

# Auditor's Annual Report

City of Lincoln Council – year ended 31  
March 2023

January 2024



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Our reports are prepared in the context of the 'Statement of responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies' issued by Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd. Reports and letters prepared by appointed auditors and addressed to members or officers are prepared for the sole use of the Council. No responsibility is accepted to any member or officer in their individual capacity or to any third party.

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# 01

## Section 01: **Introduction**

# 1. Introduction

## Purpose of the Auditor's Annual Report

Our Auditor's Annual Report (AAR) summarises the work we have undertaken as the auditor for the City of Lincoln Council ('the Council') for the year ended 31 March 2023. Although this report is addressed to the Council, it is designed to be read by a wider audience including members of the public and other external stakeholders.

Our responsibilities are defined by the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and the Code of Audit Practice ('the Code') issued by the National Audit Office ('the NAO'). The remaining sections of the AAR outline how we have discharged these responsibilities and the findings from our work. These are summarised below.



### Opinion on the financial statements

Our audit report, issued 22 December 2023, gave an unqualified opinion on the financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2023.

Our audit was conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Code, and International Standards on Auditing (ISAs).



### Value for Money arrangements

In our audit report, we reported that we had not completed our work on the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources and had not issued recommendations in relation to identified significant weaknesses in those arrangements at the time of reporting. Section 3 confirms that we have now completed this work and provides our commentary on the Council's arrangements. No significant weaknesses in arrangements were identified and there are no recommendations arising from our work.



### Wider reporting responsibilities

At the date of reporting our work on the Council's Whole of Government Accounts return remains incomplete whilst we wait for final instructions from the National Audit Office

# 02

Section 02:

**Audit of the financial statements**

## 2. Audit of the financial statements

### The scope of our audit and the results of our opinion

At Appendix A, we have set out the main financial statement risks addressed in our audit – detailed findings were presented to the Audit Committee.

In the table below, we set out the main audit outcomes for 2022/23.

Audit Area	Outcomes
<b>Financial Statements</b>	<p>The purpose of our audit is to provide reasonable assurance to users that the financial statements are free from material error. We do this by expressing an opinion on whether the statements are prepared, in all material respects, in line with the financial reporting framework applicable to the Council and whether they give a true and fair view of the Council's financial position as at 31 March 2023 and of its financial performance for the year then ended.</p> <p>Our audit report, issued in December 2023, gave an unqualified opinion on the financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2023.</p>
<b>Qualitative aspects of the Council's accounting practices</b>	<p>We reviewed the Council's accounting policies and disclosures and concluded they complied with the 2022/23 Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting, appropriately tailored to the Council's circumstances.</p>
<b>Internal Control Recommendations</b>	<p>As part of our audit, we considered the internal controls in place that are relevant to the preparation of the financial statements. We did this to design audit procedures that allow us to express our opinion on the financial statements, but this did not extend to us expressing an opinion on the effectiveness of internal controls. We did not identify any 'High – level 3' recommendations for 2022/23.</p>
<b>Annual Governance Statement</b>	<p>We did not identify any matters where, in our opinion, the governance statement did not comply with the guidance issued by CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting.</p>
<b>Wider responsibilities</b>	<p>Our powers and responsibilities under the 2014 Act are broad and include the ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• issue a report in the public interest;</li><li>• make statutory recommendations that must be considered and responded to publicly;</li><li>• apply to the court for a declaration that an item of account is contrary to law; and</li><li>• issue an advisory notice under schedule 8 of the 2014 Act.</li></ul> <p>We have not exercised any of these powers as part of our 2022/23 audit.</p>

