

Leicester City Council Audit Progress Report and Sector Update

24 November 2021



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Introduction

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

The paper also includes:

- a summary of emerging national issues and developments that may be relevant to you as a local authority; and
- includes a number of challenge questions in respect of these emerging issues which the Committee may wish to consider (these are a tool to use, if helpful, rather than formal questions requiring responses for audit purposes)

Members of the Audit and Risk 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 www.grantthornton.co.uk.

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 your Engagement Lead or Engagement Manager.

Progress at November 2021

2020/21 Financial Statements Audit

We undertook our initial planning for the 2020/21 audit in January 2021, and interim audit in February and March.

In March we issued a detailed audit plan, setting out our proposed approach to the audit of the Authority's 2020/21 financial statements, and we began our work on your draft financial statements in June.

At the last Committee meeting on 29 September we reported to you our Audit Findings Report which at the time including some outstanding items which were still a work in progress, including anticipated changes to the accounts. Subsequently, a final version of the Audit Findings Report was provided to management on 15 October 2021 concurrently with our signed audit opinion.

We can provide the updated report to members on request but we summarise the final findings below.

Adjusted misstatements

4 adjustments were made, none of which resulted in an adjustment to the Council's Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement, or impacted on the Council's usable reserves:

- 1) Derecognition of St Margaret's Bus Statement -£10.1m
- 2) Derecognition of the Waterside assets under construction £2.5m
- 3) Correction of capital expenditure which had been written off as not adding value in the Housing Revenue Account £2.4m
- 4) Update to pension accounting as a result of the revised IAS19 report

Unadjusted Misstatements

There were 4 unadjusted misstatements reported, which management did not adjust for on the grounds of materiality:

- 1) Overstatement of the valuation of Braunstone Leisure Centre which had arisen as a result of applying an incorrect gross internal area of £1.2m.
- 2) Understatement of the valuation of Haymarket Car Park as a result of a transposition error of £1.6m.

- 2) Overstatement of Forest Lodge Education Centre as a result of a transposition error of £0.8m.
- 3) Overstatement of the valuation of Soar Valley College as a result of a transposition error of £0.7m.

These errors were considered immaterial both individually and in aggregate. The net impact on the Statement of Financial Position would have been to increase the value of Property, Plant & Equipment by £1.0m, had the adjustments been made.

2020/21 Value for Money

The new Code of Audit Practice (the "Code") came into force on 1 April 2020 for audit years 2020/21 and onwards. The most significant change under the new Code is the introduction of an Auditor's Annual Report, containing a commentary on arrangements to secure value for money and any associated recommendations, if required. The new approach is more complex, more involved and is planned to make more impact.

Under the 2020 Code of Audit Practice, for relevant authorities other than local NHS bodies auditors are required to issue our Auditor's Annual Report no later than 30 September or, where this is not possible, issue an audit letter setting out the reasons for delay.

As a result of the ongoing pandemic, and the impact it has had on both preparers and auditors of accounts to complete their work as quickly as would normally be expected, the National Audit Office has updated its guidance to auditors to allow us to postpone completion of our work on arrangements to secure value for money and focus our resources firstly on the delivery of our opinions on the financial statements.

The extended deadline is now no more than three months after the date of the opinion on the financial statements, which would be 15 January 2022. In our Audit Findings Report (including our letter setting out the reasons for delay) we confirmed that we anticipate issuing our Annual Auditor's Report prior to Christmas.

Progress at November 2021 (cont.)

Other areas

Certification of claims and returns

We certify the Authority's annual Housing Benefit Subsidy claim in accordance with procedures agreed with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Initial work was performed for the 2020/21 claim in June, and then paused while we focussed on the audit of the Authority's financial statements. We have recommenced work and will aim to report our findings to the Audit and Risk Committee in the new year.

We certify the Authority's annual Teachers' Pensions return in accordance with procedures agreed with Teachers' Pensions. Officers have provided us with the supporting documentation requested for our sample testing and our review of this evidence is currently underway.

We also certify the Authority's annual Pooling of Housing Capital Receipts return in accordance with procedures agreed with the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. (MHCLG) – now the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). Guidance has recently been issued, and officers have made contact with us to certify the claim for 2020/21. Grant Thornton's legal team is in the process of drafting an appropriate engagement letter, which we will issue to the Authority when available in order that we can commence work.

