

A pair of hands is shown from a top-down perspective, cupping a large number of Euro coins. The coins are of various denominations, including 1 Euro, 2 Euro, and 5 Euro, and are piled together. The hands are resting on a rustic, weathered wooden surface. A bright yellow rectangular overlay is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the image, containing the title text.

Local Government Audit Committee Briefing



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This sector briefing is one of the ways that we support you and your organisation in an environment that is constantly changing and evolving.

It covers issues which may have an impact on your organisation, the Local Government sector, and the audits that we undertake.

The briefings are produced by our public sector audit specialists within EY's national Government and Public Sector (GPS) team, using our public sector knowledge, and EY's wider expertise across UK and international business.

The briefings bring together not only technical issues relevant to the Local Government sector but wider matters of potential interest to you and your organisation.

Links to where you can find out more on any of the articles featured can be found at the end of the briefing.

We hope that you find the briefing informative and should this raise any issues that you would like to discuss further, please contact your local audit team.



Government and economic news

EY Item Club forecast

The latest EY Item Club forecast highlights how this year's general election result has increased political uncertainty and hindered the Article 50 EU exit negotiations, but that it could lead to a more business-friendly Brexit (with agreement on transition arrangements and to a comprehensive free trade agreement).

In terms of the economy itself, the surge in inflation has slowed consumption which, combined with investment and exports failing to offset this effect, meant GDP growth fell back to 0.2% quarter-on-quarter in the first three months of 2017. The outlook for the rest of the year remains poor, and the April forecast of 1.8% for GDP growth in 2017 has been revised down to 1.5%. Conversely, the growth forecast for next year of 1.2% has been revised up to 1.3%.

Consumer spending grew by just 0.4% quarter-on-quarter in Q1 of 2017, down from 0.7% in Q4 of 2016 and 0.8% in each of the previous quarters. This is a reflection that household savings are already very stretched, wage growth remains low, whilst inflation is picking up faster than expected. When wages fail to keep pace with price rises, inflation reduces the strength of consumption and pushes down demand. With the economy slowing it seems unlikely that falling unemployment could now trigger a significant increase in wage inflation. In terms of Consumer Prices Index (CPI) inflation, it is expected to move above 3% by July and reach 3.2 to 3.3% in the autumn, maintaining the pressure on households.

Returning to Brexit, a transition agreement with talks on a free trade agreement under way, should stimulate investment, especially in sectors like the motor industry where it has been held back by Brexit uncertainty. As a result the EY Item Club medium-term forecasts have been revised upwards. April's GDP growth forecast of 1.5% for 2019 is raised to 1.8%, whilst expected growth rates of 1.8% for 2020 and 2021 have moved up to 2.0% and 2.2% respectively.

2018-19 local government settlement: consultation

During September and October 2017 DCLG embarked on a consultation process for the 2018-19 finance settlement, which will be the third year of the multi-year settlement that was accepted by 97% of local authorities. The main themes of the consultation were:

- ▶ **Business rate retention** – the 100% retention of business rate income scheme was piloted by five regions in 2017/18. Central government is committed to giving local government greater control over the money they raise and so they have invited interested local authorities to apply to participate in a new wave of pilot schemes for 2018/19. The Spring Budget 2017 announced that authorities in London were working with Government to explore piloting the scheme for 2018/19. However, independent research commissioned by the County

Council Network has identified that 100% business rate retention could actually increase the funding gap for county authorities by £700mn by 2029. The analysis indicated that there would be a divergence between future business rate growth and demographic cost pressures.

- ▶ **New homes bonus** – since its inception the New Home Bonus has allocated £6bn to local authorities to encourage the building of over 1.2mn new homes. As part of the 2017/18 financial settlement Government reduced the number of years for legacy payments from six to four starting in 2018/19, and also set a national baseline for housing growth to incentivise local authorities to build more new homes. The national baseline (below which no bonus will be paid) was set at 0.4% for 2017/18, which is significantly below average past growth rates. The 2018/19 baseline is yet to be confirmed; however, will be calculated based on additional housing stock as reported through council tax base figures.
- ▶ **Council tax referendum principles** – government is considering whether to retain the core principle that increasing council tax demands by greater than 2% would require a local referendum. In addition, Government is considering whether this 2% core principle should also apply to Mayoral Combined Authorities.
- ▶ Continuation of the Adult Social Care Precept principle of a 2% increase, with the additional flexibility in 2018/19 to increase this precept by an additional 1% to 3%, provided that the total increase between 2017/18 and 2019/20 does not exceed 6%.

