



New Forest National
Park Authority

External Audit Update

February 2024



New Forest National Park Authority,
Lymington Town Hall,
Avenue Road,
Lymington,
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29 February 2024

Dear Authority Members

External Audit Update

The purpose of this report is to provide Authority Members with an overview of the current status of the Authority's audit for 2022/23 and our plans for the 2023/24 year. This report is a key mechanism in ensuring that our audit is aligned with the Authority's service expectations.

Our audit is undertaken in accordance with the requirements of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014, the National Audit Office's 2020 Code of Audit Practice, the Statement of Responsibilities issued by Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) Ltd, auditing standards and other professional requirements.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss this report with you as well as understand whether there are other matters which you consider may influence our audits.

Yours faithfully,

Simon Mathers

For and on behalf of Ernst & Young LLP

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Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd (PSAA) issued the “Statement of responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies”. It is available from the PSAA website (<https://www.psa.co.uk/managing-audit-quality/statement-of-responsibilities-of-auditors-and-audited-bodies/statement-of-responsibilities-of-auditors-and-audited-bodies-from-2023-24-audits/>). The 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 and further guidance (updated July 2021)” issued by the PSAA (<https://www.psa.co.uk/managing-audit-quality/terms-of-appointment/terms-of-appointment-and-further-guidance-1-july-2021/>) 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 in legislation, and covers matters of practice and procedure which are of a recurring nature.


This report is made solely to the Authority Members and management of New Forest National Park Authority. Our work has been undertaken so that we might state to the Authority Members and management of New Forest National Park Authority those matters we are required to state to them in this report and for no other purpose. To the fullest extent permitted by law we do not accept or assume responsibility to anyone other than the Authority Members and management of New Forest National Park Authority for this report or for the opinions we have formed. It should not be provided to any third-party without our prior written consent.



01

Progress Update – 2022/23 and 2023/24 audits





Context for the 2022/23 and 2023/24 audits

Context for the 2022/23 and 2023/24 audits – Department for Levelling-up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and Financial Reporting Council (FRC) measures to address local audit delays

Timely, high-quality financial reporting and audit of local bodies is a vital part of our democratic system. It supports good decision making by local bodies and ensures transparency and accountability to local taxpayers. There is general agreement that the backlog in the publication of audited accounts by local bodies has grown to an unacceptable level and there is a clear recognition that all stakeholders in the sector will need to work together to address this. DLUHC has worked collaboratively with the FRC, as incoming shadow system leader, and other system partners, to develop measures to clear the backlog. The proposals, which have been developed to maintain auditor independence and enable compliance with International Standards on Auditing (UK) (ISAs (UK)), consist of three phases:

Phase 1: Reset involving clearing the backlog of historic audit opinions up to and including financial year 2022/23 by 30 September 2024.

Phase 2: Recovery from Phase 1 in a way that does not cause a recurrence of the backlog by using backstop dates to allow assurance to be rebuilt over multiple audit cycles.

Phase 3: Reform involving addressing systemic challenges in the local audit system and embedding timely financial reporting and audit.


To support the further development and testing of the measures, consultations are taking place to receive further feedback and inform the decision on how to proceed. Specifically:

- DLUHC has launched a consultation on changes to the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 to insert statutory backstop dates for historic accounts and for the financial years 2023/24 to 2027/28.
- The National Audit Office (NAO) has launched a consultation on amending the Code of Audit Practice to:
 - Require auditors to issue audit opinions according to statutory backstop data for historic audits, and place specific duties on auditors to co-operate during the handover period for the new PSAA contract for the appointment of local authority auditors covering the years 2023/24 to 2027/28.
 - Allow auditors to produce a single value for money commentary for the period to 2022/23 and use statutory reporting powers to draw significant matters to the attention of authorities and residents.
- The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) has launched a consultation on temporary changes to the accounting code for preparation of the accounts. The proposed temporary changes to the financial reporting framework have an impact on both how the accounts are prepared and our audit procedures necessary to gain assurance.