Events

We provide a range of workshops, along with network events for members and publications to support the Authority. Your officers will be invited to our Financial Reporting Workshop in the new year, which will help ensure that members of your Finance Team were up to date with the latest financial reporting requirements for local authority accounts.

Further details of the publications that may be of interest to the Authority are set out in our Sector Update section of this report.

Progress at November 2021 (cont.)

CFO insights

CFO Insights is an online software service offering from Grant Thornton UK LLP that enables users to rapidly analyse, segment and visualise all the key data relating to the financial performance of a local authority. The financial data, revenue outturn and budget data for the current year and the previous year (and in time up to 10 years), is provided by CIPFA and the socio-economic data is drawn from Place Analytics. The data is contextualised using a range of socio-economic indicators enabling a local authority to understand its relative performance.

It is reported to you here, as the Council has taken out a subscription to this service for three years at £12,500 annually.

We have set out our consideration of the threats to our independence as auditors, in providing this non-audit service, and the safeguards that have been applied to mitigate these threats.

Audit-related service	Fees £	Threats identified	Safeguards
CFO insights	12,500 (per annum for 3 years)	Self-Interest (because this is a recurring fee)	The level of this recurring fee taken on its own is not considered a significant threat to independence as the fee for this work is anticipated to be £12,500 in comparison to the total fee for the audit and in particular relative to Grant Thornton UK LLP's turnover overall. Further, it is a fixed fee and there is no contingent element to it. These factors all mitigate the perceived self-interest threat to an acceptable level.
		Self-review (because GT provides audit services)	To mitigate against the self review threat , the work is undertaken by a team independent of the audit team. The audit will consider the accounting treatment of the payments made and this is not part of CFOi service. There is not considered to be a significant self-review threat.

Deliverables

2020/21 Audit Deliverables	Planned Date	Status
<p>Audit Plan</p> <p>We are required to issue a detailed audit plan to the Audit and Risk Committee setting out our proposed approach in order to give an opinion on the Authority's 2020/21 financial statements and the Auditor's Annual Report on the Authority's Value for Money arrangements.</p>	March 2021	Complete
<p>Audit Findings Report</p> <p>This reports the findings of our audit work on the Authority's financial statements</p>	September 2021	Complete
<p>Auditors Report</p> <p>This is the opinion on your financial statements.</p>	September 2021	Completed and issued 15 October 2021
<p>Auditor's Annual Report</p> <p>This Report communicates the key issues arising from our Value for Money work.</p>	Christmas 2021	Not yet due
2020/21 Audit-related Deliverables	Planned Date	Status
<p>Teachers Pensions Scheme – certification</p> <p>This is the report we submit to Teachers Pensions based upon the mandated agreed upon procedures we are required to perform.</p>	30 November 2021	Not yet due
<p>Housing Benefit Subsidy – certification</p> <p>This is the report we submit to Department of Work and Pensions based upon the mandated agreed upon procedures we are required to perform.</p>	31 January 2022	Not yet due
<p>Pooling of housing capital receipts - certification</p> <p>This is the report we submit to Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government based upon the mandated agreed upon procedures we are required to perform.</p>	4 February 2022	Not yet due

FRC AQR report on major local audits

On 29 October, the FRC published its annual report setting out the findings of its review of the work of local auditors. The report summarises the results of the FRC's inspections of twenty audit files for the last financial year. A link to the report is here: [FRC AQR Major Local Audits October 2021](#)

Grant Thornton are one of seven firms which currently delivers local audit work. Of our 330 local government and NHS audits, 87 are currently defined as 'major audits' which fall within the scope of the AQR. This year, the FRC looked at nine of our audits.

Our file review results

The FRC reviewed nine of our audits this year. It graded six files (67%) as 'Good' and requiring no more than limited improvements. No files were graded as requiring significant improvement, representing an impressive year-on-year improvement. The FRC described the improvement in our audit quality as an 'encouraging response by the firm to the quality findings reported in the prior year.' Our Value for Money work continues to be delivered to a high standard, with all of the files reviewed requiring no more than limited improvement. We welcome the FRC findings and conclusions which demonstrate the impressive improvement we have made in audit quality over the past year.

