



Audit Progress Report

Darlington Borough Council

10 July 2025

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This document is to be regarded as confidential to Darlington Borough Council. It has been prepared for the sole use of the Audit Committee as those charged with governance. No responsibility is accepted to any other person in respect of the whole or part of its contents.

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01

Audit update



01 Audit update

Purpose of this report

This report provides the Audit Committee with information about progress in delivering our responsibilities as your external auditors for Darlington Borough Council.

Audit for the year ending 31 March 2024

As reported at the Audit Committee previously, we received the signed accounts, annual governance statement and management letter of representation for 2023/24 in February 2025 and issued our audit report on the 2023/24 financial statements and our Auditor's Annual Report 2023/24 on 24 February 2025, ahead of the backstop date of 28 February 2025. Unfortunately, for the reasons previously explained to the Audit Committee, we issued a disclaimed audit opinion on the financial statements.

Members of the Audit Committee may be interested in the comparative data included on page 23 in respect of audit outcomes for 2023/24 nationally.

Audit for the year ending 31 March 2025

On 5 June 2025, critical guidance was issued by the National Audit Office which will assist audit firms in determining how to rebuild assurance so that there is a return to unqualified audit opinions as soon as is practicable (see page 26).

At the time of preparing this report, Forvis Mazars is assessing the guidance and what it will mean for our work in 2024/25 when disclaimed audit opinions have been previously issued, as is the case for Darlington Borough Council.

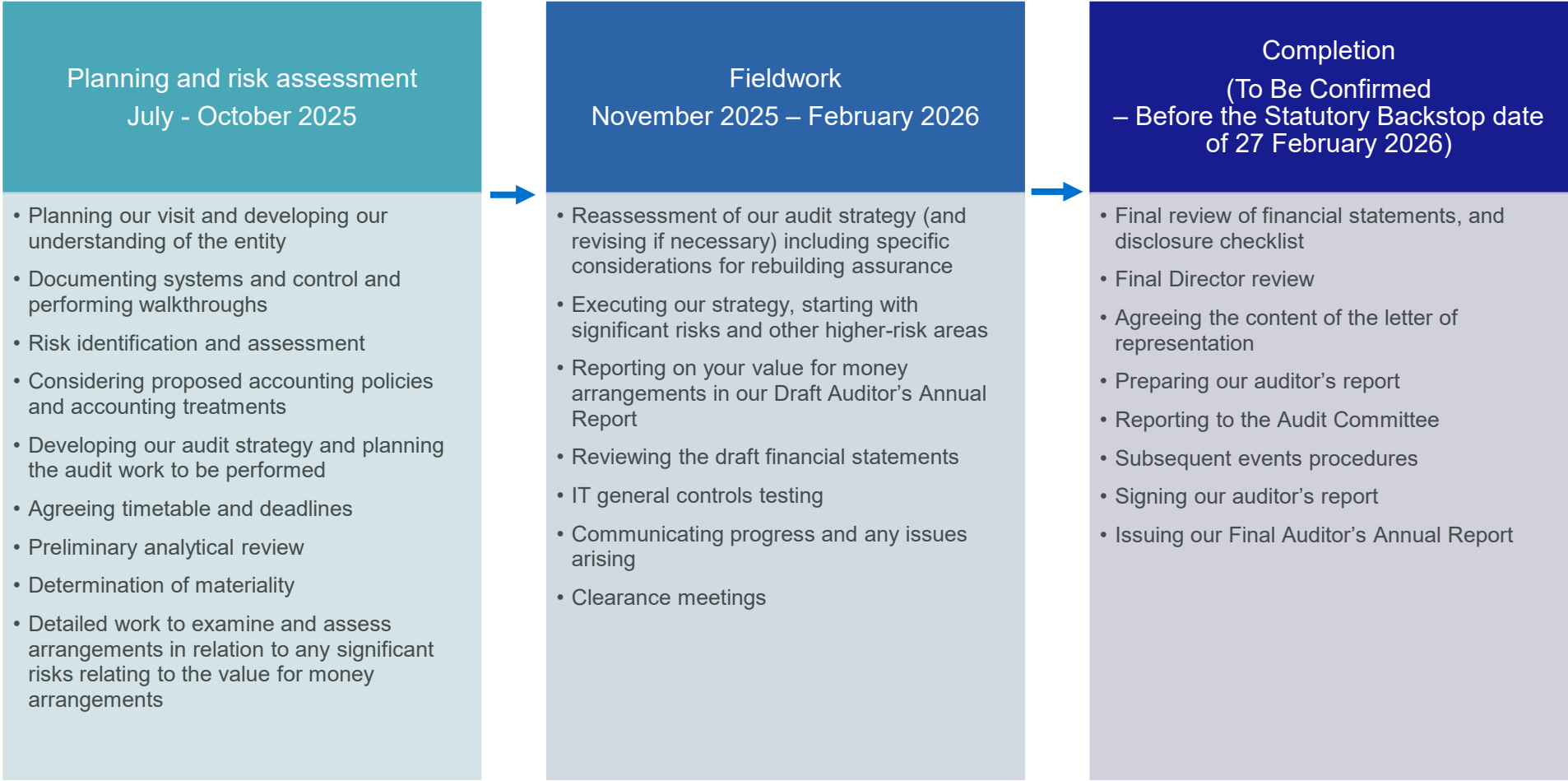
We will issue our Audit Strategy Memorandum 2024/25 when the guidance has been considered and we can set out our approach more fully. We anticipate reporting our Audit Strategy Memorandum 2024/25 to the next meeting of the Audit Committee.

