

The Annual Audit Letter for North Devon District Council

Year ended 31 March 2020

15 December 2020



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Executive Summary

Purpose

Our Annual Audit Letter (Letter) summarises the key findings arising from the work that we have carried out at North Devon District Council (the Council) for the year ended 31 March 2020.

This Letter is intended to provide a commentary on the results of our work to the Council and external stakeholders, and to highlight issues that we wish to draw to the attention of the public. In preparing this Letter, we have followed the National Audit Office (NAO)'s Code of Audit Practice and Auditor Guidance Note (AGN) 07 – 'Auditor Reporting'. We reported the detailed findings from our audit work to the Council's Governance Committee as those charged with governance in our Audit Findings Report on 5 October 2020.

Respective responsibilities

We have carried out our audit in accordance with the NAO's Code of Audit Practice, which reflects the requirements of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the Act). Our key responsibilities are to:

- give an opinion on the Council's financial statements (section two)
- assess the Council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources (the value for money conclusion) (section three).

In our audit of the Council's financial statements, we comply with International Standards on Auditing (UK) (ISAs) and other guidance issued by the NAO.

Our work

Materiality	We determined materiality for the audit of the Council's financial statements to be £1,000,000, which is circa 2% of the Council's gross cost of services.
Financial Statements opinion	<p>We gave an unqualified opinion on the Council's financial statements on 27 November 2020.</p> <p>We included an emphasis of matter paragraph in our report in respect of the uncertainty over valuations of the Council's land and buildings and investment properties and the property assets of its pension fund given the Coronavirus pandemic. This does not affect our opinion that the statements give a true and fair view of the Council's financial position and its income and expenditure for the year.</p>
Whole of Government Accounts (WGA)	North Devon District Council fell below the threshold set by the NAO that requires detailed testing to be completed. We submitted our assurance statement to the NAO on 26 November 2020.
Use of statutory powers	We did not identify any matters which required us to exercise our additional statutory powers.

Executive Summary

Value for Money arrangements	We were satisfied that the Council put in place proper arrangements to ensure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. We reflected this in our audit report to the Council on 27 November 2020.
Certificate	We certified that we have completed the audit of the financial statements of North Devon District Council in accordance with the requirements of the Code of Audit Practice on 27 November 2020.

Working with the Council

It has been a challenging year due to the impact of covid 19.

Restrictions for non-essential travel has meant both Council and audit staff have had to adapt to ensure we have gained sufficient audit evidence for the entries within the financial statements. This has meant a greater reliance on video calling for many aspects of the audit, particularly in terms of the use of sharing of screens to watch transaction listing being run. Where information is normally provided in a spreadsheet format, we have undertaken additional levels of testing to ensure that the information provided hasn't been manipulated prior to being sent to the audit team.

We are pleased to report that this process has worked well with both teams collaborating to identify solutions to hurdles presented by remote working. Our 'inflo' document sharing system has facilitated this but inevitably the remote working has impacted on delivery and additional resources have been necessary on both sides to complete the work in accordance with the new extended reporting timetable.

We would like to record our appreciation for the assistance and co-operation provided to us during our audit by the Council's staff.

Grant Thornton UK LLP
December 2020

Audit of the Financial Statements

Our audit approach

Materiality

In our audit of the Council's financial statements, we use the concept of materiality to determine the nature, timing and extent of our work, and in evaluating the results of our work. We define materiality as the size of the misstatement in the financial statements that would lead a reasonably knowledgeable person to change or influence their economic decisions.

We determined materiality for the audit of the Council's financial statements to be £1,000,000, which is to circa 2% of the Council's gross cost of services. We used this benchmark as, in our view, users of Council's financial statements are most interested in where the Council has spent its revenue in the year.

We also set a lower level of specific materiality for senior officer remuneration. This was set at £10,000.

We set a lower threshold of £50,000, above which we reported errors to the Governance Committee in our Audit Findings Report.

The scope of our audit

Our audit involves obtaining sufficient evidence about the amounts and disclosures in the financial statements to give reasonable assurance that they are free from material misstatement, whether caused by fraud or error. This includes assessing whether:

- the accounting policies are appropriate, have been consistently applied and adequately disclosed;
- the significant accounting estimates made by management are reasonable; and
- the overall presentation of the financial statements gives a true and fair view.