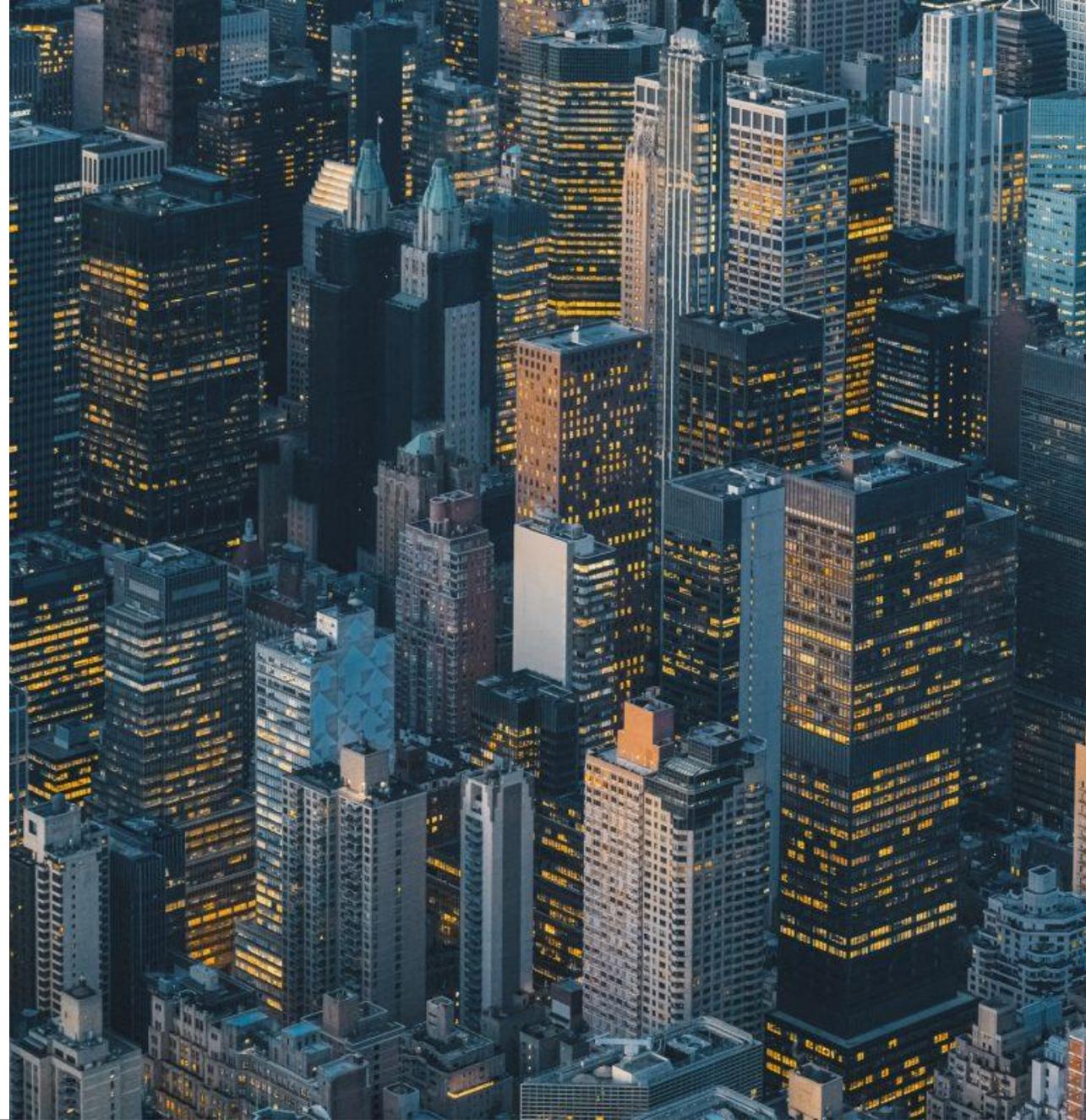
# 03

Section 03:

**Commentary on VFM arrangements**

### 3. Commentary on VFM arrangements

#### Overall summary



# 3. VFM arrangements – Overall summary

## Approach to Value for Money arrangements work

We are required to consider whether the Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. The NAO issues guidance to auditors that underpins the work we are required to carry out and sets out the reporting criteria that we are required to consider. The reporting criteria are:



**Financial sustainability** - How the Council plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services



**Governance** - How the Council ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks



**Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness** - How the Council uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services

Our work is carried out in three main phases.

### Phase 1 - Planning and risk assessment

At the planning stage of the audit, we undertake work so we can understand the arrangements that the Council has in place under each of the reporting criteria; as part of this work we may identify risks of significant weaknesses in those arrangements.

We obtain our understanding of arrangements for each of the specified reporting criteria using a variety of information sources which may include:

- NAO guidance and supporting information
- Information from internal and external sources including regulators
- Knowledge from previous audits and other audit work undertaken in the year
- Interviews and discussions with staff and directors

Although we describe this work as planning work, we keep our understanding of arrangements under review and update our risk assessment throughout the audit to reflect emerging issues that may suggest there are further risks of significant weaknesses.

