

Lancashire County Council Audit Progress Report and Sector Update

Year ending 31 March 2021

9 April 2021



Contents

| Section | Page |
|------------------------|------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Progress at April 2021 | 4 |
| Audit Deliverables | 6 |
| Sector Update | 7 |

The contents of this report relate only to the matters which have come to our attention, which we believe need to be reported to you as part of our audit planning process. It is not a comprehensive record of all the relevant matters, which may be subject to change, and in particular we cannot be held responsible to you for reporting all of the risks which may affect the Council or all weaknesses in your internal controls. This report has been prepared solely for your benefit and should not be quoted in whole or in part without our prior written consent. We do not accept any responsibility for any loss occasioned to any third party acting, or refraining from acting on the basis of the content of this report, as this report was not prepared for, nor intended for, any other purpose.

Grant Thornton UK LLP is a limited liability partnership registered in England and Wales: No.OC307742. Registered office: 30 Finsbury Square, London, EC2A 1AG. A list of members is available from our registered office. Grant Thornton UK LLP is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. Grant Thornton UK LLP is a member firm of Grant Thornton International Ltd (GTIL). GTIL and the member firms are not a worldwide partnership. Services are delivered by the member firms. GTIL and its member firms are not agents of, and do not obligate, one another and are not liable for one another's acts or omissions.

Introduction

Your key Grant Thornton team members are:



Paul Dossett

Key Audit Partner

T 020 7728 3180

E Paul.Dossett@uk.gt.com



Stuart Basnett

Manager

T 0151 224 7232

E Stuart.H.Basnett@uk.gt.com

This paper provides the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee with a report on progress in delivering our responsibilities as your external auditors.

The paper also includes:

- a summary of emerging national issues and developments that may be relevant to you as a Council; and
- includes a number of challenge questions in respect of these emerging issues which the Committee may wish to consider (these are a tool to use, if helpful, rather than formal questions requiring responses for audit purposes)

Members of the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee can find further useful material on our website, where we have a section dedicated to our work in the public sector. Here you can download copies of our publications www.grantthornton.co.uk ..

If you would like further information on any items in this briefing, or would like to register with Grant Thornton to receive regular email updates on issues that are of interest to you, please contact either your Engagement Lead or your Engagement Manager.

Progress at April 2021

Financial Statements Audit

We have undertaken our initial planning for the 2020/21 audit in March – April 2021. We expect to begin our work on your draft financial statements in July .

Our interim fieldwork included:

- Updating our understanding of the Council’s control environment
- Updating our understanding of financial systems
- Review of the results of any Internal Audit work in the year
- Understanding how the Council’s makes material estimates for the financial statements for both the Group and the Council
- Early work on emerging accounting issues

The detailed audit plan, setting out our proposed approach to the audit of the Group and the Council’s 2020/21 financial statements is attached as a separate item to this agenda.

We will report our work in the Audit Findings Report and currently aim to give our opinion on the Statement of Accounts in September 2021.

2019/20 Audit

We were unable to complete the certification of the audit for 2019/20. We cannot formally conclude the audit and issue an audit certificate in accordance with the requirements of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and the Code of Audit Practice until we have completed our consideration of a matter brought to our attention by the Authority in 2013.

Value for Money

The new Code of Audit Practice (the “Code”) came into force on 1 April 2020 for audit years 2020/21 and onwards. The most significant change under the new Code is the introduction of an Auditor’s Annual Report, containing a commentary on arrangements to secure value for money and any associated recommendations, if required.

The new approach is more complex, more involved and will make more impact.

Before beginning work, we will discuss with you:

- Timing
- Resourcing
- Fees

We communicated the details of the new value for money approach in our progress report to the Audit Committee on 25th January 2021. Further details are provided in slides 8-10.

Progress at April 2021 (cont.)

Other areas

Certification of claims and returns

We certify the Authority's annual Teachers' Pensions' return. We certified the return for the 2019/20 year on 18 November 2020, in advance of the 30th November national deadline.

The certification work for the 2020/21 return has not yet begun.

Meetings

We meet with Finance Officers on a monthly basis and have also had several meetings with Finance Officers throughout our planning work to discuss the programme of work and any emerging issues.