Planning fees

A government white paper published in February 2017 set out plans to allow local authorities to increase planning permission fees by up to 20% from July 2017; however, this increase has not

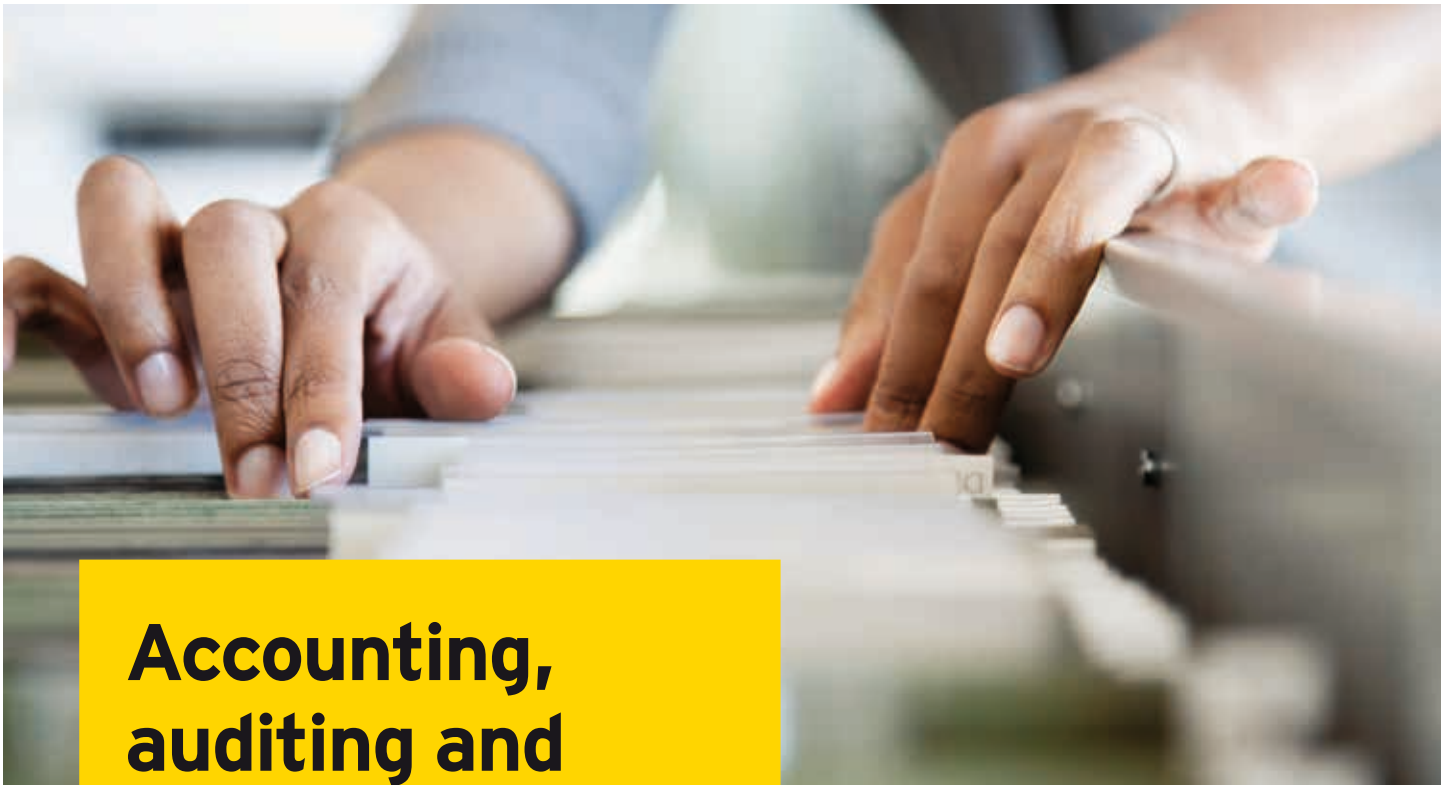
been implemented and it is unclear whether it will in the future. This has put £1bn of potential future funding up to 2022 at risk according to the Local Government Association (LGA).

The LGA has estimated that the average council receives 486,500 planning applications per year with council tax funds being used to fund approximately one third of applications. Planning permission fees are set nationally so that applicants have certainty of cost throughout the country. Often individual householder applications will result in an overall loss for councils due to the small size of the application and corresponding fee, the cost of which is picked up by the taxpayer.

