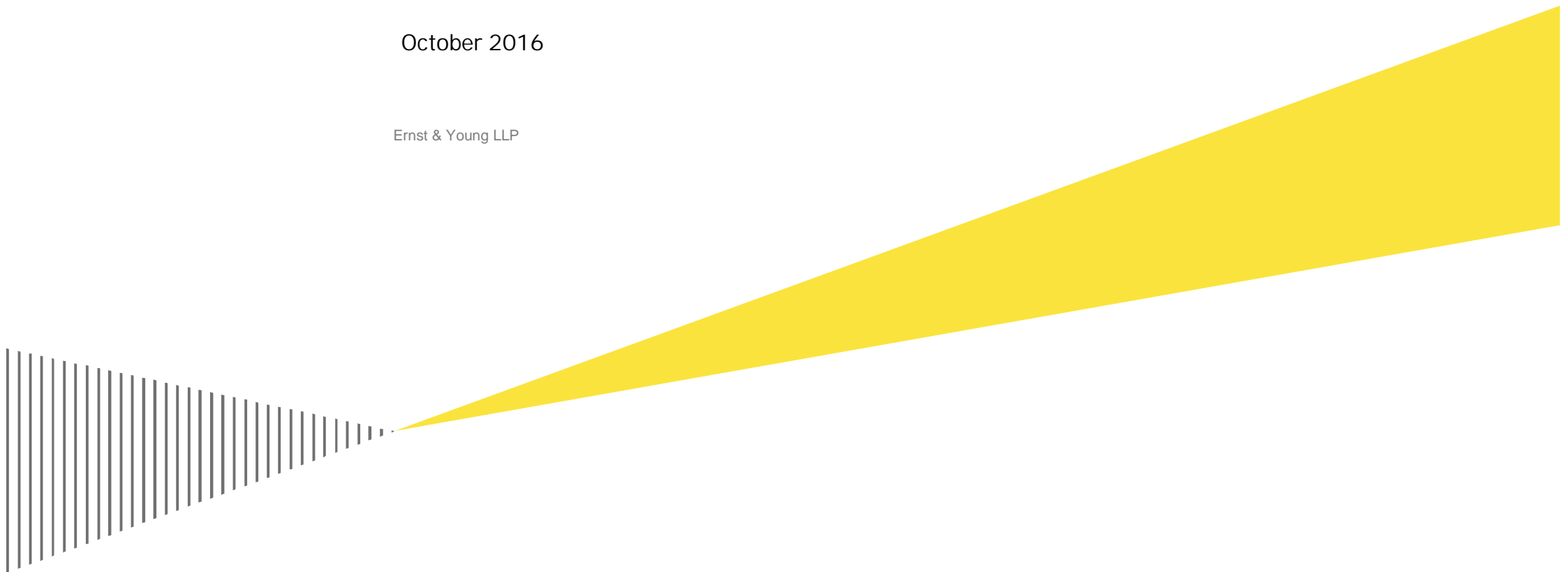


# Thurrock Council

Annual Audit Letter for the year ended 31 March 2016

October 2016

Ernst & Young LLP



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In April 2015 Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd (PSAA) issued ‘Statement of responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies 2015-16’. It is available from the Chief Executive of each audited body and via the PSAA website ([www.psaa.co.uk](http://www.psaa.co.uk))

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 from 1 April 2015’ issued by PSAA 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 statute, and covers matters of practice and procedure which are of a recurring nature.

This Annual Audit Letter is prepared in the context of the Statement of responsibilities. It is addressed to the Members of the audited body, and is prepared for their sole use. We, as appointed auditor, take no responsibility to any third party.

Our Complaints Procedure – If at any time you would like to discuss with us how our service to you could be improved, or if you are dissatisfied with the service you are receiving, you may take the issue up with your usual partner or director contact. If you prefer an alternative route, please contact Steve Varley, our Managing Partner, 1 More London Place, London SE1 2AF. We undertake to look into any complaint carefully and promptly and to do all we can to explain the position to you. Should you remain dissatisfied with any aspect of our service, you may of course take matters up with our professional institute. We can provide further information on how you may contact our professional institute.