The FRC also identified a number of good practices including effective challenge of management's valuer, use of an auditor's expert to assist with the audit of a highly specialised property valuation, and the extent and timing of involvement by the audit partner on the VFM conclusion.

Our results over the past three years are shown in the table below:

Grade	Number 2018/19	Number 2019/20	Number 2020/21
Good with limited improvements (Grade 1 or 2)	1	1	6
Improvements required (Grade 3)	2	5	3
Significant improvements required (Grade 4)	1	0	0
Total	4	6	9

Our continued commitment to Audit quality and continuous improvement

Our work over the past year has been undertaken during the backdrop of COVID, when the public sector has faced the huge challenge of providing essential services and helping safeguard the public during the pandemic. Our NHS bodies in particular have been at the forefront of the public health crisis. As auditors we have had to show compassion to NHS staff deeply affected by the crisis, whilst staying focused on the principles of good governance and financial management, things which are more important than ever. We are very proud of the way we have worked effectively with audited bodies, demonstrating empathy in our work whilst still upholding the highest audit quality.

Over the coming year we will make further investments in audit quality including strengthening our quality and technical support functions, and increasing the level of training, support and guidance for our audit teams. We will address the specific improvement recommendations raised by the FRC, including:

- Enhanced training for local auditors on key assumptions within property valuations, and how to demonstrate an increased level of challenge
- Formalising our arrangements for the consideration of complex technical issues by Partner Panels.
- As part of our enhanced Value for Money programme, we will focus on identifying the scope for better use of public money, as well as highlighting weaknesses in governance or financial stewardship where we see them.

Conclusion

Local audit plays a critical role in the way public sector audits an society interact, and it depends on the trust and confidence of all those who rely on it. As a firm we're proud to be doing our part to promote good governance, effective stewardship and appropriate use of public funds.

Sector Update

Authorities continue to try to achieve greater efficiency in the delivery of public services, whilst facing the challenges to address rising demand, ongoing budget pressures and social inequality.

Our sector update provides you with an up to date summary of emerging national issues and developments to support you. We cover areas which may have an impact on your organisation, the wider local government sector and the public sector as a whole. Links are provided to the detailed report/briefing to allow you to delve further and find out more.

Our public sector team at Grant Thornton also undertake research on service and technical issues. We will bring you the latest research publications in this update. We also include areas of potential interest to start conversations within the organisation and with audit committee members, as well as any accounting and regulatory updates.

- [Grant Thornton Publications](#)
- [Insights from local government sector specialists](#)
- [Reports of interest](#)
- [Accounting and regulatory updates](#)

More information can be found on our dedicated public sector and local government sections on the Grant Thornton website by clicking on the logos below:

A teal rectangular button with the text "Public Sector" in white, sans-serif font, centered within the button.

Public Sector

A dark purple rectangular button with the text "Local government" in white, sans-serif font, centered within the button.

Local
government

What can be learned from Public Interest Reports? – Grant Thornton

2020 will be remembered as a tumultuous year in local government, with the pandemic creating unprecedented pressure on the sector. It also saw the appearance of two Public Interest Reports (PIRs), followed by another in January this year – the first to be issued in the sector since 2016. PIR's can be issued by local auditors if there are significant concerns around council activity, such as major failings in finance and governance.

The recent PIRs have made headlines because, up to this point, very few have ever been issued. But, as our latest report “Lessons from recent Public Interest Reports” explores, all three illustrate some of the fundamental issues facing the wider sector and provide a lesson for all local authorities around: weaknesses in financial management; governance and scrutiny practices; and council culture and leadership; which, when combined, can provide fertile ground for the kind of significant issues we might see in a PIR.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted four essential factors we probably always knew about local government, have often said, but which are now much better evidenced:

- 1) Local government has provided fantastic support to its communities in working with the NHS and other partners to deal with the multifaceted challenges of the pandemic.
- 2) Britain's long centralised approach to government has been exposed to some degree in terms of its agility to tailor pandemic responses to regional and local bodies. This is recognised by the current government who continue to pursue the options for devolution of powers to local bodies. Track and Trace delivered centrally has not been as successful as anticipated and, according to government figures, local interventions have had more impact.