We have set out an indicative timetable on the next page to indicate when our work is likely to be phased. The timetable also assumes that the Council is able to produce good quality draft financial statements for 2024/25 and supporting working papers and is also able to support the audit work on rebuilding assurance for the 2022/23 and 2023/24 audit years that will be required.

We anticipate that through our work on the 2024/25 financial statements we can make good progress on the rebuilding assurance process.

Audit scope, approach, and timeline

We will agree a timetable for the 2024/25 audit with the finance team to enable Darlington Borough Council to publish their audited 2024/25 statement of accounts by the statutory deadline of 27 February 2026. We have set out an initial timetable below in which we roughly expect to complete each phase of our audit:



02

Value for Money



02 Value for Money arrangements

The framework for value for money work

We are required to form a view as to whether Darlington Borough Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. The NAO issues guidance to auditors that underpins the work we are required to carry out in order to form our view and sets out the overall criterion and sub-criteria that we are required to consider.

This will be the first audit year where we are undertaking our value for money (VFM) work under the full 2024 Code of Audit Practice (the Code). Our responsibility remains to be satisfied that the Council has proper arrangements in place, and to report in the auditor's report where we are not satisfied that arrangements are in place. Where we have issued a recommendation in relation to a significant weaknesses this indicates we are not satisfied that arrangements are in place. Separately we provide a commentary on the Council's arrangements in the Auditor's Annual Report.

A key change in the 2024 Code of Audit Practice is the requirement for us to issue our Auditor's Annual Report for the year ending 31 March 2025 to you in draft by the 30 November 2025. This is required whether our audit is complete or not. Should our work not be complete, we will report the status of our work and any findings to up to that point (and since the issue of our previous Auditor's Annual Report).

Risks of significant weaknesses in arrangements

Our work will focus on the three criteria specified in the Audit Code: financial sustainability; governance; and improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Our VFM risk assessment process is continuous and will be updated throughout the audit process. We have not fully completed our planning and risk assessment work and we intend to report on this in our Audit Strategy Memorandum 2024/25 when it is finalised.

