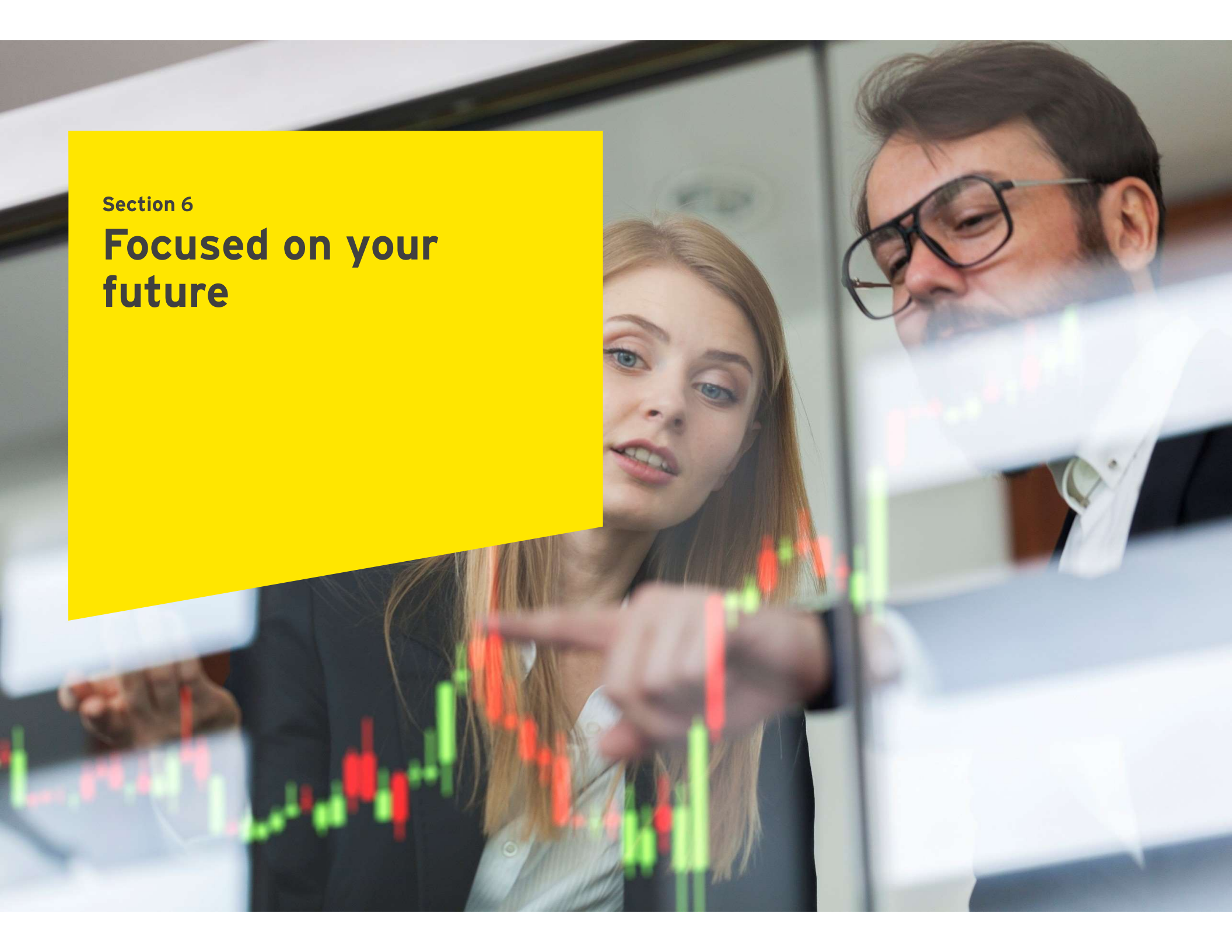
As part of our work, we obtained an understanding of internal control sufficient to plan our audit and determine the nature, timing and extent of testing performed. Although our audit was not designed to express an opinion on the effectiveness of internal control, we are required to communicate to you significant deficiencies in internal control identified during our audit.

We have adopted a fully substantive audit approach and have therefore not tested the operation of controls.

Our audit did not identify any controls issues to bring to the attention of the Audit Committee.

Section 6

Focused on your future



Focused on your future

The Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom introduces the application of new accounting standards in future years. The impact on the Council is summarised in the table below.

Standard	Issue	Impact
IFRS 16 Leases	<p>It is currently proposed that IFRS 16 will be applicable for local authority accounts from the 2021/22 financial year.</p> <p>Whilst the definition of a lease remains similar to the current leasing standard; IAS 17, for local authorities who lease a large number of assets the new standard will have a significant impact, with nearly all current leases being included on the balance sheet.</p> <p>There are transitional arrangements within the standard and although the 2020/21 Accounting Code of Practice for Local Authorities has yet to be updated, CIPFA have issued some limited provisional information which begins to clarify what the impact on local authority accounting will be. Whether any accounting statutory overrides will be introduced to mitigate any impact remains an outstanding issue.</p>	<p>Until the revised 2020/21 Accounting Code is issued and any statutory overrides are confirmed there remains some uncertainty in this area.</p> <p>However, what is clear is that the Council will need to undertake a detailed exercise to identify all of its leases and capture the relevant information for them. The Council must therefore ensure that all lease arrangements are fully documented.</p>



Section 8

Audit Fees

Audit Fees

Our fee for 2019/20 is in line with the scale fee set by the PSAA / as agreed with your in our Engagement Letter and reported in our 15 October 2020 Audit Results Report.

Description	Final Fee 2019/20 £	Planned Fee 2019/20 £	Scale Fee 2019/20 £
Audit Fee - Code work	71,813	71,813	71,813
Changes in work required to address professional and regulatory requirements and scope associated with risk (see Note 1)	25,087		
Additional specific one-off work required for Covid-19 considerations and current year errors (see Note 2)	13,317		
Total Audit Fee	110,217		
Non-audit work - Housing Benefits Subsidy Claim	10,500	10,500	
Non-audit work - Teachers' Pension Certification Work	5,500	5,500	
Non-audit work - Homes England Grant	4,000	4,000	
Non-audit work - Pooling of Capital Receipts	TBC	TBC	
Total Fees	TBC	TBC	

Note 1

For 2019/20 the scale fee has been re-assessed to take into account a number of risk factors as outlined below:

- Procedures performed to address the risk profile of Darlington Borough Council - £12,207
- Additional work to address increase in Regulatory standards - £12,880

This additional fee has been discussed with Management and is subject to review and approval by the PSAA Ltd.

Note 2

We have performed additional work as a result of Covid-19, particularly in respect of risk assessments, going concern consultations and the impact on asset valuations. Additionally, we have performed additional procedures which were required in respect of errors in heritage assets valuation in the draft accounts

This additional fee has been discussed with Management and is subject to review and approval by the PSAA Ltd.

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