

# London Borough of Brent

Audit progress report and sector updates

March 2026

# Agenda

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# Audit progress report

# Introduction



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

The paper also includes a series of sector updates in respect of emerging issues which the Committee may wish to consider.

Members of the Audit & Standards 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:

[Local government | Grant Thornton.](#)

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 Sophia or Sheena.



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# Progress as at March 2026 (1)

## Financial statements audit

We completed our external audit of your 2024-25 financial statements on 25 February 2026 following presentation of our Audit Findings Report at the 3 February 2026 Audit & Standards Committee meeting. On issuing the 2024-25 audit opinion we also finalised the Audit Findings Report and the Auditor's Annual Report. These final documents will be included in papers for the upcoming Audit & Standards Committee meeting on 24 March 2026.

We commenced planning and risk assessment procedures for the 2025-26 audit on 9 March 2026. In line with the timetable set out in the Appendix we will discuss the advanced testing schedule with management to support early progress ahead of the year-end audit.

New audit legislation introduces earlier backstop dates for publishing local authority accounts over the next three years. Our letter in the Appendix explains how we are preparing for the statutory deadline moving to 30 November. Specific time frames for the Council's 2025-26 audit will be confirmed in the 2025-26 Audit Plan.

## Value for money

In our 2024-25 Auditor's Annual Report, we reported two significant weaknesses under Financial Sustainability relating to medium-term financial planning and the development of a pipeline of recurrent savings and income-generation schemes. We also reported a significant weakness under Improving Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness, following the Council's self-referral to the Regulator of Social Housing, and their finding in May 2025 that the Council failed to meet the Safety and Quality Standard in relation to accuracy and completion of fire safety data and housing repairs, highlighting compliance risks and potential cost increases.

We have completed our planning and risk assessment procedures for the 2025-26 VFM work. At this stage, we have assumed that the prior-year findings remain areas of significant weakness, and will set this out in the 2025-26 Audit Plan. We will revisit prior-year significant weaknesses and key recommendations in our 2025-26 work to assess progress and determine if further action is required.

As our work progresses, we will continue to monitor for any emerging issues. Should any potential significant weaknesses be identified, we will report these promptly to those charged with governance.

# Progress at March 2026 (2)

## Meetings

As part of our 2025-26 audit, we will meet regularly with the finance team as part of our audit liaison meetings.

We have recurring meetings with your Chief Executive and Corporate Director Finance and Resource. During these meetings we receive strategic finance updates, and we discuss the progress of the audit. These regular meetings ensure that issues are flagged and discussed early.

## Audit fees

PSAA published their scale fees for 2025-26: [Auditor-Directory-for-Website-2025-2026-as-at-11-02-2026.xlsx](#)

For the London Borough of Brent, these fees are £560,500 for the Council's audit. These fees are derived from the procurement exercise carried out by PSAA in 2022. They reflect both the increased work auditors must now undertake as well as the scarcity of audit firms willing to do this work.

## Events

We recently held a webinar for members of audit committees on 10 February 2026, to discuss best next steps to take "After the Backstop". A recording for the webinar can be found here: [After the Backstop | Grant Thornton](#).

We also held two Local Government Accounts webinars for preparers of accounts on 5 and 11 February 2026, where we discussed a range of topics for preparing the 2025-26 statement of account.

# Audit deliverables

Below are some of the audit deliverables planned for 2025-26

2025-26 Deliverables	Planned date	Status
<p><b>Audit Plan</b></p> <p>We are required to issue a detailed audit plan to the Audit &amp; Standards Committee setting out our proposed approach to giving an opinion on the Council's 2025-26 financial statements.</p>	<p>Agreement with mgmt. in April 2026 Present to ASC in June 2026</p>	<p>In progress</p>
<p><b>Audit Findings Report</b></p> <p>The Audit Findings Report will be reported to the Audit &amp; Standards Committee.</p>	<p>November 2026</p>	<p>Not yet due</p>
<p><b>Auditor's Report</b></p> <p>This includes the opinion on your financial statements.</p>	<p>November 2026</p>	<p>Not yet due</p>
<p><b>Auditor's Annual Report</b></p> <p>This report communicates the key outputs of the audit, including our commentary on the Council's value for money arrangements.</p>	<p>November 2026</p>	<p>Not yet due</p>

The Appendix provides an update on expected audit timeframes from 2026 onwards.