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a blue pen and writing on a document. The hand is positioned on the right side of the frame. In the background, a laptop is open, and a calculator is visible on the desk. To the left, a white mug is partially visible. The scene is brightly lit, likely from a window, creating a professional and focused atmosphere. A yellow rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the text 'Executive Summary'.

## Executive Summary

## Executive Summary

We are required to issue an Annual Audit Letter to Thurrock Council (the Council) following completion of our audit procedures for the year ended 31 March 2016.

Below are the results and conclusions on the significant areas of the audit process.

Area of Work	Conclusion
Opinion on the Council's:	
▶ Financial statements	Unqualified – the financial statements give a true and fair view of the financial position of the Council as at 31 March 2016 and of its expenditure and income for the year then ended
▶ Consistency of other information published with the financial statements	Other information published with the financial statements was consistent with the Statement of Accounts 2015/16
Concluding on the Council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness	We concluded that you have put in place proper arrangements to secure value for money in your use of resources

Area of Work	Conclusion
Reports by exception:	
▶ Consistency of Annual Governance Statement	The Annual Governance Statement was consistent with our understanding of the Council
▶ Public interest report	We had no matters to report in the public interest
▶ Written recommendations to the Council, which should be copied to the Secretary of State	We had no matters to report
▶ Other actions taken in relation to our responsibilities under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014	We had no matters to report

Area of Work	Conclusion
Reporting to the National Audit Office (NAO) on our review of the Council's Whole of Government Accounts return (WGA).	We had no matters to report

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As a result of the above we have also:

Area of Work	Conclusion
Issued a report to those charged with governance of the Council communicating significant findings resulting from our audit.	Our Audit Results Report was issued on 26 September 2016
Issued a certificate that we have completed the audit in accordance with the requirements of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and the National Audit Office's 2015 Code of Audit Practice.	Our certificate was issued on (date in October to be confirmed once our WGA work is complete)

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In January 2017, we will also issue a report to those charged with governance of the Council summarising the certification work we have undertaken.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Council's staff for their assistance during the course of our work.

Debbie Hanson  
Executive Director  
For and on behalf of Ernst & Young LLP

Purpose



## Purpose

### The Purpose of this Letter

The purpose of this Annual Audit Letter is to communicate to Members and external stakeholders, including members of the public, the key issues arising from our work, which we consider should be brought to the attention of the Council.

We have already reported the detailed findings from our audit work in our 2015/16 Audit Results Report to the 29 September 2016 Standards & Audit Committee, representing those charged with governance. We do not repeat those detailed findings in this letter. The matters reported here are the most significant for the Council.



Responsibilities



## Responsibilities

### Responsibilities of the Appointed Auditor

Our 2015/16 audit work has been undertaken in accordance with the Audit Plan that we issued on 15 March 2016 and is conducted in accordance with the National Audit Office's 2015 Code of Audit Practice, International Standards on Auditing (UK and Ireland), and other guidance issued by the National Audit Office.

As auditors we are responsible for:

- ▶ Expressing an opinion:
  - ▶ On the 2015/16 financial statements; and
  - ▶ On the consistency of other information published with the financial statements.
- ▶ Forming a conclusion on the arrangements the Council has to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.
- ▶ Reporting by exception:
  - ▶ If the annual governance statement is misleading or not consistent with our understanding of the Council;
  - ▶ Any significant matters that are in the public interest;
  - ▶ Any written recommendations to the Council, which should be copied to the Secretary of State; and
  - ▶ If we have discharged our duties and responsibilities as established by thy Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and Code of Audit Practice.

Alongside our work on the financial statements, we also review and report to the National Audit Office (NAO) on you Whole of Government Accounts return. The extent of our review and the nature of our report are specified by the NAO.

