

Central Bedfordshire Council

COUNCIL

Thursday, 21 July 2016

Appointment of the Council's External Auditors following the Expiry of the Current Contract

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Purpose of this report

This report outlines the discussion held at the Audit Committee on 27 June 2016 on changes to the arrangements for appointing external auditors following the closure of the Audit Commission and the end of the transitional arrangements at the conclusion of the 2017/18 audits. The options available for arranging the first appointment of an external auditor by 31 December 2017 are set out and the Council's approval of the Audit Committee's preferred approach is sought.

Schedule 3, paragraph 1 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 states that full Council is required to appoint the new external auditor. At this point, the Audit Committee is recommending to full Council a preferred approach for adoption. However, the preferred approach is subject to any final decision being made by full Council at a future meeting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Council is asked to:

1. Approve the Audit Committee's preferred approach of opting in to a procurement of external audit services through a Sector Led Body;
2. Note that officers will notify the Local Government Association of the decision taken;

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| <p>3 Note that any recommendation on the final approach to be taken on this matter will be submitted to full Council for approval at a later date.</p> |
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Overview and Scrutiny Comments/Recommendations

1. The report has not been considered by Overview and Scrutiny because, under its existing terms of reference, the Audit Committee has general responsibilities regarding the work and appointment of the Council's external auditor.

Background

2. On 27 June 2016 the Audit Committee considered a report which explained how the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 brought to a close the Audit Commission and established transitional arrangements for the appointment of external auditors and the setting of audit fees for all local government and NHS bodies in England. On 5 October 2015 the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government determined that the transitional arrangements for local government bodies would be extended by one year to also include the audit of the accounts for 2017/18.
3. Members were aware that the Council's current external auditor was Ernst and Young LLP, this appointment having been made under a contract let by the Audit Commission. Following the closure of the Audit Commission the contract was managed by Public Sector Audit Appointments Limited, the transitional body set up by the Local Government Association (LGA) with delegated authority from the Secretary of State.
4. The Audit Committee was advised that when the current transitional arrangements came to an end on 31 March 2018 the Council would be able to move to the local appointment of its external auditor. There were a number of options by which this could be achieved, each with varying risks and opportunities. The three broad options are set out in paragraph 6 below. In addition the Committee noted that the current fees charged by external auditors were based on discounted rates offered by the firms in return for substantial market share. When the contracts were last negotiated nationally by the Audit Commission they covered NHS and local government bodies and offered maximum economies of scale. The meeting was advised that the LGA believed the fees would rise after the current contracts ended.
5. The Audit Committee noted that the scope of the audit would still be specified nationally, the National Audit Office (NAO) being responsible for writing the Code of Audit Practice which all firms appointed to carry out the Council's audit must follow. Not all accounting firms would be eligible to compete for the work: they would need to demonstrate that

they have the required skills and experience and be registered with a Registered Supervising Body approved by the Financial Reporting Council. The registration process had not yet commenced and so the number of firms was not known but it was expected that the list of eligible firms may include the top 10 or 12 firms in the country, including the Council's current auditor. It was unlikely that small local independent firms would meet the eligibility criteria.

The Options Available

6. There were three broad options open to the Council under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the Act):

Option 1 To make a stand-alone appointment

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

Advantages/benefit

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

Disadvantages/risks

- b Recruitment and servicing of the Auditor Panel, running the bidding exercise and negotiating the contract is estimated by the LGA to cost in the order of £15,000 plus on going expenses and allowances.
- c The Council will not be able to take advantage of reduced fees that may be available through joint or national procurement contracts, and is therefore likely to end up paying significantly higher fees.
- d The assessment of bids and decision on awarding contracts will be taken by independent appointees and not solely by elected Members.

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

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

Advantages/benefits

- a The costs of setting up the panel, running the bidding exercise and negotiating the contract will be shared across a number of authorities.
- b There is greater opportunity for negotiating some economies of scale by being able to offer a larger combined contract value to the firms.

Disadvantages/risks

- c The decision making body will be further removed from local input, with potentially no input from elected Members where a wholly independent auditor panel is used or possibly only one elected Member representing each Council, depending on the constitution agreed with the other bodies involved.
- d The choice of auditor could be complicated where individual Councils have independence issues. An independence issue occurs where the auditor has recently or is currently carrying out work such as consultancy or advisory work for the Council. Where this occurs some auditors may be prevented from being appointed by the terms of their professional standards. There is a risk that if the joint auditor panel choose a firm that is conflicted for this Council then the Council may still need to make a separate appointment with all the attendant costs and loss of economies possible through joint procurement.
- e Even if the Council joins with one or more other local authorities, it will still not be able to offer the scale of appointment that would be available on a nation wide process. It would therefore be likely to incur higher fees than under option 3 below.