We also read the remainder of the Statement of Accounts to check it is consistent with our understanding of the Council and with the financial statements included in the Statement of Accounts on which we gave our opinion.

We carry out our audit in accordance with ISAs (UK) and the NAO Code of Audit Practice. We believe that the audit evidence we have obtained is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for our opinion.

Our audit approach was based on a thorough understanding of the Council's business and is risk based.

We identified key risks and set out overleaf the work we performed in response to these risks and the results of this work.

Audit of the Financial Statements

Significant Audit Risks

These are the significant risks which had the greatest impact on our overall strategy and where we focused more of our work.

Risks identified in our audit plan	How we responded to the risk	Findings and conclusions
<p>Management override of internal controls</p> <p>Under ISA (UK) 240 there is a non-rebuttable presumed risk that the risk of management over-ride of controls is present in all entities. The Council faces external scrutiny of its spending and this could potentially place management under undue pressure in terms of how they report performance.</p> <p>We therefore identified management override of control, in particular journals, management estimates and transactions outside the course of business as a significant risk, which was one of the most significant assessed risks of material misstatement.</p>	<p>As part of our work we have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> evaluated the design effectiveness of management controls over journals; analysed the journals listing and determined the criteria for selecting high risk unusual journals; tested unusual journals made during the year and after the draft accounts stage for appropriateness and corroboration; gained an understanding of the accounting estimates and critical judgements applied made by management and considered their reasonableness; and evaluated the rationale for any changes in accounting policies, estimates or significant unusual transactions. 	<p>Our work identified that there is no preventative control in place around journals authorisation. All journals can be posted and authorised by the same person. There is only a retrospective review of all journals over £10,000 that occurs quarterly.</p> <p>Our testing of unusual journal postings made during the year did not identify any issues.</p>
<p>Improper revenue recognition</p> <p>Under ISA (UK) 240 there is a rebuttable presumed risk that revenue may be misstated due to the improper recognition of revenue.</p> <p>This presumption can be rebutted if the auditor concludes that there is no risk of material misstatement due to fraud relating to revenue recognition.</p>	<p>Having considered the risk factors set out in ISA240 and the nature of the revenue streams at the Authority, we determined at the planning stage that the risk of fraud arising from revenue recognition could be rebutted, because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> there is little incentive to manipulate revenue recognition opportunities to manipulate revenue recognition are very limited the culture and ethical frameworks of local authorities, including North Devon District Council, mean that all forms of fraud are seen as unacceptable <p>We reviewed material revenue transactions as part of our audit and we were satisfied that there had been no changes of circumstance requiring us to alter our proposed strategy with regards to revenue recognition in the latter part of the year.</p> <p>Our audit work did not identify any issues in respect of improper revenue recognition.</p>	

Audit of the Financial Statements

Significant Audit Risks (continued)