Impact on 2022/23 and 2023/24 financial statements audits

To allow for timely reset of the audit of the Authority we have focused our resources on discharging our value for money reporting requirements for 2022/23 and planning the 2023/24 audit. As a result of the likely backstop date and our decision to prioritise 2023/24 work to allow for a reset we expect to disclaim the opinion on the Authority's 2022/23 accounts. Our proposed disclaimer of the Authority's 2022/23 accounts will impact both the audit procedures we need to undertake to gain assurance on the 2023/24 financial statements and the form of our audit report in 2023/24 and subsequent years during the recovery phase.

The changes proposed by the consultations therefore have a significant impact on both the scope of the 2023/24 audit and our assessment of risk. We will continue to provide updates to the Authority as the audit progresses and our final assessment on the scope and nature of procedures we will undertake becomes clearer.



Context for the 2022/23 and 2023/24 audits

Responsibilities of Authority management and those charged with governance

For the planned measures to be successful and the current backlog to be addressed it is vital that all stakeholders properly discharge their responsibilities.

The Authority's Section 151 Officer is responsible for preparing the statement of accounts in accordance with proper practices and confirming they give a true and fair view of the financial position at the reporting date and of its expenditure and income for the year ended 31 March 2024. To allow the audit to be completed on a timely and efficient basis it is essential that the financial statements are supported by high quality working papers and audit evidence and that Authority resources are readily available to support the audit process, within agreed deadlines. The Authority, as the body charged with governance, has an essential role in ensuring that it has assurance over both the quality of the draft financial statements prepared by management and the Authority's wider arrangements to support the delivery of a timely and efficient audit. Where this is not done, we will:

- Consider and report on the adequacy of the Authority's external financial reporting arrangements as part of our assessment of Value for Money arrangements.
- Consider the use of other statutory reporting powers to draw attention to weaknesses in Authority financial reporting arrangements where we consider it necessary to do so.
- Seek a fee variation for the cost of additional resources needed to discharge our responsibilities. We have set out this and other factors that will lead to a fee variation in Section 04 of this report. We also include paragraphs 26-28 of PSAA's Statement of Responsibilities, which clearly set out what is expected of audited bodies in preparing their financial statements, in full at Section 03 of this report.




02 Overview of our 2023/24 audit strategy

Overview of our 2023/24 audit strategy

The following 'dashboard' summarises the significant accounting and auditing matters we expect to include within our Audit Planning Report. It seeks to provide the Authority with an overview of our initial risk identification for the upcoming audit and any changes in risks identified in the current year.

Audit risks and areas of focus

Risk/area of focus	Risk identified	Change from PY	Details
Misstatements due to fraud or error	Fraud risk	No change in risk or focus	There is a risk that the financial statements as a whole are not free from material misstatement whether caused by fraud or error. We perform mandatory procedures regardless of specifically identified fraud risks.
Inappropriate capitalisation of revenue expenditure	Fraud risk	No change in risk or focus	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. We have assessed that this risk is most likely to occur through the inappropriate capitalisation of revenue expenditure.
Pension Liability/Asset Valuation	Inherent risk	No change in risk or focus	The Local Authority Accounting Code of Practice and IAS19 require the Authority to make extensive disclosures within its financial statements regarding its membership of the Local Government Pension Scheme. Accounting for this scheme involves significant estimation and judgement and therefore management engages an actuary to undertake the calculations on their behalf. ISAs (UK) 500 and 540 require us to undertake procedures on the use of the management experts and assumptions underlying fair value estimates.



Overview of our 2023/24 audit strategy

Audit scope

We plan to provide you with:

- ▶ Our audit opinion on whether the financial statements of the Authority give a true and fair view of the financial position as at 31 March 2024 and of the income and expenditure for the year then ended; and
- ▶ Our commentary on your arrangements to secure value for money in your use of resources for the relevant period.

We will also review and report to the National Audit Office (NAO), to the extent and in the form required by them, on the Authority's Whole of Government Accounts return.