We continue to liaise on key audit matters such as estimates and in particular, the key estimates attributed to the valuation of property, plant and equipment and have attended a meeting with the Council's finance team discuss the valuation approach for both the Group and Council assets.

Events

We provide a range of workshops, along with network events for members and publications to support the Authority. Your officers attended our Financial Reporting Workshop in February, which helped to ensure that members of your Finance Team were up to date with the latest financial reporting requirements for local authority accounts.

Further details of the publications that may be of interest to the Council are set out in our Sector Update section of this report.

Audit Deliverables

| 2020/21 Deliverables | Planned Date | Status |
|--|----------------|-------------|
| <p data-bbox="120 408 264 435">Audit Plan</p> <p data-bbox="120 456 1424 555">We are required to issue a detailed audit plan to the Audit, Risk & Governance Committee setting out our proposed approach in order to give an opinion on the Authority's 2020/21 financial statements and the Auditor's Annual Report on the Authority's Value for Money arrangements.</p> | April 2021 | Complete |
| <p data-bbox="120 584 450 611">Interim Progress Report</p> <p data-bbox="120 632 1384 691">We will report the results of our planning and interim work to the 26 July Audit, Risk & Governance Committee.</p> | July 2021 | Not yet due |
| <p data-bbox="120 727 421 754">Audit Findings Report</p> <p data-bbox="120 775 1368 834">The Audit Findings Report will be reported to the September Audit, Risk & Governance Committee (TBC).</p> | September 2021 | Not yet due |
| <p data-bbox="120 871 338 898">Auditors Report</p> <p data-bbox="120 919 734 946">This is the opinion on your financial statements.</p> | September 2021 | Not yet due |
| <p data-bbox="120 983 450 1010">Auditor's Annual Report</p> <p data-bbox="120 1031 1155 1058">This Report communicates the key issues arising from our Value for Money work.</p> | September 2021 | Not yet due |

Sector Update

Authorities continue to try to achieve greater efficiency in the delivery of public services, whilst facing the challenges to address rising demand, ongoing budget pressures and social inequality.

Our sector update provides you with an up to date summary of emerging national issues and developments to support you. We cover areas which may have an impact on your organisation, the wider local government sector and the public sector as a whole. Links are provided to the detailed report/briefing to allow you to delve further and find out more.

Our public sector team at Grant Thornton also undertake research on service and technical issues. We will bring you the latest research publications in this update. We also include areas of potential interest to start conversations within the organisation and with audit committee members, as well as any accounting and regulatory updates.

- [Grant Thornton Publications](#)
- [Insights from local government sector specialists](#)
- [Reports of interest](#)
- [Accounting and regulatory updates](#)

More information can be found on our dedicated public sector and local government sections on the Grant Thornton website by clicking on the logos below:

A teal rectangular button with the text "Public Sector" in white, sans-serif font, centered within the button.

Public Sector

A dark purple rectangular button with the text "Local government" in white, sans-serif font, centered within the button.

Local
government

Lessons from recent Public Interest Reports – Grant Thornton

2020 will be remembered as a tumultuous year in local government. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted four essential factors we probably always knew about local government, have often said, but which are now much better evidenced:

1 Local government has provided fantastic support to its communities in working with the NHS and other partners to deal with the multifaceted challenges of the pandemic.

2 Britain's long centralised approach to government has been exposed to some degree in terms of its agility to tailor pandemic responses to regional and local bodies. This is recognised by the current government who continue to pursue the options for devolution of powers to local bodies. Track and Trace delivered centrally has not been as successful as anticipated and, according to government figures, local interventions have had more impact.

3 Years of reduced funding from central government have exposed the underlying flaws in the local authority business model, with too much reliance on generating additional income.

4 Not all authorities exercise appropriate care with public money; not all authorities exercise appropriate governance; and not all authorities have the capability of managing risk, both short and long term. Optimism bias has been baked into too many councils' medium-term plans.

The Public Interest Reports (PIRs) at Nottingham City Council (August 2020), the London Borough of Croydon (October 2020), and Northampton Borough Council (January 2021) were the first issued since 2016. All three are clear illustrations of some of the local government issues identified above. The audit reports are

comprehensive and wide-ranging and a lesson for all local authorities. There are some quotes that seem particularly apposite for all councils to consider. Local authorities have a variety of different governance models which range from elected mayor to the cabinet and a scrutiny system approach, while others have moved back to committee systems. Arguments can be made both for and against all of these models. However, in the recent PIR cases, and for many other councils, it is less about the system of governance and more about how it operates, who operates it and how willing they are to accept scrutiny and challenge.