Risks identified in our audit plan	How we responded to the risk	Findings and conclusions
<p>Covid-19</p> <p>The global outbreak of the Covid-19 virus pandemic has led to unprecedented uncertainty for all organisations, requiring urgent business continuity arrangements to be implemented. We expect current circumstances will have an impact on the production and audit of the financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2020, including and not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Remote working arrangements and redeployment of staff to critical front line duties may impact on the quality and timing of the production of the financial statements, and the evidence we can obtain through physical observation; - Volatility of financial and property markets will increase the uncertainty of assumptions applied by management to asset valuation and receivable recovery estimates, and the reliability of evidence we can obtain to corroborate management estimates; - Financial uncertainty will require management to reconsider financial forecasts supporting their going concern assessment and whether material uncertainties for a period of at least 12 months from the anticipated date of approval of the audited financial statements have arisen; and - Disclosures within the financial statements will require significant revision to reflect the unprecedented situation and its impact on the preparation of the financial statements as at 31 March 2020 in accordance with IAS1, particularly in relation to material uncertainties. <p>We therefore identified the global outbreak of the Covid-19 virus as a significant risk, which was one of the most significant assessed risks of material misstatement.</p>	<p>As part of our audit work we have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • worked with management to understand the implications the response to the Covid-19 pandemic had on the organisation's ability to prepare the financial statements and update financial forecasts and assessed the implications for our materiality calculations. The draft financial statements were provided on 22 July 2020, which was ahead of the date originally planned; • liaised with other audit suppliers, regulators and government departments to co-ordinate practical cross-sector responses to issues as and when they arose; • evaluated the adequacy of the disclosures in the financial statements that arose in light of the Covid-19 pandemic; • evaluated whether sufficient audit evidence could be obtained through remote technology; • evaluated whether sufficient audit evidence could be obtained to corroborate significant management estimates such as assets and the pension fund liability valuations; and • evaluated management's assumptions that underpin the revised financial forecasts and the impact on management's going concern assessment. 	<p>Our audit work, did not identify any significant issues in respect of Covid-19 specific risks.</p> <p>This is not to say that there was not an impact. The Council have identified a material uncertainty in relation to land and building valuations and has extended this to investment properties.</p> <p>In addition on receipt of letters of assurance from the Devon County Pension Fund Auditor an additional material uncertainty was identified in relation to the property investment funds that form part of the Pension Fund Assets and North Devon District Councils share of these assets. The draft financial statements were amended to reflect this uncertainty.</p> <p>The financial challenge into the medium term have also increased due to the lost income, additional costs and the uncertainty of future government funding in respect of Covid-19.</p>

Audit of the Financial Statements

Significant Audit Risks (continued)

Risks identified in our audit plan	How we responded to the risk	Findings and conclusions
<p>Valuation of land and buildings (Rolling revaluation)</p> <p>The Council revalues its land and buildings on a rolling five-yearly basis. This valuation represents a significant estimate by management in the financial statements due to the size of the numbers involved (£78.1m) and the sensitivity of this estimate to changes in key assumptions. Additionally, management will need to ensure the carrying value in the Council's financial statements is not materially different from the current value at the financial statements date, where a rolling programme is used.</p> <p>We therefore identified valuation of land and buildings, particularly revaluations and impairments, as a significant risk, which was one of the most significant assessed risks of material misstatement.</p>	<p>As part of our audit work we have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> evaluated management's processes and assumptions for the calculation of the estimate, the instructions issued to valuation experts and the scope of their work; evaluated the competence, capabilities and objectivity of the valuation expert; written to the valuer to confirm the basis on which the valuation was carried out; challenged the information and assumptions used by the valuer to assess completeness and consistency with our understanding, the Council's valuer's report and the assumptions that underpin the valuation; tested revaluations made during the year to see if they had been input correctly into the Council's asset register; and evaluated the assumptions made by the valuer for those assets revalued at 31 March 2020. For the assets not formally revalued in year we have assessed how management has satisfied themselves that these assets are not materially different to current value at year end. 	<p>We noted that from 2019/20, the Council had changed its valuation date for those assets subject to revaluation in year to the 31 March 2020. This combined with £72.9m of the £78.1m of assets held at 31 March 2020 being subject to a revaluation in 2019/20 provided strong assurance over the material accuracy of the land and buildings carrying value at 31 March 2020.</p> <p>As highlighted previously in this report, we included an emphasis of matter paragraph in the audit opinion to reflect the uncertainty surrounding land and building (and investment property) valuations at the year end. In line with RICS guidance, the valuer employed by the Council included a material uncertainty in their final valuation report. Officers reflected this in note 6 of the financial statements. The emphasis of matter paragraph refers to this disclosure in the accounts and draws attention to it for the readers of the financial statements and reflects the increased uncertainty in global markets created by covid-19.</p> <p>This is in line with other local councils.</p>

Audit of the Financial Statements

Significant Audit Risks (continued)