Our audit will also include the mandatory procedures that we are required to perform in accordance with applicable laws and auditing standards.

When planning the audit we take into account several key inputs:

- ▶ Strategic, operational and financial risks relevant to the financial statements;
- ▶ Developments in financial reporting and auditing standards;
- ▶ The quality of systems and processes;
- ▶ Changes in the business and regulatory environment; and,
- ▶ Management's views on all of the above.

By considering these inputs, our audit is focused on the areas that matter and our feedback is more likely to be relevant to the Authority.

Taking the above into account, our professional responsibilities require us to independently assess the risks associated with providing an audit opinion and undertake appropriate procedures in response to those risks. Our Terms of Appointment with PSAA allow them to vary the fee dependent on "the auditors assessment of risk and the work needed to meet their professional responsibilities". Therefore to the extent any of these or any other risks are relevant in the context of the Authority's audit, and we will continue to discuss these with management as to the impact on the scale fee.

Audit process and strategy

Audit scope (cont'd)

Department for Levelling-up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and Financial Reporting Council (FRC) measures to address local audit delays

The changes proposed by the consultations are likely to have a significant impact on both the scope of the 2023/24 audit and our assessment of risk. We will continue to provide updates to the Authority as the audit progresses and our assessment on the required scope and nature of procedures we will undertake becomes clearer. As examples:

- ▶ Where prior year audit opinions are modified work will be required to gain assurance, where possible, on opening balances over the period of the recovery phase (phase 2). Where we are unable to gain assurance over opening balances, we anticipate that this may lead to limitation of scope of our audit over those balances.
- ▶ Where prior year audit opinions are modified, and particularly where we do not have assurance spanning a number of historic financial years, this is likely to have an impact on our assessment of materiality and our ability to issue an unmodified opinion early in the recovery phase.
- ▶ Changes to the Code of Audit Practice on Local Authority Accounting will potentially impact on our assessment of audit risk generally, risks associated with significant accounting estimates, such as the valuation of operational property, plant and equipment and the related need to rely on management's and auditor's specialists.

New Forest National Park Authority - Overview of our 2023/24 audit strategy

Value for Money

We are required to consider whether the Authority has made 'proper arrangements' to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness on its use of resources.

Planning on value for money and the associated risk assessment is focused on gathering sufficient evidence to enable us to document our evaluation of the Authority's arrangements, to enable us to prepare a commentary under three reporting criteria. This includes identifying and reporting on any significant weaknesses in those arrangements and making appropriate recommendations.

We will provide a commentary on the Authority's arrangements against three reporting criteria:

- ▶ Financial sustainability - How the Authority plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services;
- ▶ Governance - How the Authority ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks; and
- ▶ Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness - How the Authority uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services.

The commentary on the Authority's value for money arrangements will be included in the Auditor's Annual Report.

Key Audit Partner and senior audit team



Simon Mathers - Partner

Simon is the new partner leading the 2023/24 audit of the Authority from our Southampton Office. He has over 20 years experience in the delivery of Local Government audits covering district and borough councils, county councils, London boroughs and pension funds.



Katie Lean - Manager

Katie, who is also based in our Southampton Office, has experience in the delivery of Local Government audits covering both lower and upper tier authorities.



03 Audit Timeline



Audit Timeline

Timeline

Delivery to our proposed timeline is based on the assumption that the Authority complies with PSAA's Statement of Responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies.

See <https://www.psa.co.uk/managing-audit-quality/statement-of-responsibilities-of-auditors-and-audited-bodies/statement-of-responsibilities-of-auditors-and-audited-bodies-from-2023-24-audits/>.

In particular the Authority should have regard to paragraphs 26-28 of the Statement of Responsibilities which clearly set out what is expected of audited bodies in preparing their financial statements. We set out these paragraphs in full below:

Preparation of the statement of accounts

26. Audited bodies are expected to follow Good Industry Practice and applicable recommendations and guidance from CIPFA and, as applicable, other relevant organisations as to proper accounting procedures and controls, including in the preparation and review of working papers and financial statements.