03

National publications and technical updates



National publications and technical updates

	Publication/update	Key points
Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy ('CIPFA')		
1	Audit Committee Update issue 41 – the local audit backstop	A guide for audit committee members at English local authorities to explain the local audit backstop arrangements. It covers key terms, dates, roles and responsibilities and how audit committee members can help. For information only.
2	CIPFA Consultation on updated guidance on the annual review and preparation of an annual governance statement	CIPFA has launched a consultation on its guidance on the annual review and preparation of the annual governance statements (AGS). For information only.
3	CIPFA Better Reporting Group consultation	CIPFA's Better Reporting Group (BRG) has been set up to identify and address challenges in local authority financial reporting. For information only.
4	CIPFA Advisory Note: Statement of Responsibilities	CIPFA has published an advisory note on the Chief Finance Officer's (CFO's) Statement of Responsibilities which provides guidance on informing the 'true and fair' assessment of the accounts at the reporting date. For information only.
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government ('MHCLG') (formerly the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities ('DLUHC'))		
5	Code of Audit Practice 2024: Explanatory memorandum	This explanatory memorandum has been prepared by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and laid before Parliament in accordance with the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. For information only.
6	MHCLG Addressing the local audit backlog in England: Non-compliance lists	MHCLG has published a list of local bodies that did not publish one or more audited accounts for financial years up to and including 2022 to 2023 by the statutory backstop date of 13 December 2024. For information only.
7	Local audit reform: a strategy for overhauling the local audit system in England	MHCLG has published its response to the consultation on local audit reform. This included making some additional commitments in response to the findings of the consultation. For information only.
National Audit Office ('NAO')		
8	NAO overview: The impact of fraud and error on public funds 2023-24	This report provides an introduction to the impact of fraud and error on public funds, how public bodies can tackle fraud and error, and the NAO's examination of the topic. It is intended to support the Committee of Public Accounts, and Members across the House in their examination of how government manages fraud and error and some of the things it could do to improve. For information only.

National publications and technical updates

	Publication/update	Key points
9	NAO report: Whole of Government Accounts 2022-23	The Whole of Government Accounts consolidates the accounts of over 10,000 public sector bodies to provide the most complete and accurate picture of the UK's public finances. For information only.
10	NAO insight: Financial management in government: monitoring and forecasting	This guide is for senior finance leaders in government departments and other public bodies. It sets out insights and good practice on monitoring and forecasting for better financial management in government. For information only.
11	NAO insight: Government's approach to technology suppliers: addressing the challenges	This report examines government's overall approach to digital and technology suppliers. It sets out lessons for the centre of government and departments to learn from government's approach to digital procurement. For information only.
12	NAO insight: Financial management in government: allocating resources	This guide is for senior finance leaders in government departments and other public bodies. It sets out insights and good practice on how to allocate resources for better financial management in government. For information only.
13	NAO report: Managing conflicts of interest: value for money	This report looks at the governance, systems and processes that public bodies have used to manage conflicts of interest. For information only.
14	NAO Report: Good practice in annual reporting	The NAO has published its insight guide on Good practice in annual reporting. For information only.
15	NAO report: Local government financial sustainability	The NAO has published its report Local government financial sustainability. For information only.
16	NAO Insight: Managing the commercial lifecycle	The NAO has published good practice guidance Managing the commercial lifecycle that has been updated in response to the implementation of the Procurement Act 2023. For information only.
Other		
17	Audit opinion data 2023/24	An update was provided on the delivery of audit opinions for 2023/24 against the backstop date of 28 February 2025. For information only.
18	ICAEW and LGPS Scheme Advisory Board launch LGPS informer	This document explains how the Local Government Pension Scheme ('LGPS') works in practice, and other key information. For information only.
19	Major Local Audits Reports	The FRC have published their annual report on their inspection findings of Audit Quality Reviews of Major Local Audits. For information only.

National publications and technical updates

	Publication/update	Key points
20	Forvis Mazars - Annual Local Government Risk Report 2025/26	The report deep dives into the known and emerging risks for Local Authorities in 2025/26, as well as what they should include in their internal audit plans. For information only.
21	Forvis Mazars – Public Sector in Focus Report	Forvis Mazars report for the public and social sector outlining the top priorities and risks shaping the future of the sector. For information only.