Risks identified in our audit plan	How we responded to the risk	Findings and conclusions
<p>Valuation of pension fund net liability</p> <p>The Council's pension fund net liability, as reflected in its balance sheet as the net defined benefit liability, represents a significant estimate in the financial statements.</p> <p>The pension fund net liability is considered a significant estimate due to the size of the numbers involved (£55.6 million in the Council's balance sheet) and the sensitivity of the estimate to changes in key assumptions.</p> <p>We therefore identified valuation of the Council's pension fund net liability as a significant risk, which was one of the most significant assessed risks of material misstatement, and a key audit matter.</p>	<p>As part of our audit work we have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • updated our understanding of the processes and controls put in place by management to ensure that the Council's pension fund net liability is not materially misstated and evaluated the design of the associated controls; • evaluated the instructions issued by management to their management expert (an actuary) for this estimate and the scope of the actuary's work; • assessed the competence, capabilities and objectivity of the actuary who carried out the Council's pension fund valuation; • assessed the accuracy and completeness of the information provided by the Council to the actuary to estimate the liability; • tested the consistency of the pension fund asset and liability and disclosures in the notes to the core financial statements with the actuarial report from the actuary; • undertaken procedures to confirm the reasonableness of the actuarial assumptions made by reviewing the report of the consulting actuary (as auditor's expert) and performing any additional procedures suggested within the report; • agreed the advance payment made to the pension fund during the year to the expected accounting treatment and relevant financial disclosures; and • followed up the unadjusted misstatement reported in the 2018/19 Audit Findings Report and have ensured that this has now been adjusted correctly as a past service cost. 	<p>Our work has not identified any issues in respect of valuation of the net liability.</p> <p>On receipt of the letters of assurance from the Devon County Pension Fund Auditor an additional material uncertainty was identified in relation to the property investment funds that form part of the Pension Fund Assets and North Devon District Councils share of these assets.</p> <p>The Council amended the draft financial statements to include a material uncertainty in note 6 of the revised financial statements.</p> <p>As highlighted previously in this report, we included an emphasis of matter paragraph in the audit opinion to reflect this uncertainty. The emphasis of matter paragraph refers to this disclosure in the accounts and draws attention to it for the readers of the financial statements and reflects the increased uncertainty in global markets created by covid-19.</p> <p>This is in line with other local councils.</p>

Audit of the Financial Statements

Audit opinion

We gave an unqualified opinion on the Council's financial statements on 27 November 2020.

Preparation of the financial statements

The Council presented us with draft financial statements in July 2020, ahead of the agreed timescale, and provided a good set of working papers to support them. The finance team responded promptly and efficiently to our queries during the course of the audit.

Issues arising from the audit of the financial statements

We reported the key issues from our audit to the Council's Governance Committee on 5 October 2020.

Annual Governance Statement and Narrative Report

We are also required to review the Council's Annual Governance Statement and Narrative Report. It published them on its website alongside the draft Statement of Accounts in line with the National Deadline.

Both documents were prepared in line with the CIPFA Code and relevant supporting guidance. We confirmed that both documents were consistent with the financial statements prepared by the Council and with our knowledge of the Council.

Whole of Government Accounts (WGA)

We issued an assurance statement which confirmed the Council was below the audit threshold on 26 November 2020.

Certificate of closure of the audit

We certified that we have completed the audit of the financial statements of North Devon District Council in accordance with the requirements of the Code of Audit Practice on 27 November 2020.

Value for Money conclusion

Background

We carried out our review in accordance with the NAO Code of Audit Practice, following the guidance issued by the NAO in April 2020 which specified the criterion for auditors to evaluate:

'In all significant respects, the audited body takes properly informed decisions and deploys resources to achieve planned and sustainable outcomes for taxpayers and local people'.

Key findings

Our first step in carrying out our work was to perform a risk assessment and identify the risks where we concentrated our work.

The risks we identified and the work we performed are set out overleaf.

As part of our Audit Findings report agreed with the Council in October 2020, we agreed recommendations to address our findings.

Overall Value for Money conclusion

We are satisfied that in all significant respects the Council put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources for the year ending 31 March 2020.

Value for Money conclusion

Value for Money Risks

Risk identified in our audit plan

Financial Sustainability

North Devon District Council continues to face significant financial challenges over the medium term. As at month 9 the Council is forecasting an underspend of circa £0.006m in 2019/20 but has a funding gap of circa £2.678m through to 2023/24. This budget gap has increased significantly from the budget gap of £0.666m reported in 2018/19. This is largely due to the assumptions made regarding New Homes Bonus and Business Rates. These are both areas of significant uncertainty and the Council appear to have taken a prudent approach. The Council currently has a General Fund Reserves balance (including earmarked reserves) of £6.629m. This is forecast to reduce by circa £1.3m as at 31 March 2020.