## Responsibilities of the Council

The Council is responsible for preparing and publishing its statement of accounts accompanied by an Annual Governance Statement. In the Annual Governance Statement, the Council reports publicly each year on how far it complies with its own code of governance, including how it has monitored and evaluated the effectiveness of its governance arrangements in year, and any changes planned in the coming period.

The Council is also responsible for putting in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

# Financial Statement Audit



## Financial Statement Audit

### Key Issues

The Council's Statement of Accounts is an important tool for the Council to show how it has used public money and how it can demonstrate its financial management and financial health.

We audited the Council's Statement of Accounts in line with the National Audit Office's 2015 Code of Audit Practice, International Standards on Auditing (UK and Ireland), and other guidance issued by the National Audit Office and issued an unqualified audit report on 30 September 2016.

Our detailed findings were reported to the 29 September 2016 Standards & Audit Committee.

The key issues identified as part of our audit were as follows:

Significant Risk	Conclusion
<p>Management override of controls</p> <p>A risk present on all audits is that management is in a unique position to perpetrate fraud because of its ability to manipulate accounting records directly or indirectly, and prepare fraudulent financial statements by overriding controls that otherwise appear to be operating effectively.</p> <p>Auditing standards require us to respond to this risk by testing the appropriateness of journals, testing accounting estimates for possible management bias and obtaining an understanding of the business rationale for any significant unusual transactions.</p>	<p>We obtained a full list of journals posted to the general ledger during the year, and analysed these journals using criteria we set to identify any unusual journal types or amounts. We then tested a sample of journals that met our criteria and tested these to supporting documentation.</p> <p>We have not identified any material weaknesses in controls or evidence of material management override.</p> <p>We have not identified any instances of inappropriate judgements being applied.</p> <p>We did not identify any other transactions during our audit which appeared unusual or outside the Council's normal course of business</p>

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#### Revenue and expenditure recognition

Auditing standards also required us to presume that there is a risk that revenue and expenditure may be misstated due to improper recognition or manipulation.

We respond to this risk by reviewing and testing material revenue and expenditure streams and revenue cut-off at the year end.

For local authorities the potential for the incorrect classification of revenue spend as capital is a particular area where there is a risk of management override. We therefore review capital expenditure on property, plant and equipment to ensure it meets the relevant accounting requirements to be capitalised.

Our testing has not revealed any material misstatements with respect to revenue and expenditure recognition.

Overall our audit work did not identify any issues or unusual transactions which indicated that there had been any misreporting of the Council's financial position.

Our testing did not identify any expenditure which had been inappropriately capitalised.

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#### The valuation of surplus assets

The Council owns a portfolio of properties that were transferred to it when the Thurrock Thames Gateway Development Corporation was abolished.

The portfolio comprises 28 freehold properties which had a carrying value in the 2014/15 financial statements of £56.1m; increasing to £61.3m in the 2015/16 statements.

The Council classifies these properties as surplus assets as they are not used for operational purposes. IFRS 13: Fair Value Measurement has been introduced into the Accounting Code for the first time in 2015/16, and requires surplus assets to now be valued at highest and best use based on what someone would pay for the asset.

The change in the basis of the valuation of these surplus assets means that potential changes in the assumptions underpinning the valuation could have a material impact on the carrying value in the financial statements.

Our testing has not revealed any material issues regarding the work of the valuers in this area or the application of IFRS 13 to the valuation of surplus assets.

Other Key Findings

Conclusion

Accounting for Gloriana Thurrock Ltd

The Council incorporated Gloriana Thurrock Ltd during the 2014/15 financial year. The company is wholly owned by the Council and was created with the objective of developing affordable housing within the Thurrock area. The company traded for the first time during 2015/16.

The Council needed to give careful consideration to how it accounted for its relationship with Gloriana Thurrock Ltd and whether it is required to prepare Group Accounts. This assessment extended to other entities associated with the Council.

The Council documented their approach to assessing whether group accounts are required for Gloriana Thurrock Ltd, as well as other potential entities. When assessing the materiality of such entities to the group accounts, the Council undertook a qualitative assessment alongside the quantitative assessment.

