

WEST MIDLANDS FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

20 FEBRUARY 2017

1. ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE APPOINTMENT OF EXTERNAL AUDITORS

Joint report of the Chief Fire Officer and Treasurer.

RECOMMENDED

THAT the Authority approve the option to 'opt-in' to a Sector Led Body (SLB) appointed by the Secretary of State for the procurement of External Auditors.

2. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 2.1 This report summarises the 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.
- 2.2 The Authority needs to consider the options available and put in place new arrangements in time to make a first appointment by 31 December 2017.
- 2.3 The Authority is requested to consider the preferred approach from the following options:
 - (1) supporting the Local Government Association (LGA) in setting up a national SLB by indicating intention to "opt-in"
 - (2) establishing a stand-alone Auditor Panel to make the appointment on behalf of the Authority.
 - (3) commencing work on exploring the establishment of local joint procurement arrangements with neighbouring authorities

3. **BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 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 Communities and Local Government (CLG) 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.
- 3.2 In July 2016, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government specified Public Sector Audit Appointments Limited (PSAA) as an appointing person under regulation 3 of the Local Audit (Appointing Person) Regulations 2015. For audits of the accounts from 2018/19, PSAA will be able to appoint an auditor to relevant principal authorities that choose to opt into its national collective scheme. Appointments for 2018/19 must be made by 31 December 2017. Further information regarding PSAA is attached as an Appendix.
- 3.3 The Authority's current external auditor is Grant Thornton, this appointment having been made under a contract let by the Audit Commission. Following closure of the Audit Commission the contract is currently managed by PSAA, the transitional body set up by the LGA with delegated authority from the Secretary of State CLG. Over recent years the Authority has benefited from reductions in external audit fees. This has been as a result of a combination of factors including new contracts negotiated nationally with the firms of accountants and savings from closure of the Audit Commission. The Authority's current external audit fee for 2016/17 is £38,636.
- 3.3 When the current transitional arrangements come to an end on 31 March 2018 the Authority will be able to move to the local appointment of the auditor. There are a number of routes by which this can be achieved, each with varying risks and opportunities. Current fees are 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.

- 3.4 The scope of the audit will still be specified nationally, the National Audit Office (NAO) is responsible for writing the Code of Audit Practice which all firms appointed to carry out the Authority's audit must follow. Not all accounting firms will be eligible to compete for the work, they will need to demonstrate that they have the required skills and experience and be registered with a Registered Supervising Body approved by the Financial Reporting Authority. The registration process has not yet commenced and so the number of firms is not known but it is reasonable to expect that the list of eligible firms may include the top 10 or 12 firms in the country, including our current auditor. It is unlikely that small local independent firms will meet the eligibility criteria.
- 3.5 This matter was considered by the Audit Committee at the meeting held on 14th November 2016. Members of the Audit Committee considered the options available and elected to recommend to the Authority supporting the LGA in setting up a national SLB by indicating the intention to "opt-in".

4. **OPTIONS FOR LOCAL APPOINTMENT OF EXTERNAL AUDITORS**

- 4.1 There are three broad options open to the Authority under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the Act):

Option 1 Opt-in to a sector led body

- 4.4 In response to the consultation on the new arrangement the LGA successfully lobbied for Authorities 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.

Advantages/benefits

- 4.4.1 The costs of setting up the appointment arrangements and negotiating fees would be shared across all opt-in authorities.
- 4.4.2 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.
- 4.4.3 Any conflicts at individual authorities would be managed by the SLB who would have a number of contracted firms to call upon.
- 4.4.4 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

- 4.4.5 Individual elected members will have less opportunity for direct involvement in the appointment process other than through the LGA and/or stakeholder representative groups.
- 4.4.6 In order for the SLB to be viable and to be placed in the strongest possible negotiating position the SLB will need Authorities to indicate their intention to opt-in before final contract prices are known.

Option 2 To make a stand-alone appointment

- 4.2 In order to make a stand-alone appointment the Authority will 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 Authority's external audit. A new independent auditor panel established by the Authority will be responsible for selecting the auditor.

Advantages/benefit

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

Disadvantages/risks

- 4.2.2 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
- 4.2.3 The Authority will not be able to take advantage of reduced fees that may be available through joint or national procurement contracts.
- 4.2.4 The assessment of bids and decision on awarding contracts will be taken by independent appointees and not solely by elected members.

Option 3 Set up a Joint Auditor Panel/local joint procurement arrangements

- 4.3 The Act enables the Authority 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 (members). Further legal advice will be required on the exact constitution of such a panel having regard to the obligations of each Authority under the Act and the Authority need to liaise with other local authorities to assess the appetite for such an arrangement.

Advantages/benefits

- 4.3.1 The costs of setting up the panel, running the bidding exercise and negotiating the contract will be shared across a number of authorities.
- 4.3.2 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

4.3.3 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 possible only one elected member representing each Authority, depending on the constitution agreed with the other bodies involved.

4.3.4 The choice of auditor could be complicated where individual Authorities 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 Authority. 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 Authority then the Authority may still need to make a separate appointment with all the attendant costs and loss of economies possible through joint procurement.

5. THE WAY FORWARD

- 5.1 The Authority has until December 2017 to make an appointment. In practical terms this means one of the options outlined in this report will need to be in place by spring 2017 in order that the contract negotiation process can be carried out during 2017.
- 5.2 The LGA are working on developing a Sector Led Body. The Chairman of the PSAA recently indicated that approximately 50% of the 493 eligible bodies had registered to 'opt-in' and the expectation is that this figure would rise to above 80% by the cut-off date. Greatest economies of scale will come from the maximum number of Authorities acting collectively and opting-in to a SLB. In order to strengthen the LGA's negotiating position and enable it to more accurately evaluate the offering the Authority is asked to consider whether it is interested in the option of opting in to a SLB. A formal decision to opt-in is required by 9th March 2017.

6. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

In preparing this report, an initial Equality Impact Assessment is not required and has not been carried out because the matters contained in this report do not relate to a policy change.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 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 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;
- 7.2 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.
- 7.3 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.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Current external fee levels could potentially increase when the existing contracts end in 2018.
- 8.2 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 arrangement and would remove any costs associated with a joint or local Audit Panel.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Audit Committee report 14th November 2016

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