# Sector updates

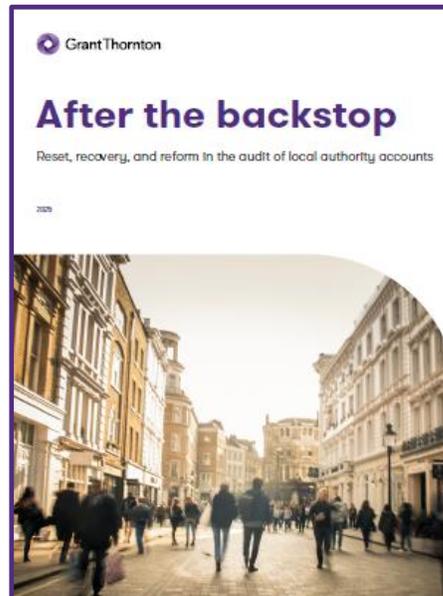
# After the Backstop:

## Reset, recovery and reform in the audit of local authority accounts

Our latest thought leadership report ‘After the Backstop: Reset, recovery and reform in the audit of local authority accounts’ was published in December 2025.

In this report we explored the development and implementation of a ‘reset’ of the local audit system, the immediate and longer-term consequences of the ‘backstop’ before turning attention to the reform of the system, the challenges involved in returning to widespread and sustainable compliance with audit reporting timeframes and what, in our view, is needed next. We also set out a series of recommendations for the Local Audit Office, the UK Government, local bodies, Audit Committees, and auditors.

The full report is available here: [Local audit reset: What comes after the backstop? | Grant Thornton](#)



Gareth Davies, Head of the National Audit Office, informed Parliament [in a keynote speech on 10th February 2026](#) that the use of disclaimed audit opinions to meet backstop dates, coming after years of backlogs in the accounts, means that *“we have no independent assurance about how local government spent billions of pounds of public money”*.

By coincidence, we were joined at a webinar by some 140 local government finance professionals and audit committee members on the same day to discuss reset, recovery and reform in the local audit market. Insight from the discussion can be found here: [After the Backstop | Grant Thornton](#).

Key recommendations to audit committees are:

- ❖ Recruit independent members with appropriate skills and experience.
- ❖ Hold management and auditors to account.
- ❖ Report to full Council on an annual basis with their assessment of the accounts preparation and audit process.

# CIPFA Code changes to the accounting for non-investment assets

## Changes introduced in the 2025/26 Code:

The 2025/26 CIPFA Code introduces substantial changes arising from the HM Treasury Thematic Review on Non-investment assets, and the requirement to keep the valuations of certain assets up to date:

- ❖ The introduction of a valuation expedient requiring valuations once every five years or on a five-year rolling basis, in each case supported by indexation in intervening years; and
- ❖ The Code requires the use of the best available indices and, where no index is available, a desktop valuation is undertaken in year three.

The following asset classes are affected by the change:

- ❖ Other land and buildings;
- ❖ Vehicles, plant, furniture and equipment (where carried at current value);
- ❖ Surplus assets; and
- ❖ Right of use assets measured at current value

Assets which are not in scope of the changes include council dwellings; vehicles; plant and equipment carried at depreciated historical cost as a proxy for current value; infrastructure; assets under construction; heritage assets; assets held for sale; intangible assets; and community assets carried at cost.

## Why indexation is important:

Indexation is a new requirement in the Code, intended to provide a reasonable estimate of how market values have changed, rather than an exact valuation. A range of indices are available, and authorities will need to exercise and be prepared to explain their judgements on which indices are the most appropriate to apply across their asset base. Authorities may apply indexation to 31 March 2025 carrying values, providing the assumption that existing carrying values are true and fair is valid. Where valuations are required, they must be undertaken at least once every five-years or when there are indicators of impairment.

## Audit committees can help by asking:

- ❖ Have we sought advice from an expert valuer on which indices are most appropriate for our various assets within scope of indexation?
- ❖ Have we documented our rationale regarding why we select/reject or deem there to be no indices?
- ❖ How has indexation been calculated/applied in underlying records/ asset systems?
- ❖ Have we ensured that asset records distinguish between revaluation versus indexation, so that we have a clear record of when valuations are due and when valuations were last carried out?

# Public Sector Finance Leaders' Barometer

Audit committees can obtain new analysis of the issues public sector finance leaders most prioritise, and how it might affect their organisation, here:

[The Public Sector Finance Leaders' Barometer | Grant Thornton](#)

## Background

Grant Thornton's 2026 Public Sector Finance Leaders' Barometer draws on the views of 100 s151 officers across local government in England to identify the top three strategic priorities, operational pressures and in-demand skills for public sector finance this year.