Our review of the Council's assessment of whether group accounts were required in 2015/16 concluded that it was not unreasonable to exclude Gloriana Thurrock Ltd from group accounting on the basis of immateriality. This assessment will however need to be revisited as the level of activity of the company increases, and group accounts will be required for 2016/17.

Our review also concluded that the disclosures made within the Council's financial statements regarding Gloriana Thurrock Ltd are appropriate.

A close-up, shallow depth-of-field photograph of a stack of coins. The coins are stacked vertically, with the edges of several coins visible. The lighting is warm, highlighting the metallic texture and the embossed details on the coins. A bright yellow rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the text "Value for Money".

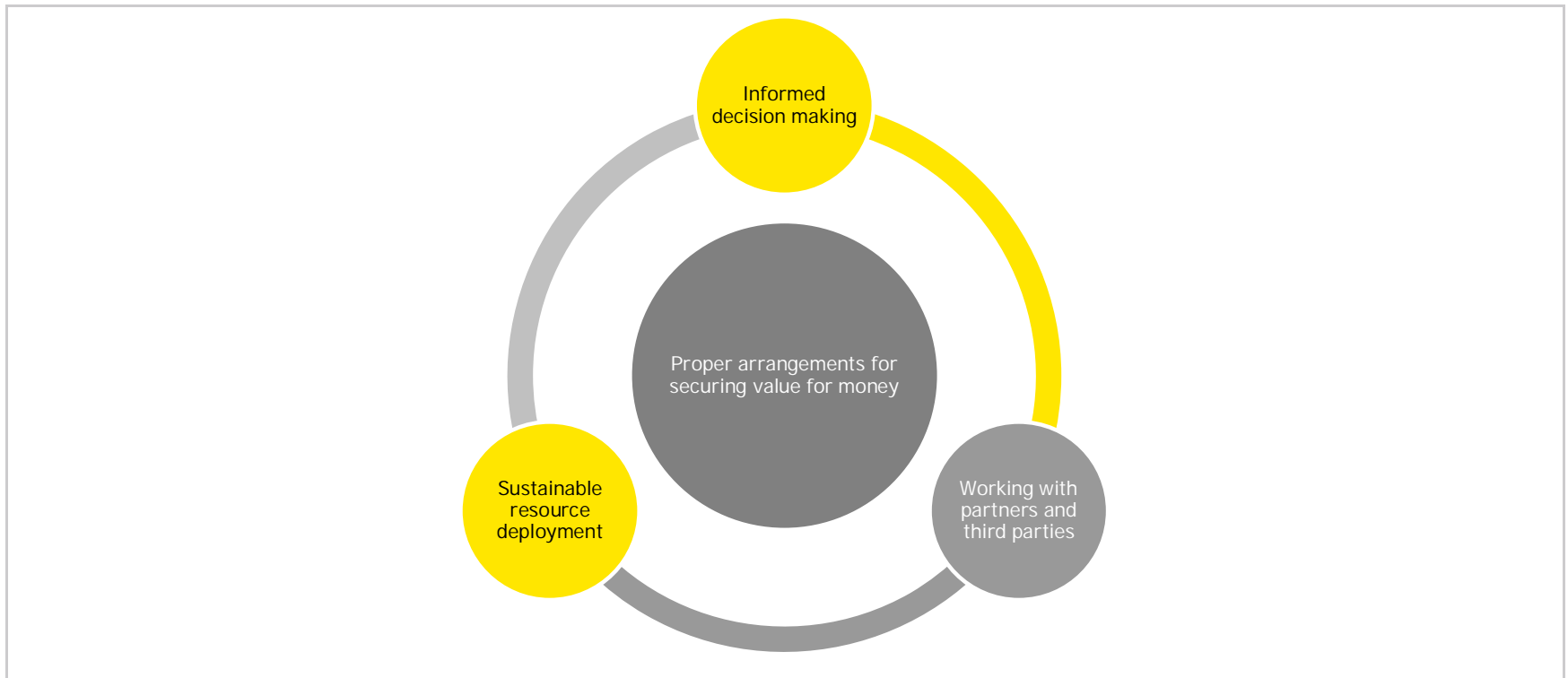
Value for Money

## Value for Money

We are required to consider whether the Council has put in place 'proper arrangements' to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness on its use of resources. This is known as our value for money conclusion.