Latest update, 5 June 2025

	Publication/update	Key points
22	NAO: Publication of Local Audit Reset and Recovery Implementation Guidance (LARRIG) 06	Provides guidance to auditors on special considerations for rebuilding assurance for specified balances following backstop-related disclaimed audit opinions. For information only.

National publications and technical updates

CIPFA

1. Audit Committee Update issue 41 – the local audit backstop

A guide for audit committee members at English local authorities to explain the local audit backstop arrangements. It covers key terms, dates, roles and responsibilities and how audit committee members can help.

Link: [Audit Committee Update issue 41 – the local audit backstop](#)

2. CIPFA Consultation on updated guidance on the annual review and preparation of an annual governance statement

CIPFA has launched a consultation on its guidance on the annual review and preparation of the annual governance statements (AGS).

The consultation is on a proposed Addendum to the current AGS guidance within Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework (Governance Framework) (CIPFA and Solace, 2016). The purpose of the Addendum is to reflect the changes affecting governance in local government bodies since 2016, encourage robust reviews of governance arrangements and improve accountability to stakeholders, including local communities.

The consultation is applicable to all local government bodies that undertake an annual review and publish an AGS in accordance with the appropriate national regulations and the 2016 Framework. It is also relevant to external auditors and the stakeholders of local authorities.

Link: [Consultation on updated guidance on the annual review](#)

National publications and technical updates

CIPFA

3. CIPFA Better Reporting Group consultation

CIPFA's Better Reporting Group (BRG) has been set up to identify and address challenges in local authority financial reporting either through proposing amendments to the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting for the United Kingdom (the Code) or assisting to develop practical guidance to enhance its application.

Link: [Better Reporting Group](#)

4. CIPFA Advisory Note: Statement of Responsibilities

CIPFA has published an advisory note on the Chief Finance Officer's (CFO's) Statement of Responsibilities which provides guidance on informing the 'true and fair' assessment of the accounts at the reporting date. The advisory note applies to all local government bodies in the UK.

The note draws from lessons learnt from recent examples and a roundtable with CFO's and reinforces good practice principles that local government bodies in the UK should adopt. The CIPFA Practice Oversight Panel expects all local government bodies to be aware of the lessons learnt and therefore auditors may wish to ensure the bodies they audit are aware of this latest guidance.

Link: [Statement of Responsibilities](#)

National publications and technical updates

MHCLG

5. Code of Audit Practice 2024: Explanatory memorandum

The draft Code of Audit Practice 2024 has been developed by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) and laid in Parliament on his behalf by the government. The government has produced this accompanying explanatory memorandum.

The changes in the Code are part of wider measures to address the significant backlog of unaudited local body accounts in England. This backlog affects non-NHS bodies within the Code's remit including local authorities, National Park authorities, fire authorities, police and crime commissioners, waste authorities and transport authorities

Link: [Code of Audit Practice 2024: Explanatory memorandum](#)

6. MHCLG Addressing the local audit backlog in England: Non-compliance lists

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has published a list of local bodies that did not publish one or more audited accounts for financial years up to and including 2022 to 2023 by the statutory backstop date of 13 December 2024.

Link: [Addressing the local audit backlog in England: Non-compliance lists - GOV.UK](#)

National publications and technical updates

MHCLG

5. Code of Audit Practice 2024: Explanatory memorandum

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Link: [Code of Audit Practice 2024: Explanatory memorandum](#)

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Link: [Addressing the local audit backlog in England: Non-compliance lists - GOV.UK](#)

National publications and technical updates

MHCLG

7. Local audit reform: a strategy for overhauling the local audit system in England

Extracts from Press Release on 9 April 2025:

Road to recovery outlined in new commitments for local audit reform to streamline and fix the fragmented and broken system

New reforms to repair the 'broken' local audit system will boost taxpayers' confidence in council spending and streamline the sector so it's fit-for-purpose, legal and decent.