### Phase 2 - Additional risk-based procedures and evaluation

Where we identify risks of significant weaknesses in arrangements, we design a programme of work to enable us to decide whether there are actual significant weaknesses in arrangements. We use our professional judgement and have regard to guidance issued by the NAO in determining the extent to which an identified weakness is significant.

### Phase 3 - Reporting the outcomes of our work and our recommendations

We are required to provide a summary of the work we have undertaken and the judgments we have reached against each of the specified reporting criteria in this Auditor's Annual Report. We do this as part of our Commentary on VFM arrangements which we set out for each criteria later in this section.

We also make recommendations where we identify weaknesses in arrangements or other matters that require attention from the Council. We refer to two distinct types of recommendation through the remainder of this report:

- **Recommendations arising from significant weaknesses in arrangements**

We make these recommendations for improvement where we have identified a significant weakness in the Council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. Where such significant weaknesses in arrangements are identified, we report these (and our associated recommendations) at any point during the audit.

- **Other recommendations**

We make other recommendations when we identify areas for potential improvement or weaknesses in arrangements which we do not consider to be significant but still require action to be taken

The table on the following page summarises the outcomes of our work against each reporting criteria, including whether we have identified any significant weaknesses in arrangements or made other recommendations.

# 3. VFM arrangements – Overall summary

## Overall summary by reporting criteria

Reporting criteria	Commentary page reference	Identified risks of significant weakness?	Actual significant weaknesses identified?	Other recommendations made?
 <b>Financial sustainability</b>	11	No	No	No
 <b>Governance</b>	15	No	No	No
 <b>Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness</b>	18	No	No	No

### 3. Commentary on VFM arrangements

#### Financial Sustainability

How the body plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services



# 3. VFM arrangements – Financial Sustainability

## Overall commentary on the Financial Sustainability reporting criteria

Significant weakness in 2021/22	Nil.
Significant weaknesses identified in 2022/23	Nil.

### Position brought forward from 2021/22

We reported in our Annual Auditor’s Report for 2021/22, that we had:

- Reviewed the 2021/22 financial performance and forecasts during the year and considered the Council’s financial outturn position as presented in the financial statements;
- Reviewed the 2022/23 General Fund and Housing Revenue Account Budget.
- Reviewed the Council’s Annual governance Statement for any significant issues; and
- Considered the general findings from our audit work in other areas.

As set out in the table above, there are no indications of a significant weakness in the Council’s arrangements for financial sustainability brought forward from 2021/22. The Council’s underlying arrangements in relation to financial sustainability are not significantly different in 2022/23.

### Overall responsibilities for financial governance

We have reviewed the Council’s overall governance framework, including Council and committee reports, the Annual Governance Statement, and Statement of Accounts for 2022/23. These confirm the Council undertook its responsibility to define the strategic aims and objectives, approve budgets and monitor financial performance against budgets and plans to best meet the needs of the Council’s service users.

### The Council’s financial planning and monitoring arrangements

Through our review of Council and committee reports, meetings with Officers and relevant work performed on the financial statements, we are satisfied that the Council’s arrangements for budget monitoring remain appropriate, including regular reporting to Members and well-established arrangements for year-end financial reporting.

### 2022/23 Budget Setting and the Medium-Term Financial Strategy

We considered the 2022/23 budget setting process, including the Medium Term Financial Strategy as part of our work on the 2021/22 review of arrangements, with no significant concerns arising. We were satisfied that, the Budget Report for 2022/23 adequately explains revenue and capital budgets, with a sufficient link to specific business units, as well as an explanation on the impact to the general fund balance. The Council reported its financial outturn position in the 2022/23 Statement of Accounts, which highlighted a total net budget variance of £1k after making an additional £157k contribution to general fund balances (£218k actual vs £61k planned).

There is no indication of excessive use of capital flexibilities to support revenue expenditure, nor has our work on the financial statements highlighted any concerns regarding the Council’s policy for setting the Minimum Revenue Provision. Furthermore, there is no indication that the Council’s Medium Term Financial Strategy and budget setting process is not aligned to supporting plans given the Council has a track record of delivering against budget.

### 2022/23 Statement of Financial Position

We carried out a high-level analysis of the financial statements subject to our audit, including the Movement in Reserves Statement and the Balance Sheet, our work to date has not highlighted any risks of significant weakness in arrangements or indicators of a risk to the Council’s financial sustainability.