84% of those interviewed were confident that their medium-term financial strategies will hold, but there was consensus that the biggest risks those strategies face are largely outside the s151 officer's control:

- Growth in demand for statutory services
- Unfunded policy changes
- Failure to deliver change programmes.

These risks highlight the need for better demand modelling, earlier horizon scanning, and disciplined delivery of change programmes. However, workforce shortages, recruitment challenges, and increasing complexity, mean there's simply not enough capacity to deliver transformation at the required pace.



**Interviews with 100 s151 officers identified for 2026:**

**The top three strategic priorities are:**

- ❖ Digital transformation
- ❖ Talent attraction and retention
- ❖ Regulatory compliance

**The top three top operational pressures are:**

- ❖ Rising operating costs
- ❖ Complexity of regulation
- ❖ Workforce and skills shortages

**The top three most in-demand skills are:**

- ❖ Technical accounting
- ❖ Data analytics and business intelligence
- ❖ Change management

# Finance Settlement 2026/27 to 2028/29

The Government published the final Local Government finance settlement for 2026/27 to 2028/29, valued at some £78 billion, on 9 February 2026. We note that:

- ❖ This was the first multi-year settlement for a decade, helping to create certainty for financial planning.
- ❖ Councils will have up to 90% of their historic SEND-related deficit balances as at 31st March 2026 covered by a new grant.
- ❖ Some councils impacted by historic funding cuts will receive targeted investment through a £440 million Recovery Grant uplift, aimed at increasing spend on street cleaning, pot-hole repair and services.
- ❖ There is an extra £272 million homelessness funding to invest in Homelessness, Rough Sleeping and Domestic Abuse Grant; an additional £50 million to help Councils implement the Renter's Rights Act; and an additional £39.6 billion for mayoral capacity.
- ❖ Seven councils have been granted permission for flexibility to raise council tax over the referendum limit.

[Key information table for local authorities: final local government finance settlement 2026 to 2027 - GOV.UK](#)

**There are important aspects to be aware of:**

- ❖ Although all local councils with a SEND deficit will be eligible to receive the new grant funding, they will need to secure approval of a SEND local reform plan first.
- ❖ Residual SEND deficits accrued by 31 March 2026 will only be covered by statutory override until 31 March 2028. Similarly, any new deficits incurred in 2026/27 and 2027/28 are only covered by statutory override until that date.
- ❖ The new Indices of Multiple Deprivation, have brought changes in the distribution of funds between areas – some areas will gain, but others will lose.
- ❖ The government has still had to approve [Exceptional Financial Support](#) for 35 local authorities.

# Local Outcomes Framework

Audit committees should seek to understand how their organisation is implementing reporting against new local government Outcomes:

The Government published a new Local Outcomes Framework on 9 February 2026, setting out 16 national priority outcomes that central government and local government will work together in partnership to deliver:

[Local Outcomes Framework: Priority outcomes and metrics - GOV.UK](#)

Using the Outcomes Framework will be a radical shift in the way that the performance of local government is assessed. We will see a shift from process-heavy form filling by councils for central government, to a clearer focus on what councils are actually achieving at local level.

Prominent sector commentators such as [Solace](#) and the [Local Government Association](#) have reacted very positively.

The Outcomes in turn are supported by metrics that will be populated from robust, well known national data sources such as the Office for National Statistics; Government Departments for areas such as Health and Social Care, Education, Transport, and Work and Pensions; the Ministry of Justice; and Sport England.

## New local government Outcomes:

- ❖ Housing Supply
- ❖ Housing quality and safety
- ❖ Homelessness and rough sleeping
- ❖ Multiple disadvantage
- ❖ Best start in life
- ❖ Every child achieving and thriving
- ❖ Keeping children safe (children's social care)
- ❖ Health and wellbeing
- ❖ Adult social care – quality
- ❖ Adult social care – independence, choice and control
- ❖ Adult social care - neighbourhood health / integration
- ❖ Neighbourhoods
- ❖ Environment, circular economy and climate change
- ❖ Transport and local infrastructure
- ❖ Economic prosperity and regeneration – contextual outcome
- ❖ Child poverty

# The Crisis and Resilience Fund

- ❖ A new Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF) will be introduced from 1 April 2026, replacing the Household Support Fund and providing a £1 billion annual government fund in England, until March 2029, to help low-income families if they suffer financial shock.
- ❖ Culturally, there will be a big difference between the new CRF and its predecessor, the Housing Support Fund (HSF). The CRF emphasises lasting support and resilience (into the long-term), while the HSF focused on immediate crisis response.
- ❖ The new CRF will have three main aims: Effective crisis support; improving the citizen's own financial resilience (ability to withstand financial shock); and bolstering local support networks in communities.