Today, 16 commitments have been set out to achieve this, including simplifying financial reporting requirements and increasing capacity to avoid reliance on a small number of auditors.

The reforms will be backed by up to £49 million of support to help councils clear their backlogs and cover the additional cost of restoring audit assurance. Releasing funds to councils will be reliant on compliance with statutory backstops and linked to the publication of audited accounts and audit fees being paid.

In addition, a further £15m of grant was paid to local bodies in March 2025 as part of an existing package to help meet the wider costs of meeting audit requirements and fees.

The 16 new measures follow an [open consultation](#) on the local audit strategy, which attracted hundreds of responses.

The measures build on an existing commitment to set up the Local Audit Office as an independent and unified body, which will stop fragmentation in the system by co-ordinating functions spread across different organisations including the Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd, the National Audit Office and the Financial Reporting Council.

These reforms will be crucial to fixing the foundations and bringing long-term stability to local government as committed in the Plan for Change.

Link: [Overhaul of local audit will restore trust in broken system - GOV.UK](#)

National publications and technical updates

NAO

8. NAO overview: The impact of fraud and error on public funds 2023-24

This report provides an introduction to the impact of fraud and error on public funds, how public bodies can tackle fraud and error, and the NAO's examination of the topic. It is intended to support the Committee of Public Accounts, and Members across the House in their examination of how government manages fraud and error and some of the things it could do to improve.

This overview summarises the key information and insights from our work. It includes:

- what we mean by fraud and error, and how government is structured to tackle it
- the fraud and error risk management cycle
- fraud and error against government, including in benefits, taxes and COVID-19 fraud
- emerging threats and opportunities
- what to look out for when thinking about fraud and error.

Link: [The impact of fraud and error on public funds 2023-24](#)

9. NAO report: Whole of Government Accounts 2022-23

The Whole of Government Accounts consolidates the accounts of over 10,000 public sector bodies, including central and local government and public corporations such as the Bank of England, to provide the most complete and accurate picture of the UK's public finances.

Link: [Whole of Government Accounts 2022-23](#)

National publications and technical updates

NAO

10. NAO insight: Financial management in government: monitoring and forecasting

Good financial management is critical in the public sector. For public services to be efficient and productive, the effective management of public finances is essential. This guide outlines how finance leaders across government can monitor budgets and their performance and ensure forecasting is effective. It focuses on three principles:

- Promote a culture of accountability – leadership emphasises the importance of budget holders being accountable for monitoring financial performance and ensuring forecasts are accurate and realistic.
- Develop the right skills and capabilities – finance professionals possess the skills and capabilities to monitor effectively and forecast with precision and leverage these to elevate the quality of the organisation's decision-making.
- Make the best use of data and information – high-quality data and information is used to enable better monitoring and more accurate forecasting, helping decision-makers respond to events quickly and effectively.

Link: [Financial management in government: monitoring and forecasting](#)

11. NAO insight: Government's approach to technology suppliers: addressing the challenges

This report examines government's overall approach to digital and technology suppliers. It sets out lessons for the centre of government and departments to learn from government's approach to digital procurement. The NAO focus on major procurement of technology to support business change, including the digital transformation of government and planning for technology of the future. The report examines:

- the scale of the challenge of undertaking digital procurement in a way that supports the modernisation of the public sector to make it more efficient and effective, and government's response to that challenge;
- how the centre of government can adopt a more strategic approach to how it works with digital and technology suppliers; and
- how departments can better understand and manage the complexities of digital procurement, including making full use of their digital expertise.

Link: [Government's approach to technology suppliers: addressing the challenges](#)

National publications and technical updates

NAO

12. NAO insight: Financial management in government: allocating resources

This guide outlines how finance leaders across government can allocate resources effectively when resources are scarce and trade-offs need to be made. It focuses on three principles:

- Using information intelligently an organisation should use trusted and objective information intelligently, so it can allocate resources to support strategic objectives.
- Prioritising effectively – finance leaders should support decision makers to make difficult decisions and trade-offs to generate good value-for-money outcomes based on agreed priorities.
- Building for the long term – decisions need to balance short-term pressures with long-term priorities and align with the strategic objectives of the organisation.