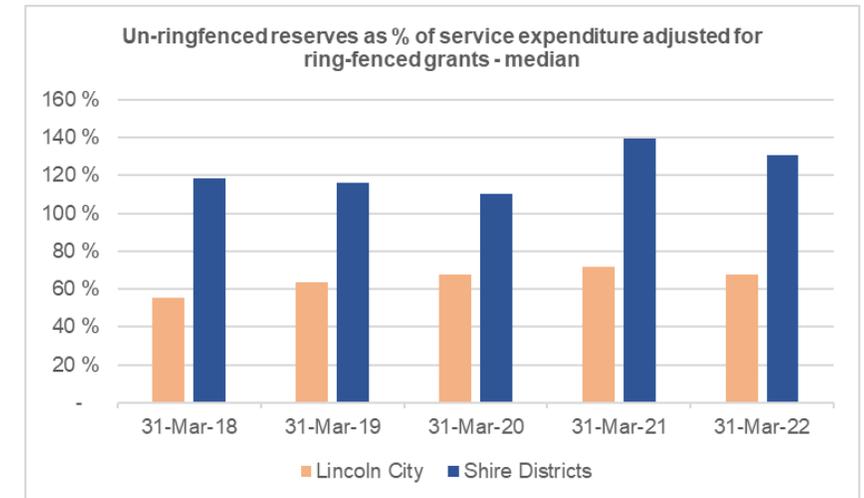
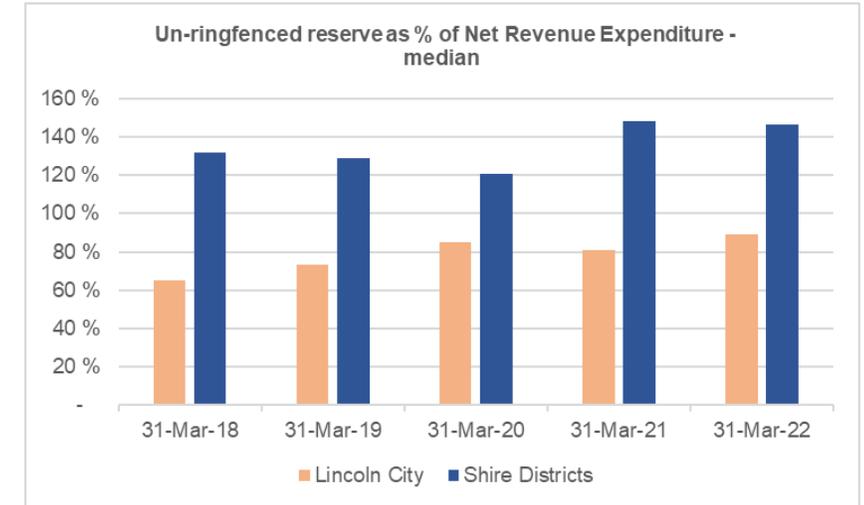
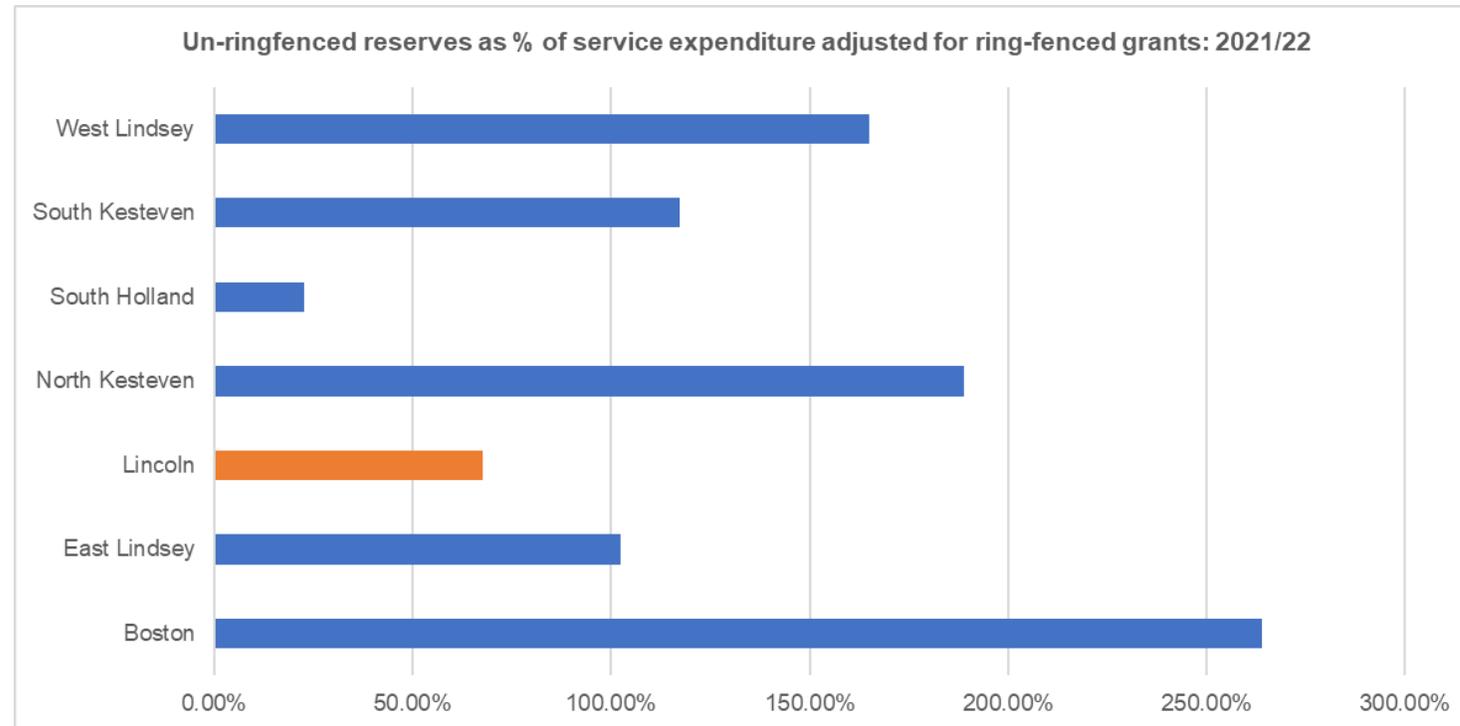
In 2022/23, the Council spent £19.4m on capital additions per Note 15 of the financial. Our testing of these balances did not identify any concerns relating to the Council’s arrangements.