- 3) Years of reduced funding from central government have exposed the underlying flaws in the local authority business model, with too much reliance on generating additional income.
- 4) Not all authorities exercise appropriate care with public money; not all authorities exercise appropriate governance; and not all authorities have the capability of managing risk, both short and long term. Optimism bias has been baked into too many councils' medium-term plans.

The PIRs at Nottingham City Council (August 2020), the London Borough of Croydon (October 2020), and Northampton Borough Council (January 2021) are clear illustrations of some of the local government issues identified above. The audit reports are comprehensive and wide-ranging and a lesson for all local authorities. Local authorities have a variety of different governance models. These range from elected mayor to the cabinet and a scrutiny system approach, while others have moved back to committee systems. Arguments can be made both for and against all of these models. However, in the recent PIR cases, and for many other local authorities, it's less about the system of governance and more about how it operates, who operates it and how willing they are to accept scrutiny and challenge.

There are a number of lessons to be learned from the recent PIR reports and these can be broken down into three key areas which are explored further in our report:

- 1) The context of local government in a COVID-19 world
- 2) Governance, scrutiny, and culture
- 3) Local authority leadership

The full report is available here:

[Lessons from recent Public Interest Reports | Grant Thornton](#)

Annual Transparency Report – Grant Thornton

As auditors of several listed entities as well as nearly one hundred major local audits, we are required as a firm to publish an annual transparency report.

The report contains a variety of information which we believe is helpful to audit committees as well as wider stakeholders. The Financial Reporting Council (FRC) in their thematic review of transparency reporting noted that they are keen to see more Audit Committee Chairs actively engaging and challenging their auditors on audit quality based on the information produced in Transparency reports on a regular basis. We agree with the FRC and are keen to share our transparency report and discuss audit quality with you more widely.

The transparency report provides details of our:

- Leadership and governance structures
- Principle risks and Key Performance Indicators
- Quality, risk management and internal control structure
- Independence and ethics processes
- People and culture
- Compliance with the Audit Firm Governance code and EU Audit directive requirements

We have made significant developments in the year as part of our Local Audit Investment Plan to improve our audit quality. We welcome an opportunity to discuss these developments and our transparency report should you wish.



The full report is available here:

[Transparency report 2020 \(grantthornton.co.uk\)](https://www.grantthornton.co.uk/transparency-report-2020)

Local government finance in the pandemic – National Audit Office

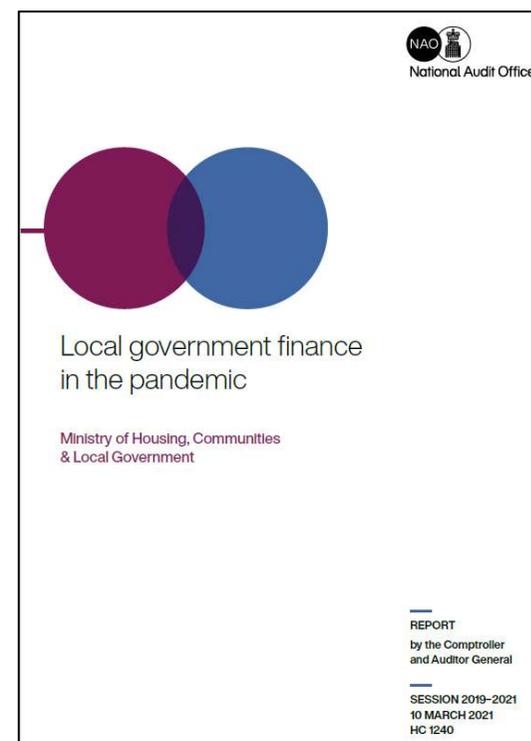
The National Audit Office (NAO) report, published in March, notes “The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented public health and economic emergency. Local authorities in England have made a major contribution to the national response to the pandemic, working to protect local communities and businesses, while continuing to deliver existing services. The pandemic has in turn placed significant pressure on local authorities’ finances, which in many cases were already under strain going into the pandemic.”

The NAO report examines if the Department’s approach to local government finance in the COVID-19 pandemic enabled it to assess and fund the costs of new services which local authorities have been asked to deliver. It also examines whether the Department fulfilled its responsibilities in securing financial sustainability across the sector.