27. In preparing their statement of accounts, audited bodies are expected to:

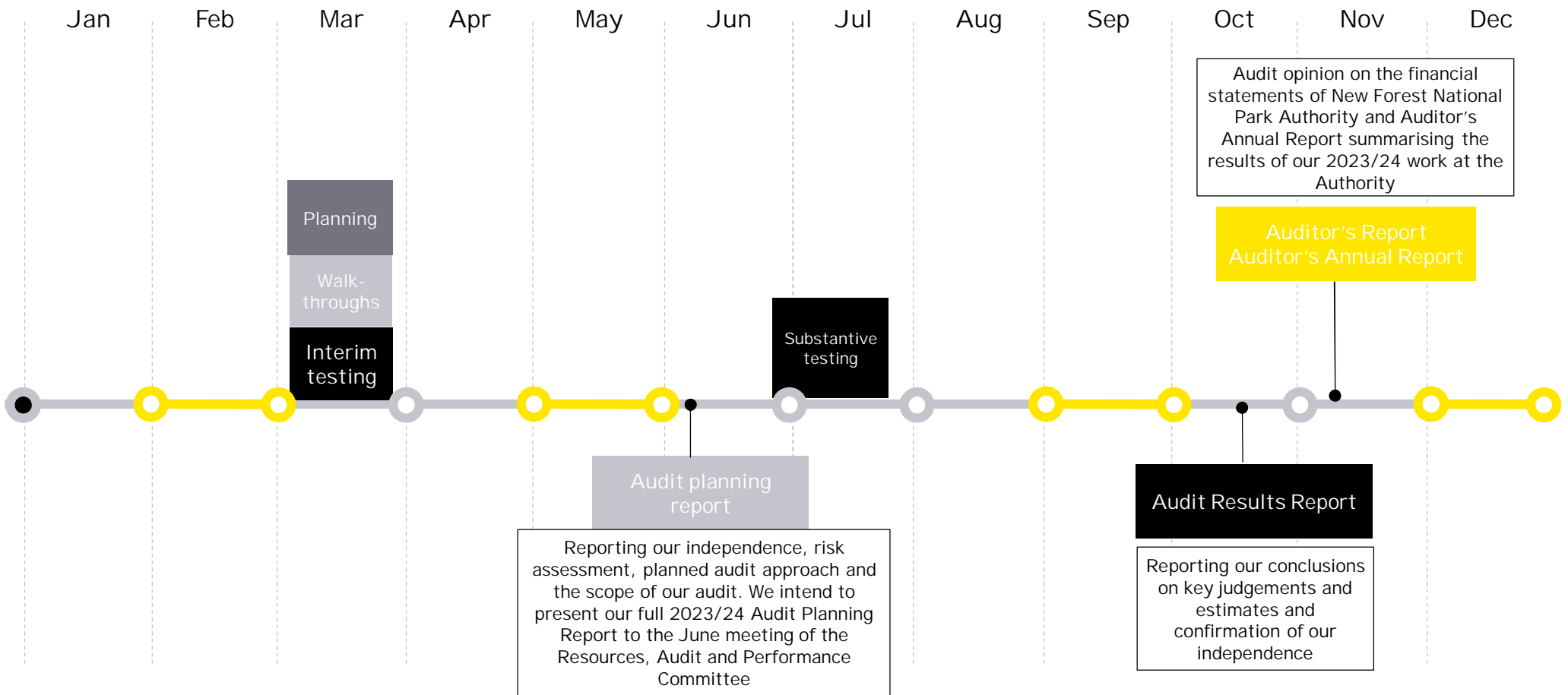
- prepare realistic plans that include clear targets and achievable timetables for the production of the financial statements;
- ensure that finance staff have access to appropriate resources to enable compliance with the requirements of the applicable financial framework, including having access to the current copy of the CIPFA/LASAAC Code, applicable disclosure checklists, and any other relevant CIPFA Codes.
- assign responsibilities clearly to staff with the appropriate expertise and experience;
- provide necessary resources to enable delivery of the plan;
- maintain adequate documentation in support of the financial statements and, at the start of the audit, providing a complete set of working papers that provide an adequate explanation of the entries in those financial statements including the appropriateness of the accounting policies used and the judgements and estimates made by management;
- ensure that senior management monitors, supervises and reviews work to meet agreed standards and deadlines;
- ensure that a senior individual at top management level personally reviews and approves the financial statements before presentation to the auditor; and
- during the course of the audit provide responses to auditor queries on a timely basis.

