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To All Chief Executives, Chief Financial Officers,
Local Authority Leaders and Local Audit Firm
Partners

8 February 2024

Dear Colleagues,

Local Audit Consultation

I am delighted that today the Government is launching a consultation and Joint Statement, progressing the commitments made by the previous Minister for Local Government to work with the Financial Reporting Council (FRC), and other organisations in the local audit system on cross-system proposals to clear the backlog and put the local audit system on a sustainable footing.

Local audit is both a vital and independent source of assurance and a key element of the checks and balances within the local accountability framework. A significant number of local audits in England are outstanding. The issues facing local audit are widely recognised as multi-faceted and complex. Delays are to an extent affecting Scotland and Wales as well as England. They also impact different sectors, not just local government. It is widely recognised that many organisations in the local audit system have contributed to the delays experienced since 2017/2018 and that audits have become more challenging, with firms responding to a changing regulatory environment. In addition, pressures on the system were compounded during the COVID-19 pandemic and by an aging workforce.

The consultation seeks views on proposed legislative changes to the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 (the 2015 Regulations). We have published a draft statutory instrument alongside the consultation which covers the core elements of the proposed amendments. These, along with the Joint Statement are available at www.gov.uk/government/consultations/addressing-the-local-audit-backlog-in-england-consultation.

These cross-system proposals have been developed and agreed by the Department for Levelling-Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC), the FRC, the National Audit Office (NAO), the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW), and Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA).

These are not proposals we take lightly, but these are exceptional times. Key organisations across the local audit system, including the Government, share the conviction that bold steps are necessary to reset the system.

The Joint Statement provides vital context, and explains the package of measures and how the various elements are intended to interact and explains that the wider package of measures consists of three stages:

- Phase 1: Reset involving clearing the backlog of historical 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.

The consultation itself covers questions on:

- Phase 1: 'Backstop' Proposals for Financial Years 2015/2016 to 2022/2023 and
- Phase 2: 'Backstop' Proposals for the Recovery Period, Financial Years 2023/2024 - 2027/2028

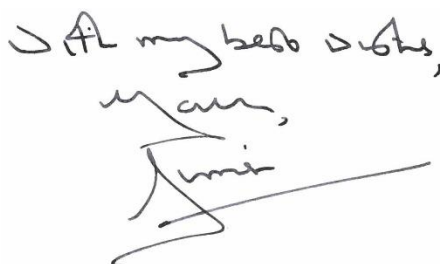
This consultation will run for four weeks from 8 February 2024 to 7 March 2024. This is an open consultation, and we welcome the views of any individual or entity interested in the proposals, including all Category 1 authorities and their Section 151 officers, audit firms, and other organisations which form part of the local audit framework. You can respond to this call for evidence through our online consultation platform Citizen Space: <https://consult.levellingup.gov.uk/local-audit-and-conduct/addressing-the-local-audit-backlog-in-england>.

The NAO is also consulting in parallel to this consultation, on related changes to the Code of Audit Practice. A link to the NAO consultation can be found here: www.nao.org.uk/code-of-audit-practice-consultation. Further detail on the NAO's proposals can also be found in the Joint Statement. The CIPFA LASAAC Board will be consulting shortly on related changes to the Code of Practice for Local Authority Accounting.

While I recognise the challenges there have been I would like to encourage you to continue undertaking existing work to produce and audit local authority financial statements while the consultations take place. Any slowdown in activity would lead to further issues in the future and, ahead of the first proposed backstop date. Please do continue to work together to ensure that as many audits can be completed in full as possible.

These proposals are an important step in restoring timely and high-quality financial reporting and audit for local bodies and I am grateful for the hard work and collaboration of system organisations in developing these measures. Please let us know your views so that we can work closely together to refine and implement measures to clear the backlog of local audit opinions, and develop the long-term reforms required to prevent a backlog recurring.

I look forward to seeing your responses.



With my best wishes,
Yours,
Simon

SIMON HOARE MP
Minister for Local Government