Option 3 Opt-in to a sector led body

In response to the consultation on the new arrangement the LGA had successfully lobbied for Councils to be able to 'opt-in' to a Sector Led Body (SLB) appointed by the Secretary of State under the Act. An SLB would have the ability to negotiate contracts with the firms nationally, maximising the opportunities for the most economic and efficient approach to procurement of external audit on behalf of the whole sector. At this stage, the length of such contracts has yet to be determined. However, the audit contracts between the SLB and the audit firms will require firms to deliver audits compliant with the NAO Code of Audit Practice.

Advantages/benefits

- a The costs of setting up the appointment arrangements and negotiating fees would be shared across all opt-in authorities, thus minimising the cost to each individual authority.
- b By offering large contract values the firms would be able to offer better rates and lower fees than are likely to result from local negotiation.
- c Any conflicts at individual authorities would be managed by the SLB who would have a number of contracted firms to call upon.
- d The appointment process would not be ceded to locally appointed independent members. Instead a separate body set up to act in the collective interests of the 'opt-in' authorities. The LGA are considering setting up such a body utilising the knowledge and experience acquired through the setting up of the transitional arrangements.

Disadvantages/risks

- e Individual elected Members will have less opportunity for direct involvement in the appointment process other than through the LGA and/or stakeholder representative groups.
 - f In order for the SLB to be viable and to be placed in the strongest possible negotiating position the SLB will need Councils to indicate their intention to opt-in before final contract prices are known.
7. The Committee noted that the LGA were working on developing an SLB. In a recent survey, 58% of respondents had expressed an interest in this option. The greatest economies of scale would come from the maximum number of councils acting collectively and opting-in to a SLB.
8. It was the recommendation of the officers that option 3 should be adopted and this was the option subsequently approved by the Audit Committee. In order to strengthen the LGA's negotiating position and

enable it to more accurately evaluate the offering the Council is therefore asked to approve the Committee's approved approach of opting in to a SLB. However, a formal decision on whether or not to definitely opt-in will be required at a later stage.

Reason/s for decision

9. The Council has until December 2017 to make an appointment. In practical terms this means one of the options outlined above will need to be in place by spring 2017 in order that the contract negotiation process can be carried out during 2017.

Council Priorities

10. This report does not directly support the Council's priorities but meets the requirements of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

Corporate Implications

Legal Implications

11. Section 7 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the Act) requires a relevant authority to appoint a local auditor to audit its accounts for a financial year not later than 31 December in the preceding year. Section 8 governs the procedure for appointment including that the authority must consult and take account of the advice of its auditor panel on the selection and appointment of a local auditor. Section 8 and Schedule 3 provides that where a relevant authority is a local authority operating executive arrangements, the function of appointing a local auditor to audit its accounts is not the responsibility of an executive of the authority under those arrangements;
12. Section 12 makes provision for the failure to appoint a local auditor: the authority must immediately inform the Secretary of State, who may direct the authority to appoint the auditor named in the direction or appoint a local auditor on behalf of the authority.
13. Section 17 gives the Secretary of State the power to make regulations in relation to an 'appointing person' specified by the Secretary of State. This power has been exercised in the Local Audit (Appointing Person) Regulations 2015 (SI 192) and this gives the Secretary of State the ability to enable a Sector Led Body to become the appointing person.

Financial and Risk Implications

14. The LGA considers that current external fees levels are likely to increase when the current contracts end in 2018.
15. The cost of establishing a local or joint Auditor Panel outlined in options 1 and 2 above will include:

- the cost of recruiting independent appointees (members),
- servicing the Panel,
- running a bidding and tender evaluation process,
- letting a contract and
- paying Panel members' fees and allowances.

These costs are not currently reflected within the Council's budget.

16. Opting-in to a national SLB provides maximum opportunity to limit the extent of any increases by entering in to a large scale collective procurement arrangements and would remove the costs of establishing an auditor panel.

Equalities Implications

17. None directly from this report.

Risk Management

18. There is no immediate risk to the Council; however, early consideration by the Council of its preferred approach will enable detailed planning to take place so as to achieve successful transition to the new arrangement in a timely and efficient manner.
19. Providing the LGA with a realistic assessment of the Council's likely way forward will enable the LGA to invest in developing appropriate arrangements to support the Council.

Conclusion and next Steps

20. The Council will need to take action to implement new arrangements for the appointment of an external auditor from April 2018. The Council has been asked by the LGA for an indication of the preferred approach in order that it can invest resources in providing appropriate support to Councils. The LGA is strongly supportive of the SLB approach as it believes this offers best value to councils by reducing set-up costs and having to potential to negotiate lowest fees.

Appendices

None

Background Papers

None