Adult social care

The DCLG 2017/18 Budget indicated that total local authority expenditure on adult social care is expected to rise by 8.6% in 2017/18 from £14.4bn to £15.6bn. Government has assisted local authorities to finance this increased expenditure through both the £2bn of extra funding for adult social care announced back in Spring 2017, of which £1bn will be available for 2017/18, and the adult social care precept first introduced in 2015/16 at a rate of up to 2%.

Given the increasing aging population throughout the UK there are still concerns that even this increased funding is not sufficiently sustainable to meet the future demand for adult social care services. A study published in the Lancet has found that the demand for high dependency adult care places is expected to increase by 86% by 2035, therefore the long term sustainable funding of adult social is critical. A green paper from Government is expected to be published shortly that will discuss the options for shaping the future of social care, including how it will be funded.



Accounting, auditing and governance

Commercialisation: local authority owned companies

Over 60% of local authorities currently own at least one trading company and this figure is expected to increase significantly by 2020 as councils seek efficiencies and innovations to generate extra income to bridge future funding gaps. Therefore, irrespective of type or purpose of newly established trading companies, governance and the interface between the local authority and their owned companies is critical to the commercial success of the trading enterprise.

Mike Birch, the CEO of a £300mn turnover wholly owned local authority company, said at CIPFA's annual conference that "the presence of too many members on executive boards could hamper the agility that a small and focused board needed to efficiently deliver services in a commercial environment ... You cannot run a business by committee; it has to have a degree of focus and agility."

Having too many members on the Board of a council owned company may not be in the best interests of either the company or the council. Therefore when establishing (or reviewing) the governance arrangements of council owned companies it is important that the appropriate framework is put in place to operate effectively for both entities. There are many complex issues that require careful consideration, for example, minimisation of conflicts of interest for key individuals of both entities and the balance of sufficient oversight by the council whilst not hindering the operations of the trading company.

EY think piece: 2017/18 early accounts closure

The Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 introduced a significant change in statutory deadlines from the 2017/18 financial year. The new timetable for preparation and approval of accounts will be brought forward with draft accounts needing to be prepared by 31 May and the publication of audited accounts by 31 July. These reporting deadline changes will provide a challenge for both preparers and auditors of local authority financial statements.

The EY Think Piece on 'Accelerating your financial close arrangements' has identified several areas of consideration that may assist in the achievement of the challenging accelerated deadlines. These include:

- ▶ **Revisit the current closure timetable.** The robustness of project timetables and the management of bottlenecks in the closure process will be critical to achieve the new deadline.
- ▶ **Format of your accounts.** Are there superfluous notes in the financial statements that could be streamlined or removed on the basis of materiality? Discuss with auditors what would be considered material.
- ▶ **Review year-end journal process.** Do year end journals actually have to be done at year end? Could journals be made throughout the year, and then adjusted at year end for material changes.
- ▶ **Manage Members' Expectations.** A 31 July audit deadline will mean rescheduling your Audit Committee (or equivalent body who perform the duties of 'those charged with governance') before the deadline.

Key questions for the Audit Committee

How is the impact of Brexit being factored into the authorities MTFP projections?

Has your local authority considered the impact of the proposed financial settlement for 2018/19?

How has the uncertainty around future charges for planning applications affected your council?

How does your council ensure that it has a sustainable financial plan for the increasing demand for adult social care?

What assurance do you have that your council's owned trading companies have effective governance arrangements in place?

What actions has your local authority taken to ensure that it is best placed to achieve the financial accounts early closure timetable of 31 July 2018?

Find out more

EY Item Club forecast

<http://www.ey.com/uk/en/issues/business-environment/financial-markets-and-economy/item---forecast-headlines-and-projections>

2018-19 local government financial settlement: consultation

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/local-government-finance-settlement-2018-to-2019-technical-consultation>

Planning fees

<http://www.publicfinance.co.uk/news/2017/08/governments-failed-planning-fees-promise-leaves-councils-ps1bn-bill>

Adult social care

<http://www.cipfa.org/cipfa-thinks/cipfa-thinks-articles/the-road-ahead-for-managing-social-care>

Commercialisation: local authority owned companies

<http://www.publicfinance.co.uk/news/2017/07/local-authority-run-companies-should-avoid-too-many-council-board-members>

EY Think Piece: 2017/18 early accounts closure

[http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY_-_Accelerating_your_financial_close_arrangements/\\$FILE/EY-accelerating-your-financial-close-arrangements.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY_-_Accelerating_your_financial_close_arrangements/$FILE/EY-accelerating-your-financial-close-arrangements.pdf)

EY client resources and information

<http://www.ey.com/gl/en/industries/government---public-sector/ey-citizen-today#recent-content>

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Ernst & Young LLP, More London Place, London, SE1 2AF.

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