The NAO report concludes “Steps taken by the government, led by the Department, have supported local authorities in the COVID-19 pandemic response. The Department’s successful monthly collection of data and continued intensive engagement with the sector provided a good evidence base to underpin the financial and other support provided by government. Action by the Department and wider government to support the sector has averted system-wide financial failure at a very challenging time and means that the Department has managed the most severe risks to value for money in the short term.

However, the financial position of local government remains a cause for concern. Many authorities will be relying on reserves to balance their 2020-21 year-end budgets. Despite continuing support into 2021-22 the outlook for next year is uncertain. Many authorities are setting budgets for 2021-22 in which they have limited confidence, and which are balanced through cuts to service budgets and the use of reserves.”

The NAO report found that “the combined impact on spending and non-tax income in 2020-21 is £9.7bn – equivalent to 17.6% of revenue expenditure. So far the government has announced £9.1bn of financial support, leaving a deficit of £605m.”



The full report can be obtained from the NAO website:

[Local government finance in the pandemic - National Audit Office \(NAO\) Report](#)

Local authority Covid-19 pressures – MHCLG

Outturn figures from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) show that local authorities in England reported additional cost pressures of £12.8bn relating to Covid-19 in 2020-21. Overall, local authorities spent £7.2bn responding to the pandemic last year, with the largest share of additional expenditure going on adult social care services at £3.2bn.

Additional expenditure due to COVID-19 by class and service area (£ millions) (2020-21)

	Shire District	Shire County	Unitary Authority	Metropolitan District	London Borough	Total
Adult Social Care – total	0.473	1,254.880	848.656	663.404	413.842	3,181.254
Children's social care - total (excluding SEND)	0.000	94.933	131.127	89.799	62.987	378.846
Housing - total (including homelessness services) excluding HRA	63.129	5.254	74.949	42.281	112.971	298.584
Environmental and regulatory services - total	33.564	68.097	67.512	66.704	63.556	299.433
Finance & corporate services - total	48.222	53.445	83.984	76.923	78.284	340.858
All other service areas not listed in rows above	184.550	634.578	584.924	564.737	395.137	2,363.926
Total	329.937	2,111.187	1,791.153	1,503.848	1,126.777	6,862.902



The figures are available in full here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-authority-covid-19-financial-impact-monitoring-information>

Income losses due to COVID-19 by class and source of income (£ millions) (2020-21)

	Shire District	Shire County	Unitary Authority	Metropolitan District	London Borough	Total
Business rates	276.498	0.000	194.192	207.351	537.667	1,215.708
Council tax	399.037	0.000	217.633	191.219	232.727	1,040.616
Sales fees and charges	516.426	194.923	553.907	396.745	475.728	2,137.728
Commercial income	82.448	24.159	120.629	204.211	52.154	483.600
Other	33.494	39.947	27.163	53.664	45.166	199.435
Total	1,307.903	259.029	1,113.524	1,053.190	1,343.441	5,077.087

Government response to Redmond review – MHCLG

Government has published an update on the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government response to Sir Tony Redmond's independent review into the effectiveness of external audit and transparency of financial reporting in local authorities.

The MHCLG press release states "The Audit, Reporting and Governance Authority (ARGA) – the new regulator being established to replace the Financial Reporting Council (FRC) – will be strengthened with new powers over local government audit, protecting public funds and ensuring councils are best serving taxpayers.

The new regulator, which will contain a standalone local audit unit, will bring all regulatory functions into one place, to better coordinate a new, simplified local audit framework.

ARGA will continue to act as regulator and carry out audit quality reviews as the FRC does now. It will now also provide annual reports on the state of local audit and take over responsibility for the updated Code of Local Audit Practice – the guidelines councils are required to follow.

The government has confirmed that the Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) will continue as the appointing body for local audit, in charge of procurement and contract management for local government auditors.

In the immediate term, MHCLG will set up and chair a Liaison Committee, which will comprise senior stakeholders across the sector that will oversee the governance of the new audit arrangements and ensure they are operating effectively."

The press release goes on to state the "measures finalise the government's response to Sir Tony Redmond's independent review into local audit, carried out last year.

The government has already announced £15 million to support councils with additional costs in audit fees, and recently consulted on the distribution of this funding. Government is also consulting on improving flexibility on audit fee setting and has extended the deadline for when councils must publish their audited accounts.