There are a number of lessons to be learned from the recent PIR reports and these can be broken down into three key areas which are explored further in our report:

- 1 The context of local government in a Covid-19 world
- 2 Governance, scrutiny, and culture
- 3 Council leadership

[Lessons from Public Interest Reports \(grantthornton.co.uk\)](https://www.grantthornton.co.uk)



The new approach to Value for Money

The nature of value for money work

Section 20 and 21 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the Act), require auditors to be satisfied that the body “has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources”. The auditor’s work on VFM arrangements is undertaken in accordance with the Code and its supporting statutory guidance. The Comptroller and Auditor General has determined through the 2020 Code and guidance that the key output from local audit work in respect of VFM arrangements is the commentary as reported in the Auditor’s Annual Report. It is therefore not a VFM arrangements ‘conclusion’ or an ‘opinion’ in the same sense as the opinion on the financial statements themselves. The Act and the Code require auditors to consider whether the body has put in place ‘proper arrangements’ for securing VFM. The arrangements that fall within the scope of ‘proper arrangements’ are set out in ‘AGN 03 Auditors’ work on VFM arrangements’, which is issued by the NAO. When reporting on these arrangements, the Code requires auditors to structure their commentary on arrangements under three specified reporting criteria:

Financial sustainability

How the body plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services, including how the body:

- ensures that it identifies all the significant financial pressures that are relevant to its short and medium-term plans and builds these into them;
- plans to bridge its funding gaps and identifies achievable savings;
- plans finances to support the sustainable delivery of services in accordance with strategic and statutory priorities;

- ensures that its financial plan is consistent with other plans such as workforce, capital, investment, and other operational planning which may include working with other local public bodies as part of a wider system; and
- identifies and manages risks to financial resilience, e.g. unplanned changes in demand, including challenge of the assumptions underlying its plans.

Governance

How the body ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks, including how the body:

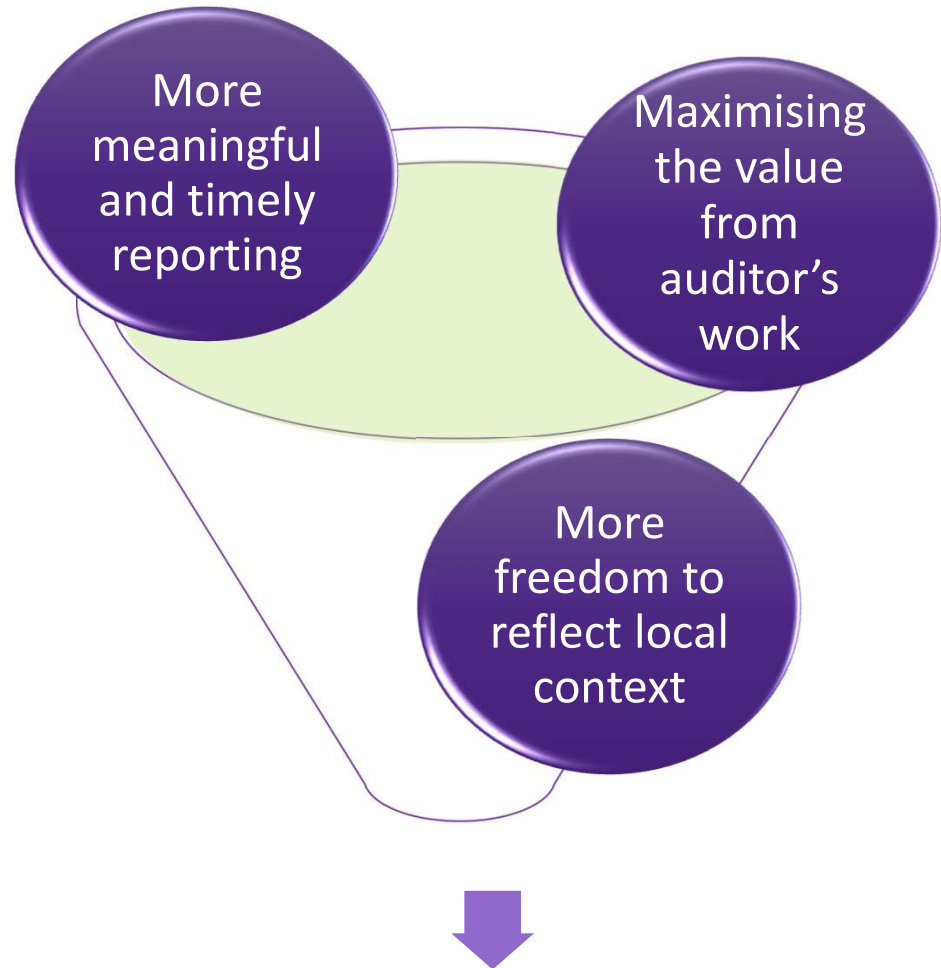
- monitors and assesses risk and how the body gains assurance over the effective operation of internal controls, including arrangements to prevent and detect fraud;
- approaches and carries out its annual budget setting process;
- ensures effective processes and systems are in place to ensure budgetary control; to communicate relevant, accurate and timely management information (including non-financial information where appropriate); supports its statutory financial reporting requirements; and ensures corrective action is taken where needed;
- ensures it makes properly informed decisions, supported by appropriate evidence and allowing for challenge and transparency. This includes arrangements for effective challenge from those charged with governance/audit committee; and
- monitors and ensures appropriate standards, such as meeting legislative/regulatory requirements and standards in terms of officer or member behaviour (such as gifts and hospitality or declarations/conflicts of interests).