Findings

Historically the Council had a strong track record of meeting its financial targets, and despite a challenging year, the Council have delivered a small surplus of £0.241m for 2019/20 which has been transferred into reserves. The Council ended the year with General Fund Reserves of £1.161m and General Fund Earmarked Reserves of £5.395m.

As set out in our Audit Plan the Council faced a significant financial challenge pre Covid-19. At that point the Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy indicated a budget gap over the medium term of £2.678m. Whilst there were schemes identified to close this gap and work had started in some areas to address the shortfall this was halted by Covid-19.

The global pandemic has exasperated the financial challenges faced by the Council. Although the outbreak had limited impact on 2019/20 it has serious consequences for 2020/21 and beyond. The projected lost income and increased costs, have to date only been partially offset by additional central government funding.

It is clear from our review that the Council's financial reporting arrangements are effective and the level of reporting has increased in response to the uncertainty presented by the virus. Despite the Council's good track record of delivering savings, delivering increase savings to plug any gap in the current climate will be challenging and the use of reserves and balances is not sustainable into the medium term.

The longer-term impact of the virus is not yet known and there are likely to be significant impacts across the medium term. The Councils initial forecast indicate that whilst the 2020/21 outturn will be impacted, and the original budget gaps remain these are likely to increase.

The pressures are expected to impact as follows:

2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
£0.385m	£1.781m	£2.110m	£2.678m

Years 2021/22 and 2022/23 are therefore pivotal in achieving financial sustainability. Officers and Members recognise difficult decisions will need to be made to cut costs and deliver further savings. Saving schemes often have significant lead times and as such progress needs to be made to ensure the impact on the Council's reserves are minimised. As at quarter 1 2020/21 the Council are forecasting an overspend of £0.385m, which will be funded from savings in year or use of reserves.

Financial modelling undertaken by the Council on busines rates and council tax collection sets out that 'worse case', there could be a further £0.372m per year challenge over the medium term.

There is a session planned with the Senior Management Team and Members in mid-October 2020 to review the revised Medium-Term Financial Strategy and to discuss all the options for addressing the shortfall and ensuring financial resilience into the medium term.

Value for Money

Conclusion

Based on the work completed we concluded that the Council has adequate arrangements in place to deliver financial sustainability.

We have concluded that the Council has good arrangements in place to set a realistic and achievable budget for 2019/20.

We have concluded that the Council has responded appropriately to the impact of Covid-19 on its medium term financial planning. The Council recognises the inherent risk due to this and the combination of loss of income and increased costs compounded by greater expectation and continued austerity. Whilst balances and reserves are adequate any planned use of them in future budgets is not sustainable into the medium term.

The financial years 20/21 and 21/22 will see perhaps the peak of the challenge with reduced levels of income, impact on savings, and uncertainty of funding. It is therefore business critical that officers and members take immediate action to identify further mitigations by way of reducing costs or increasing income. It is also crucial the medium-term financial plan is refreshed at the earliest opportunity.

Continued close in year monitoring and timely corrective action will be required to ensure budgets are delivered and service redesign with partners implemented.

A. Reports issued and fees – North Devon District Council

Audit fees 2019/20	Proposed fee
County Council scale fee	36,499
Additional proposed audit fee at planning stage	7,500
Total proposed audit fees (excluding VAT) at planning	£43,999
Further additional fees proposed at completion	6,600
Total proposed audit fees (excluding VAT) on completion	£50,599

Reports issued

Report	Dated issued
Audit Plan	10 March 2020
Audit Findings Report	25 September 2020
Annual Audit Letter	11 December 2020

The North Devon District Council Audit Plan date 10 March 2020 included £7,500 of proposed addition fees to the scale fee to take account of the additional scepticism required on the audit and the raising of the bar by our regulator. This is reflected in the total proposed audit fees at planning above of £43,999.