The press release can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-publishes-update-to-audit-review-response>

2019/20 audited accounts – Public Sector Audit Appointments

In December 2020 Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) published figures relating to the audit of 2019/20 local authority financial statements.

PSAA report “Audit arrangements in local councils, police, fire and other local government bodies are continuing to exhibit signs of stress and difficulty. In the latest audit round, focusing on 2019/20 financial statements and value for money arrangements, fewer than 50% of bodies’ audits were completed by the revised target of 30 November.

Figures compiled by PSAA, the organisation responsible for appointing auditors to 478 local bodies, reveal that 55% (265) of audit opinions were not issued by 30 November. This is a further deterioration on 2018/19 audits when 43% of opinions (210 out of 486) were delayed beyond the then target timetable of 31 July.”

By 30 November, Grant Thornton had signed 113/208 audits (a 55% completion rate), meaning that only 45% of audit opinions were not signed by 30 November, compared to the 55% all firms average.

PSAA go on to note “This year’s timetable has been deliberately eased by Ministers in recognition of the underlying pressures on the audit process and the significant added complications arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has posed practical challenges for bodies in producing accounts and working papers, and for auditors to carry out their testing. Both sets of staff have had to work remotely throughout the period, and the second national lockdown came at a critical point in the cycle.

Questions and concerns about the potential implications of the pandemic for some bodies have meant that both finance staff and auditors have needed to pay particular attention to the financial position of each entity. Additionally, following a series of increasingly challenging regulatory reviews, auditors have arguably been more focused than ever on their professional duty to give their opinion only when they are satisfied that they have sufficient assurance.”



The news article can be found here:

[News release: 2019/20 audited accounts – PSAA](#)

Consultation on 2023-24 audit appointments – Public Sector Audit Appointments

Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) is consulting on the Draft prospectus for 2023 and beyond.

PSAA state “Our primary aim is to secure the delivery of an audit service of the required quality for every opted-in body at a realistic market price and to support the drive towards a long term competitive and more sustainable market for local public audit services.

The objectives of the procurement are to maximise value for local public bodies by:

- securing the delivery of independent audit services of the required quality;
- awarding long term contracts to a sufficient number of firms to enable the deployment of an appropriately qualified auditing team to every participating body;
- encouraging existing suppliers to remain active participants in local audit and creating opportunities for new suppliers to enter the market;
- encouraging audit suppliers to submit prices which are realistic in the context of the current market;
- enabling auditor appointments which facilitate the efficient use of audit resources;
- supporting and contributing to the efforts of audited bodies and auditors to improve the timeliness of audit opinion delivery; and
- establishing arrangements that are able to evolve in response to changes to the local audit framework.”

The plans include proposals to adjust the procurement ratio between quality and costs from an equal 50:50 to 80:20, as well as trying to bring new suppliers in to the market.

The consultation on the PSAA’s proposals closed on 8 July.



The news article can be found here:

<https://www.psa.co.uk/about-us/appointing-person-information/appointing-period-2023-24-2027-28/prospectus-2023-and-beyond/draft-prospectus-for-2023-and-beyond/page/7/>

Councils given power to build more homes for first time buyers and for social rent – MHCLG

The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) has announced that councils in England will have more freedom on how they spend the money from homes sold through Right to Buy to help them build the homes needed in their communities.

The MHCLG press release states the “package will make it easier for councils to fund homes using Right to Buy receipts, including homes for social rent, and give them greater flexibility over the types of homes they provide to reflect the needs of their communities.

It will also give councils more time to use receipts and to develop ambitious building programmes. The government wants homes supplied using Right to Buy receipts to be the best value for money, and to add to overall housing supply, to help towards delivering 300,000 new homes a year across England by the mid-2020s.”

The press release goes on to note “New measures include:

- extending the time councils have to spend Right to Buy receipts from 3 years to 5 years
- increased cap on the percentage cost of new homes councils can fund from Right to Buy receipts raised from 30% to 40% per home, making it easier to build replacement homes
- allowing receipts to be used for shared ownership, First Homes, as well as affordable and social housing, to help councils build the homes their communities need
- introducing a cap on the use of Right to Buy receipts for acquisitions to help drive new supply.”



The press release can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/councils-given-power-to-build-more-homes-for-first-time-buyers-and-for-social-rent>



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