Link: [Financial management in government: allocating resources](#)

13. NAO report: Managing conflicts of interest: value for money

This report looks at the governance, systems and processes that public bodies have used to manage conflicts of interest. It aims to answer the following questions:

- Is central government guidance effective in supporting public bodies to manage conflicts of interest?
- Do public bodies have effective and proportionate governance, systems and controls over the management of conflicts of interest?
- Have public bodies done enough to set a culture where conflicts are managed properly?

Link: [Managing conflicts of interest: value for money](#)

National publications and technical updates

NAO

14. NAO Report: Good practice in annual reporting

The NAO has published its insight guide on Good practice in annual reporting which showcases real-world examples of good practice for annual reporting from organisations from the public sector who are leading the way. The examples are laid out in relevant sections of an annual report:

- Strategy
- Risk
- Operations
- Governance
- Measures of success
- Financial performance
- External factors

The list is not definitive but should provide ideas on content and format for all bodies in both the public and private sector as they plan their annual reporting for 2024-25. Note that Great Ormond Street Hospital annual report and accounts 2023-24 features for use of graphics to support narrative and demonstrate performance regarding net zero for estate-based emissions.

Link: [Good practice in annual reporting - NAO insight](#)

National publications and technical updates

NAO

15. NAO report: Local government financial sustainability

The NAO has published its report Local government financial sustainability. The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, (MHCLG) is responsible for the accountability framework for local government and distributes core funding to local authorities. It leads on oversight of financial risk in individual local authorities and the system overall while responsibility for the services local authorities deliver is spread across government departments.

This report focuses on MHCLG as the department responsible for the framework within which local authorities operate, and provides transparency over the current position of local government finances. By examining the current finance system and context for local government finances, the NAO aims to help inform MHCLG's consideration of future reforms.

The report considers:

- the context of local government finances in 2024;
- service and financial pressures; and
- the government's approach to local government financial sustainability.

The report concludes that funding for local government has increased in recent years, reversing the long-term downward trend of the previous decade. However, while real terms funding has grown by 4% between 2015-16 and 2023-24, it has not kept pace with population growth or the demand for services, the complexity of need, or the cost of delivering services to people most in need of support.

Proposed reforms of the local government finance system have been repeatedly delayed. Some services are showing the strain, and more local authorities are requesting financial support, some due to the increasing costs of delivering essential frontline services such as homelessness and social care. Despite short-term measures to address acute funding shortfalls, there has been insufficient action to address the systemic weaknesses in local government financial sustainability.

As the government turns its attention to local government reforms, it is essential that this is part of a whole-system, cross-government approach to ensure local authorities are financially sustainable and can continue to provide essential services. This approach needs to ensure effective local accountability for the service and financial performance of each local authority, including robust independent assurance.

Link: [Local government financial sustainability - NAO report](#)

National publications and technical updates

NAO

16. NAO Insight: Managing the commercial lifecycle

The NAO has published good practice guidance Managing the commercial lifecycle that has been updated in response to the implementation of the Procurement Act 2023. It reflects upon findings and recommendations drawn from 200 reports concerning over 300 commercial arrangements that have been published over the past 20 years.

The 'commercial lifecycle' means the entire process starting with the identification of a requirement that may be delivered by a supplier to government through to the selection and appointment process, contract management activity, and ending with contract termination or transition to alternative arrangements.

This is a revised and condensed edition of commercial good practice guidance that has been updated regularly since 2008. It remains essential reading for policy and commercial staff involved at all levels of public procurement and commercial activities – including senior leaders and non-executive board members of public authorities. The guidance is presented in ten sections, addressing both strategic and procedural considerations.