Updated guidance was provided by the Government on 21 January 2026 **Crisis and Resilience Fund: Guidance for local authorities in England (1 April 2026 to 31 March 2029) - GOV.UK.**



# Local government reorganisation and devolution update

## Latest developments

- ❖ **11 January 2026:** Consultation closed for four Devolution Priority Programme areas undergoing unitarisation. Decisions are expected in March 2026.
- ❖ **20 January 2026:** The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill moved to Committee stage.
- ❖ **5 February 2026:** New consultations were launched on local government reorganisation proposals for another 14 different areas across England. The consultations will run for seven weeks until Thursday 26th March 2026 and can be found here: [Local government reorganisation: Policy and programme updates - GOV.UK](#).
- ❖ **12 February 2026:** All areas in England without devolution can propose foundation strategic authority boundaries by 20th March 2026. [Written statements - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#)
- ❖ **12 February 2026:** Proposals for nine new foundation strategic authorities were announced at the same time as announcing new spatial development strategies [Areas for producing spatial development strategies - GOV.UK](#)
- ❖ **16 February 2026:** The Government confirmed that the local elections due in England on 7th May 2026 will go ahead for 30 councils where delays had previously been announced.

The [Institute for Government \(IFG\)](#) suggested in December 2025 that the government may have fundamentally misunderstood the scale of the local government reorganisation task it set itself.

Two Grant Thornton publications provide further information:

- ❖ [Navigating the future: The dual challenge of local Government reorganisation and devolution | Grant Thornton](#)
- ❖ [Dual delivery - How can areas successfully reorganise local government and implement devolution at the same time?](#)



# Unlocking land for housing

On 11 February 2026, the National Audit Office published a report that drew on interviews with 15 different local authorities about their experiences of working with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and Homes England to unlock land for housing delivery. Experiences to date show that:

- ❖ Unlocking land takes a long time. Since 2016/17, MHCLG has allocated £10.5 billion of funding to unlock land for housing. MHCLG expects that the money will have been spent by March 2034.
- ❖ It is uncertain how directly successful MHCLG interventions to unlock land so far have been. Previous funding provided capacity for building 713,000 new homes across England, but there is no direct record of how many were new builds are directly attributable to that funding.

**With a new £21 billion scheme launching on 1 April 2026**, the NAO recommends that MHCLG works with local authority (and other) partners to:

- ❖ Agree an approach to performance measurement with delivery partners;
- ❖ Generate timely data on both progress of unlocking land and subsequent delivery of new homes on new projects and active legacy projects; and
- ❖ Put in place evaluation and monitoring arrangements that provide continuous timely evidence.

## Key facts

1.5 million - Number of homes to be built by the end of this parliament.

£16 billion – committed to the new National Housing Bank from 1 April 2026 for investment capital (£10.5 billion) and housing guarantees (£5.5 billion).

£5 billion – Grant Funding through the new housing delivery fund from 1 April 2026.

Findings from the National Audit Office: [Unlocking land for housing - NAO report](#)

# Successful legacy planning for major events



Just as UK and Ireland Ltd starts to ramp up work for the Euros 2028 to be based at nine different locations across our two countries, so Mayors and Local Government Leaders from the North of England delivered a [joint letter on 8 February 2026](#) (from the Great North to the government), calling for any future UK Olympic and Paralympic bid to be centred in the North of England. The letter highlighted the legacy benefits that can accrue for regions from major sporting events in terms of jobs, regeneration and transport links.

Successful legacies don't happen on their own though. They take careful planning to achieve.

The [International Olympics Committee's Strategic Approach to Legacy](#) has in the past emphasised:

- ❖ Embedding communication legacy objectives from the very start of the Olympics bid process;
- ❖ Developing strong partnerships to deliver the legacy; and
- ❖ Setting up effective governance for legacy measurement.

For economic legacy, [World Economic Forum](#) data published in February 2026 highlights the importance of strong and realistic forecasting.

In the North of England, it is clear that the sense of partnerships is already strong.