Proper arrangements are defined by statutory guidance issued by the National Audit Office. They comprise your arrangements to:

- Take informed decisions;
- Deploy resources in a sustainable manner; and
- Work with partners and other third parties.





We issued an unqualified value for money conclusion on 30 September 2016.

Our work did not identify any significant matters in relation to the Council's arrangements.

During the planning phase of our audit, we did identify one significant value for money risk in relation to ongoing pressures from the economic downturn. The Comprehensive Spending Review continues to impact on the Council's budget and medium term financial planning during current and forthcoming financial years. In addition, the Council needed to consider how to fund the £3.5 million pension payment required following the termination of the SERCO contract. This was alongside putting in place plans to achieve the required savings in the medium term.

As a result of our work, we concluded that the Council continues to respond well to the financial challenges it, along with other public sector bodies, is facing. As we reported last year, that challenge continues to increase and the wider economy contains evermore significant uncertainties, for example the UK's future withdrawal from the European Union. Such economic financial uncertainties may well impact on the Council's future financial stability and will need to be considered as part of its strategic financial planning process.

As part of our assessment, we have reviewed how the Council has responded to the challenges it is facing and updated our understanding of the current financial position. A key element of the Council's response to this challenging situation is to explore different ways of working; delivering services through working with a range of partnership bodies and through different delivery vehicles. The creation of Gloriana Thurrock Ltd is an example of this, using a limited company structure to provide a different way to meet the Council's housing and regeneration objectives. Members should remain aware of the assumptions and sensitivities included in the Council's financial forecasts, and should not underestimate the challenge the Council has faced and will continue to face in the future. It is likely that further difficult decisions will need to be made to secure the Council's continued sound financial standing.



Other Reporting  
Issues

## Other Reporting Issues

### Whole of Government Accounts

We performed the procedures required by the National Audit Office on the accuracy of the consolidation pack prepared by the Council for Whole of Government Accounts purposes. We had no issues to report.

### Annual Governance Statement

We are required to consider the completeness of disclosures in the Council's annual governance statement, identify any inconsistencies with the other information of which we are aware from our work, and consider whether it is misleading.

We completed this work and did not identify any areas of concern.

### Report in the Public Interest

We have a duty under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 to consider whether, in the public interest, to report on any matter that comes to our attention in the course of the audit in order for it to be considered by the Council or brought to the attention of the public.

We did not identify any issues which required us to issue a report in the public interest.

### Written Recommendations

We have a duty under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 to designate any audit recommendation as one that requires the Council to consider it at a public meeting and to decide what action to take in response.

We did not identify any issues which required us to issue a written recommendation.

### Objections Received

We did not receive any objections to the 2015/16 financial statements from member of the public.

### Other Powers and Duties

We identified no issues during our audit that required us to use our additional powers under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

## Independence

We communicated our assessment of independence in our Audit Results Report to the Standards & Audit Committee on 29 September 2016. In our professional judgement the firm is independent and the objectivity of the audit engagement partner and audit staff has not been compromised within the meaning regulatory and professional requirements.

## Control Themes and Observations

In accordance with our Audit Plan we planned to test the key financial controls within the accounts receivable, accounts payable, payroll and housing benefits financial systems as part of our 2015/16 audit. Our initial audit strategy was based on being able to place reliance on the Council's general IT controls. However, our testing of these IT highlighted a weakness in the Council's general ledger system (Oracle) user access controls. These weaknesses precluded us from relying on controls within the accounts receivable, accounts payable and payroll systems. Our audit strategy for these systems was therefore adapted and we adopted a substantive testing approach, which involved examining individual documents to support income and expenditure items in the Council's accounts. These weaknesses did not impact on the housing benefit system as it uses a different IT system.