28. If draft financial statements and supporting working papers of appropriate quality are not available at the agreed start date of the audit, the auditor may be unable to meet the planned audit timetable and the start date of the audit will be delayed.

Timetable of communication and deliverables

Indicative Timeline

Below is an indicative timetable showing the key stages of the audit and the deliverables we have agreed to provide to you through the audit cycle in 2023/24. From time to time matters may arise that require immediate communication with the Authority Members and we will discuss them with the Authority Chair as appropriate. We will also provide updates on corporate governance and regulatory matters as necessary.





04

Audit Fees

Audit Fees

The duty to prescribe fees is a statutory function delegated to Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd (PSAA) by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

This is defined as the fee required by auditors to meet statutory responsibilities under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 in accordance with the requirements of the Code of Audit Practice and supporting guidance published by the National Audit Office, the financial reporting requirements set out in the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting published by CIPFA/LASAAC, and the professional standards applicable to auditors' work.

The agreed fee presented is based on the following assumptions:

- ▶ Officers meeting the agreed timetable of deliverables;
- ▶ Our accounts opinion and value for money conclusion being unqualified;
- ▶ Appropriate quality of documentation is provided by the Authority;
- ▶ The Authority has an effective control environment; and
- ▶ The Authority complies with PSAA's Statement of Responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies. See <https://www.psa.co.uk/managing-audit-quality/statement-of-responsibilities-of-auditors-and-audited-bodies/statement-of-responsibilities-of-auditors-and-audited-bodies-from-2023-24-audits/>. In particular the Authority should have regard to paragraphs 26 - 28 of the Statement of Responsibilities which clearly sets out what is expected of audited bodies in preparing their financial statements. These are set out in full section 3 of this report.

If any of the above assumptions prove to be unfounded, we will seek a variation to the agreed fee. This will be discussed with the Authority in advance.

	2023/24	2022/23	2021/22
	£	£	£
Total Fee – Scale Fee	40,100	14,829	10,226
Scale fee adjustment	TBC – Note 3	TBC – Note 2	10,397 Note 1
Total audit fees	TBC	TBC	20,623

All fees exclude VAT

(1) As reported in our 2021/22 Audit Results Report, we submitted a proposal to PSAA for rebasing of the 2021/22 scale fee and for scale fee variations. The total value of the additional fee request submitted to PSAA, including both rebasing and scale fee variation elements was £32,515 (£31,154 rebasing and £1,361 scale fee variation). Of this PSAA actually determined an amount of £10,397.

(2) The 2022/23 audit fee will be adjusted to reflect the work completed in respect of our Value for Money Conclusion and the disclaimed opinion.

(3) The revision to ISA (UK) 315 will impact on our scope and approach, and require us to enhance the audit risk assessment process, better focus responses to identified risks and evaluate the impact of IT on key processes supporting the production of the financial statements. We expect to charge addition fee for this. The scale fee also may be impacted by a range of other factors which will result in additional work, which include but are not limited to:

- Consideration of correspondence from the public and formal objections.
- New accounting standards, for example full adoption or additional disclosures in respect of IFRS 16.
- Non-compliance with law and regulation with an impact on the financial statements.
- VFM risks of, or actual, significant weaknesses in arrangements and related reporting impacts.
- The need to exercise auditor statutory powers.
- Prior period adjustments.
- Modified financial statement opinions