The new approach to Value for Money

Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness

How the body uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services, including:

- how financial and performance information has been used to assess performance to identify areas for improvement;
- how the body evaluates the services it provides to assess performance and identify areas for improvement;
- how the body ensures it delivers its role within significant partnerships, engages with stakeholders it has identified, monitors performance against expectations, and ensures action is taken where necessary to improve; and
- where the body commissions or procures services, how the body ensures that this is done in accordance with relevant legislation, professional standards and internal policies, and how the body assesses whether it is realising the expected benefits.



VFM arrangements commentary and recommendations

The new approach to Value for Money

The table below details what will be reported in the Auditor's Annual Report:

| Section of report | Content |
|--|--|
| Commentary on arrangements | An explanation of the VFM work that has been undertaken during the year, including the risk assessment and any further risk-based work. It will also highlight any significant weaknesses that have been identified and brought to the body's attention. The commentary will allow auditors to better reflect local context and draw attention to emerging or developing issues which may not represent significant weaknesses, but which may nevertheless require attention from the body itself. |
| Recommendations | Where an auditor concludes that there is a significant weakness in a body's arrangements, they report this to the body and support it with a recommendation for improvement. |
| Progress in implementing recommendations | Where an auditor has reported significant weaknesses in arrangements in the previous year, the auditor should follow up recommendations issued previously and include their view as to whether the recommendations have been implemented satisfactorily. |
| Use of additional powers | Where an auditor uses additional powers, such as making statutory recommendations or issuing a public interest report, this should be reported in the auditor's annual report. |
| Opinion on the financial statements | The auditor's annual report also needs to summarise the results of the auditor's work on the financial statements. |

The table below details the three types of recommendations that auditors can make. Auditors may make recommendations at any time during the year.

| Type of recommendation | Definition |
|----------------------------|--|
| Statutory recommendation | Where auditors make written recommendations to the body under Section 24 and Schedule 7 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. A recommendation of this type requires the body to discuss and respond publicly to the report. |
| Key recommendation | Where auditors identify significant weaknesses in a body's arrangements for securing value for money, they have to make recommendations setting out the actions that the body should take to address them |
| Improvement recommendation | Where auditors do not identify a significant weakness in the body's arrangements, but still wish to make recommendations about how the body's arrangements can be improved |

Insight into accounting for grants in local government financial statements – Grant Thornton

The government has provided a range of financial support packages throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have issued a brief bulletin aimed at helping local government bodies identify the key things they should consider when determining the accounting treatment for these grants in their financial statements for 2020/21.