As the Leaders of Westmorland and Furness Council, and Cllr Mark Fryer, leader of Cumberland Council, both said:

“It is unlikely that stood alone any city or county (in the North) could have realistic hopes of pulling off such a major coup. But the combined ambition and offer of the authorities across the North of England is a far stronger proposition.”

# Audit committee resources

Commentary from Grant Thornton on recovering the accounts preparation and audit timetable:

[Local audit reset: What comes after the backstop? | Grant Thornton](#)

Latest guidance and learning from Grant Thornton on local government reorganisation and devolution:

[Navigating the future: The dual challenge of local Government reorganisation and devolution | Grant Thornton](#)

[Dual delivery - How can areas successfully reorganise local government and implement devolution at the same time?](#)

[Learning from the new unitary councils](#)

Grant Thornton learning on procurement and contract management:

[Local government procurement and contract management](#)

Audit Committee and organisational effectiveness in local authorities (CIPFA):

<https://www.cipfa.org/services/support-for-audit-committees/local-authority-audit-committees>

LGA Regional Audit Forums for Audit Committee Chairs

These are convened at least three times a year and are supported by the LGA. The forums provide an opportunity to share good practice, discuss common issues and offer training on key topics. Forums are organised by a lead authority in each region. Please email [ami.beeton@local.gov.uk](mailto:ami.beeton@local.gov.uk) LGA Senior Adviser, for more information.

CIPFA Application Note: Global Internal Audit Standards in the UK Public Sector

[Global Internal Audit Standards in the UK Public Sector | CIPFA](#)

CIPFA Good Governance

[Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Addendum](#)

The Three Lines of Defence Model (IAA)

<https://www.theiia.org/globalassets/documents/resources/the-ias-three-lines-model-an-update-of-the-three-lines-of-defense-july-2020/three-lines-model-updated-english.pdf>

Risk Management Guidance / The Orange Book (UK Government):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/orange-book>

# Appendix

# Appendix – Letter to S151 Officer from Grant Thornton on audit timeline for 2025-26 (1)

Ahead of us starting our work on your 2025-26 Accounts, we wanted to send you a letter to set out our plans for your audit timelines over the course of the next two years and what we will need from you as an Authority as part of these plans. As I am sure you are aware, on 30 September 2024, the Accounts and Audit (Amendment) Regulations 2024 came into force. This legislation introduced a series of backstop dates for local authority audits. These Regulations required audited financial statements to be published by the following dates:

For years ended 31 March 2025 by 27 February 2026

For years ended 31 March 2026 by 31 January 2027

For years ended 31 March 2027 by 30 November 2027

The statutory instrument is supported by the National Audit Office's (NAO) new Code of Audit Practice 2024. The backstop dates were introduced with the purpose of clearing the backlog of historic financial statements and enable to the reset of local audit. Where audit work is not complete, this will give rise to a disclaimer of opinion. This means the auditor has not been able to form an opinion on the financial statements.

To be able to achieve the targets for the next two financial years, as a firm we are looking to put things in place to enable us to achieve the end of November 2027 deadline. To help make this achievable, we are going to undertake a dry run of finishing our work on the 2025-26 Accounts by the end of November 2026. On this basis, we would like you to assist with this process by firstly setting an audit committee date in advance of the end of November 2026, to enable us to sign off our opinion by that date. We would note that the NAO has already set a requirement that our Value for Money (VfM) work is completed by 30 November each year which has been set to align with the upcoming 30 November accounts deadline.

# Appendix – Letter to S151 Officer from Grant Thornton on audit timeline for 2025-26 (2)

In advance of that, we will start our work on your accounts from 16 June 2026. Whilst we recognise this is in advance of the formal deadline for you as a local authority to publish your accounts, we feel this is an important first step towards achieving end of November closure. From 15 June 2026, for a four-week period, we will undertake a suite of initial sample selection and testing, ahead of the start of your formal audit visit in Phase 1 of our local government audit work, which will start on 13 July 2026.

This plan should allow us as a firm to deliver all our 2025-26 local government audits by the end of November 2026, putting us in a strong position ahead of the backstop formally moving to 30 November 2027. We appreciate this will require a change on how both sides will need to work to make this a reality, but we are committed to making this happen. We will undertake early engagement with your finance team to clearly set out our expectations and understand what is needed to make a success of these plans. MHCLG has asked us as a firm to report by 31 July 2026, on a case-by-case basis, our assessment of the Authority's ability to both maintain, and where necessary rebuild assurance. Having a clear and agreed project plan to complete all financial statements and VfM work by 30 November 2026 is a key part of this assurance.



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