A close-up photograph of a person's face as they look through a pair of black binoculars. The person's eyes are focused on the lenses, and their hands are visible holding the device. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white. A bright yellow rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the text "Focused on your future".

Focused on your  
future

## Focused on your future

Area	Issue	Impact
EU referendum	<p>Following the majority vote to end the UK's membership of the European Union (EU) in the EU Referendum held on 23 June 2016 there is a heightened level of volatility in the financial markets and increased macroeconomic uncertainty in the UK. All three major rating agencies (S&amp;P, Fitch and Moody's) took action on the UK Sovereign credit rating and, following the rating action on the UK Government. For entities in the public sector, there is likely to be an impact on investment property valuations if confidence in the wider UK property market falls; and the valuation of defined benefit pension obligations may also be affected. It is too early to estimate the quantum of any impact of these issues, but there is likely to be significant ongoing uncertainty for a number of months while the UK renegotiates its relationships with the EU and other nations.</p>	<p>Many of the issues and challenges that face the UK public sector will continue to exist, not least because continued pressure on public finances will need responding to. Additionally it may well be that the challenges are increased if the expected economic impacts of the referendum and loss of EU grants outweigh the benefits of not having to contribute to the EU and require even more innovative solutions.</p> <p>We are committed to supporting our clients through this period, and help identify the opportunities that will also arise. We will engage with you on the concerns and questions you may have, provide our insight at key points along the path, and provide any papers and analysis of the impact of the referendum on the Government and Public Sector market.</p>
Highways Network Asset (HNA)	<p>The Code of Practice on Transport Infrastructure Assets (TIA Code) was first published in 2010 and updated in 2013. The key aim of this document was to improve the asset management of TIA. During 2016, this guidance has been renamed and updated, with the Highways Network Asset (HNA) Code, Guidance Notes and Accounting Guidance being published. Local Government has historically used depreciated historic cost (DHC) as the valuation approach for infrastructure assets. The introduction of the HNA Code will see this valuation basis change to depreciated replacement cost with effect from 1 April 2016. The change will be applied prospectively from that date, so Highways Authorities are not required to disclose comparative information.</p> <p>This is a fundamental change in approach which will require new accounting and estimation approaches as well as amendments to existing systems, or implementation of new systems.</p>	<p>The impact on the Council's Balance Sheet will be highly significant; with the recognition of a single highways network asset of approximately £5 billion. The impact on the audit will also be significant, as auditors will need to obtain sufficient assurance over the material accuracy of this asset.</p> <p>We will work closely with the Council at both the local level, regarding system implementation, valuation procedures and accounting, and at the wider level through the continuation of our HNA Client Workshops.</p>

Area	Issue	Impact
<p>Gloriana Thurrock Ltd</p>	<p>The Council incorporated Gloriana Thurrock Ltd during the 2014/15 financial year. The company is wholly owned by the Council and was created with the objective of developing affordable housing within the Thurrock area. The company traded for the first time during 2015/16. The Council is proactively exploring different ways to meet the Council's housing and regeneration objectives, and Gloriana Thurrock Ltd is a key element in that strategy.</p> <p>In 2015/16, the Council gave careful consideration to how it accounted for its relationship with Gloriana Thurrock Ltd and whether it was required to prepare Group Accounts. The Council concluded that group accounts were not required in 2015/16 and we deemed that conclusion to be reasonable.</p>	<p>It is planned that Gloriana Thurrock Ltd will expand considerably over the next few years; with more locations within the Borough being identified and developed. The company's operations will become more complex as it begins to both rent and dispose of the completed properties.</p> <p>We will work alongside the Council as Gloriana becomes more strategically important. We will continue to work with finance officers on the preparation of group accounts, which will be required from 2016/17 due to the financial impact of the company on the Council.</p>

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ED None

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