Since the presentation of the audit plan and subsequent letter, we have added a significant risk to the audit following the impact of Covid-19. We have now reflected on the time taken to discharge our responsibilities this year and are proposing a further increase in fees of £6,600 in addition to those proposed at the planning stage of the audit. This brings the total proposed audit fee up to £50,599. Further details on the breakdown is provided on the next page.

This further charge has not been entered into lightly but reflects only a proportion of the significant additional work we have had to undertake this year to discharge our responsibilities.

We have been discussing this issue with PSAA over the last few months and note these issues are similar to those experienced in the commercial sector and NHS. In both sectors there has been a recognition that audits will take longer with commercial audit deadlines being extended by 4 months and NHS deadline by a month. The FRC has also issued guidance to companies and auditors setting out its expectation that audit standards remain high and of additional work needed across all audits. The link attached <https://www.frc.org.uk/covid-19-guidance-and-advice> (see guidance for auditors) sets out the expectations of the FRC.

Please note that these proposed additional fees are subject to approval by PSAA in line with the Terms of Appointment.

Appendix A – North Devon District Council Audit fee variations – Further analysis

Final proposed audit fees

The table below shows the proposed variations to the original scale fee for 2019/20 subject to PSAA approval

Audit area	£	Rationale for fee variation
Scale fee	36,499	
Raising the bar	2,500	The Financial Reporting Council (FRC) has highlighted that the quality of work by all audit firms needs to improve across local audit. This required additional supervision and leadership, as well as additional challenge and scepticism in areas such as journals, estimates, financial resilience and information provided by the entity.
Pensions – (IAS) 19	1,750	We have increased the granularity, depth and scope of coverage, with increased levels of sampling, additional levels of challenge and explanation sought, and heightened levels of documentation and reporting.
PPE Valuation – work of experts	1,750	We have increased the volume and scope of our audit work to ensure an adequate level of audit scrutiny and challenge over the assumptions that underpin PPE valuations.
New Accounting Standards	1,500	Note that PSAA's original scale fee for this contract was set in March 2018, so any new developments since that time need to be priced in. You are required to respond effectively to new accounting standards and we must ensure our audit work in these new areas is robust.
Revised planning fee	43,999	
Covid-19	6,600	Over the past six months the current Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on all of our lives, both at work and at home. The impact of Covid-19 on the audit of the financial statements for 2019/20 has been multifaceted. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revisiting planning - we have needed to revisit our planning and refresh risk assessments, materiality and testing levels. This has resulted in the identification of a significant risk at the financial statements level in respect of Covid-19 necessitating the issuing of an addendum to our original audit plan as well as additional work on areas such as going concern and disclosures in accordance with IAS1 particularly in respect to material uncertainties. Management's assumptions and estimates - there is increased uncertainty over many estimates including pension and other investment valuations. Many of these valuations are impacted by the reduction in economic activity and we are required to understand and challenge the assumptions applied by management. Financial resilience assessment – we have been required to consider the financial resilience of audited bodies. Our experience to date indicates that Covid-19 has impacted on the financial resilience of all local government bodies. This has increased the amount of work that we need to undertake on the sustainable resource deployment element of the VFM criteria necessitating enhanced and more detailed reporting in our ISA260. Remote working – the most significant impact in terms of delivery is the move to remote working. We, as other auditors, have experienced delays and inefficiencies as a result of remote working, including managing around agreed dates for receiving the accounts in light of knock on implications of other sector audits, and delays in responses during audit fieldwork. These are understandable and arise from the availability of the relevant information and/or the availability of key staff (due to shielding or other additional Covid-19 related demands). In many instances the delays are caused by our inability to sit with an officer to discuss a query or working paper. Gaining an understanding via Teams or phone is more time-consuming.
Total proposed audit fees on completion	50,599	

A. Reports issued and fees continued

Fees for non-audit services

Service	Fees £
Audit related services	
- Housing Benefits	£21,253
Non-Audit related services	
- None	Nil

Non-audit services

- For the purposes of our audit we have made enquiries of all Grant Thornton UK LLP teams providing services to the Council. The table above summarises all non-audit services which were identified.
- We have considered whether non-audit services might be perceived as a threat to our independence as the Council's auditor and have ensured that appropriate safeguards are put in place.

The above non-audit services are consistent with the Council's policy on the allotment of non-audit work to your auditor.



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