There are no changes to the accounting treatment for grants as required by the CIPFA Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting. What has changed, is the extent of additional funding to support the cost of services, to offset other income losses along with grant packages to be paid out to support local business. Local authorities need to consider the nature and terms of the various COVID-19 measures in order to determine whether there is income and expenditure to be recognised in the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement in 2020/21.

The report highlights the factors to consider, including:

- Where the funding is to be transferred to other parties, is the authority acting as principal or as agent?
- Are there grant conditions outstanding?
- Is the grant a specific or non-specific grant?

Our bulletin provides you with links to further information on the various support packages and summarises features that may be relevant to your judgements as you determine the appropriate accounting treatment.

Local authorities need to demonstrate their judgements on the accounting treatment to be reasonable and soundly based and, where these have a significant effect on the accounts, to ensure they include sufficient disclosures to meet the requirements of IAS 1:122.

Please ask your audit manager for the full report:



Local government finance in the pandemic – National Audit Office

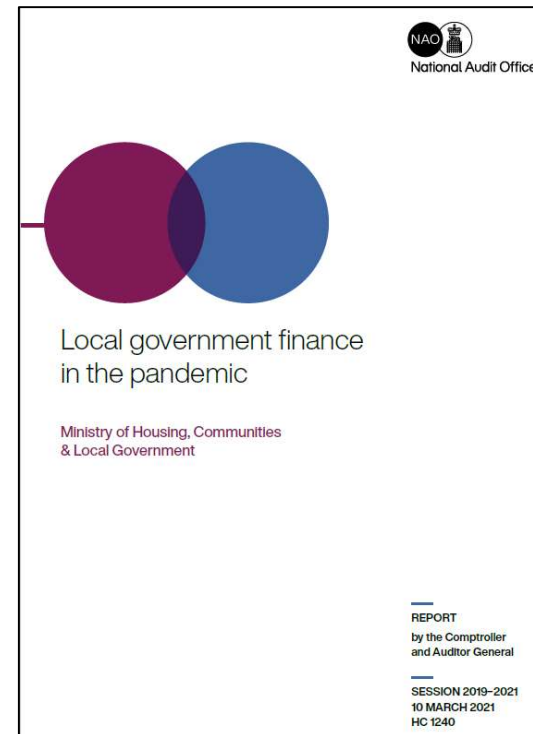
The National Audit Office (NAO) report, published in March, notes “The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented public health and economic emergency. Local authorities in England have made a major contribution to the national response to the pandemic, working to protect local communities and businesses, while continuing to deliver existing services. The pandemic has in turn placed significant pressure on local authorities’ finances, which in many cases were already under strain going into the pandemic.”

The NAO report examines if the Department’s approach to local government finance in the COVID-19 pandemic enabled it to assess and fund the costs of new services which local authorities have been asked to deliver. It also examines whether the Department fulfilled its responsibilities in securing financial sustainability across the sector.

The NAO report concludes “Steps taken by the government, led by the Department, have supported local authorities in the COVID-19 pandemic response. The Department’s successful monthly collection of data and continued intensive engagement with the sector provided a good evidence base to underpin the financial and other support provided by government. Action by the Department and wider government to support the sector has averted system-wide financial failure at a very challenging time and means that the Department has managed the most severe risks to value for money in the short term.

However, the financial position of local government remains a cause for concern. Many authorities will be relying on reserves to balance their 2020-21 year-end budgets. Despite continuing support into 2021-22 the outlook for next year is uncertain. Many authorities are setting budgets for 2021-22 in which they have limited confidence, and which are balanced through cuts to service budgets and the use of reserves.”

The NAO report found that “the combined impact on spending and non-tax income in 2020-21 is £9.7bn – equivalent to 17.6% of revenue expenditure. So far the government has announced £9.1bn of financial support, leaving a deficit of £605m.”



The full report can be obtained from the NAO website:

[Local government finance in the pandemic - National Audit Office \(NAO\) Report](#)

Good practice in annual reporting – National Audit Office

The National Audit Office (NAO) state that the guide, launched in February, “Sets out our good practice principles for good annual reporting and provides illustrative examples taken from public sector organisations who are leading the way in this area.