To support this guidance, the NAO also updated its guide on the Commercial Audit Framework, which highlights the key questions at each of the ten key stages of procurement. Whether it's the commercial strategy for public procurement, the publication of good-quality, relevant information on a timely basis, or deciding whether to extend the contract or re-procure.

Link: [Managing the commercial lifecycle - NAO insight](#)

National publications and technical updates

Other

17. Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) News - Audit opinion data 2023/24

Extract from PSAA Press Release on 11 March 2025

Auditors have reported issuing **224** disclaimed or qualified opinions due to the backstop of 28 February 2025 for the 2023/24 audits of accounts covered by PSAA’s appointing person scheme.

There were **7** modified opinions that auditors have not attributed to the backstop, including **2** disclaimed opinions.

There are a further **48** opinions that remain outstanding. This includes **6** authorities where there is an exemption due to a material objection or legal matter or due to VFM arrangements work.

Audit Opinion for 2023/24	Number	Percentage
Unmodified	174	37.9%
Unmodified with additional disclosures*	6	1.3%
Disclaimed (backstop)	216	47.1%
Qualified (backstop)*	8	1.7%
Disclaimed (non-backstop)	2	0.4%
Qualified (non-backstop)*	5	1.1%
Not yet delivered	48	10.5%
Total	459	100%

Link: [Press release: Local government audit opinion data - PSAA](#)

National publications and technical updates

Other

18. ICAEW and LGPS Scheme Advisory Board launch LGPS informer

This document explains:

- how the Local Government Pension Scheme works in practice;
- key information flows between employing bodies, pension funds and actuaries;
- the content and purpose of annual accounting reports and triennial valuations;
- key accounting requirements for employing bodies; and
- the role of external auditors.

Link: [ICAEW and LGPS Scheme Advisory Board launch LGPS informer](#)

19. Major Local Audits Reports

The FRC publish an annual report on the inspection findings of Audit Quality Reviews of major local audits in England, which includes large health and local government bodies. The audit of a relevant authority becomes a major local audit if it:

- has total income or expenditure of at least £500 million; or
- administers a local government pension scheme with at least 20,000 members or assets over £1,000 million.

In the 2023/24 inspection cycle, the FRC inspected six NHS and two local government audits. The results of these inspections are included in this report. The FRC acknowledge the unprecedented circumstances facing the local audit sector and have updated their regulatory approach to the monitoring of audit quality to support the reset measures and recovery period.

Link: [Major Local Audits Reports](#)

National publications and technical updates

Other

20. Forvis Mazars - Annual Local Government Risk Report 2025/26

The report deep dives into the known and emerging risks for Local Authorities in 2025/26, as well as what they should include in their internal audit plans.

Link: [Annual Local Government Risk Report for 2025/26](#)

21. Forvis Mazars – Public Sector in Focus Report

Forvis Mazars have issued a report for the public and social sector, Public sector in focus: Charting the road ahead. With over 390 responses from across the UK public and social sector, the study reveals the top priorities and risks shaping the future of the sector.

Link: [Public sector in focus: Charting the road ahead - Forvis Mazars - United Kingdom](#)

National publications and technical updates

Latest update, 5 June 2025

22. NAO: Publication of Local Audit Reset and Recovery Implementation Guidance (LARRIG) 06

Special considerations for rebuilding assurance for specified balances following backstop-related disclaimed audit opinion

This LARRIG, endorsed by the FRC, sets out guidance to auditors where the auditor's opinion on the prior year financial statements has been disclaimed because of backstop arrangements included in the Accounts and Audit (Amendment) Regulations 2024. Its purpose is to assist auditors in the process of rebuilding assurance for specific classes of transactions, account balances and disclosures which warrant special consideration beyond the general principles set out in LARRIG 05.

This guidance is critical where authorities have been subject to a disclaimed opinion in one or more previous years.

Link: [Guidance and information for auditors - National Audit Office \(NAO\)](#)

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