The guide draws on examples of good practice from within each of the six sections of an Annual Report:

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

The NAO also state that the guide “provides further examples where bodies have made their context more understandable to the reader through use of graphics and clear language and signposting.”

However, The NAO observe “Done well, reporting in the public sector enables the public and Parliament to understand – with ease and confidence – an organisation’s strategy and the risks it faces, how much taxpayers’ money has been spent and on what, and what has been achieved as a result.”

Further, the NAO note “The significant impacts of the pandemic emerged in the UK in mid-March 2020. This means that, for many organisations, the reporting impact will be greater in 2020-21 than in the prior year. Transparent annual reporting will help stakeholders understand the impact of COVID-19 on an organisation’s strategy, plans and operational and financial performance.”



The full report can be obtained from the NAO website:

<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/good-practice-in-annual-reports-february-2021/>

2019/20 audited accounts – Public Sector Audit Appointments

In December 2020 Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) published figures relating to the audit of 2019/20 local authority financial statements.

PSAA report “Audit arrangements in local councils, police, fire and other local government bodies are continuing to exhibit signs of stress and difficulty. In the latest audit round, focusing on 2019/20 financial statements and value for money arrangements, fewer than 50% of bodies’ audits were completed by the revised target of 30 November.

Figures compiled by PSAA, the organisation responsible for appointing auditors to 478 local bodies, reveal that 55% (265) of audit opinions were not issued by 30 November. This is a further deterioration on 2018/19 audits when 43% of opinions (210 out of 486) were delayed beyond the then target timetable of 31 July.

This year’s timetable has been deliberately eased by Ministers in recognition of the underlying pressures on the audit process and the significant added complications arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has posed practical challenges for bodies in producing accounts and working papers, and for auditors to carry out their testing. Both sets of staff have had to work remotely throughout the period, and the second national lockdown came at a critical point in the cycle.

Questions and concerns about the potential implications of the pandemic for some bodies have meant that both finance staff and auditors have needed to pay particular attention to the financial position of each entity. Additionally, following a series of increasingly challenging regulatory reviews, auditors have arguably been more focused than ever on their professional duty to give their opinion only when they are satisfied that they have sufficient assurance.”



The news article can be found here:

[News release: 2019/20 audited accounts – PSAA](#)

CIPFA Financial Resilience Index

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy's (CIPFA) Financial Resilience Index is a comparative tool designed to provide analysis on resilience and risk and support good financial management.

CIPFA note "CIPFA's Financial Resilience Index is a comparative analytical tool that may be used by Chief Financial Officers to support good financial management, providing a common understanding within a council of their financial position.

The Index shows a council's position on a range of measures associated with financial risk. The selection of indicators has been informed by extensive financial resilience work undertaken by CIPFA over the past five seven years, public consultation and technical stakeholder engagement.

Section 151 officers may also use the index in their annual report to the council setting out the proposed budget for the year and medium-term financial strategy.

While the impact of COVID-19 resulted in a delay to the publication of the index, it is still able to provide a comprehensive pre-COVID baseline, illustrating the financial resilience of authorities as they entered the pandemic."

CIPFA found that "there was a real-terms reduction of £800m in the level of reserves in 2020 compared with the previous year. At the end of March 2020 council reserves levels stood at £24.6bn, around 3% lower than £25.4bn recorded at the same period in 2019."

CIPFA note "The index is made up of a set of indicators. These indicators take publicly available data and compare similar authorities across a range of factors. There is no single overall indicator of financial risk, so the index instead highlights areas where additional scrutiny should take place in order to provide additional assurance. This additional scrutiny should be accompanied by a narrative to place the indicator into context."



The Financial Resilience tool is available on the CIPFA website below:

<https://www.cipfa.org/services/financial-resilience-index-2021?crdm=0>



© 2021 Grant Thornton UK LLP.

'Grant Thornton' refers to the brand under which the Grant Thornton member firms provide assurance, tax and advisory services to their clients and/or refers to one or more member firms, as the context requires. Grant Thornton UK LLP is a member firm of Grant Thornton International Ltd (GTIL). GTIL and the member firms are not a worldwide partnership. GTIL and each member firm is a separate legal entity. Services are delivered by the member firms. GTIL does not provide services to clients. GTIL and its member firms are not agents of, and do not obligate, one another and are not liable for one another's acts or omissions.