# VFM arrangements – Financial Sustainability

## Financial sustainability and revenue reserves

We have also performed a more detailed review of the Council's revenue reserves. We reviewed data published in May 2023 by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on Local authority general fund earmarked and unallocated reserve levels, 2017-18 to 2021-22.

The Council's reserves have generally been below the median compared to shire districts since 2018 (charts right), and lower than most other Lincolnshire district councils.



Details on the definitions and data quality arrangements are available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-authority-general-fund-earmarked-and-unallocated-reserve-levels-2017-18-to-2021-22>

# VFM arrangements – Financial Sustainability

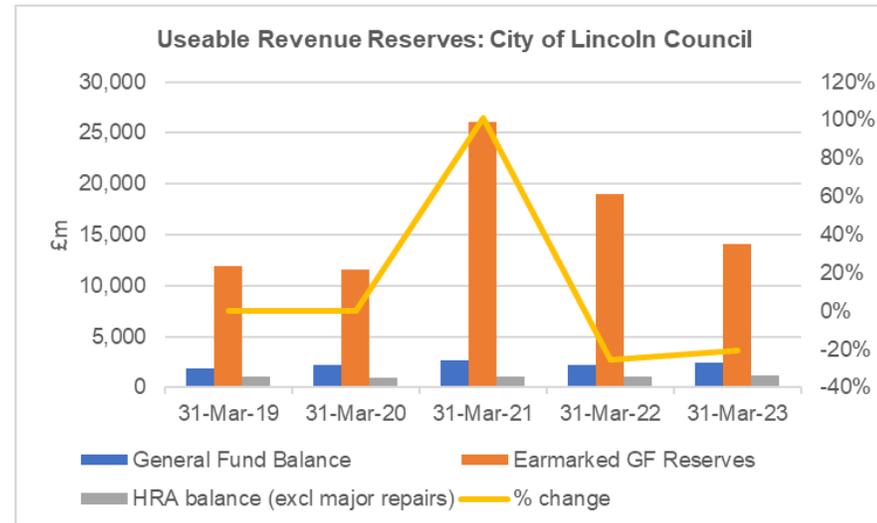
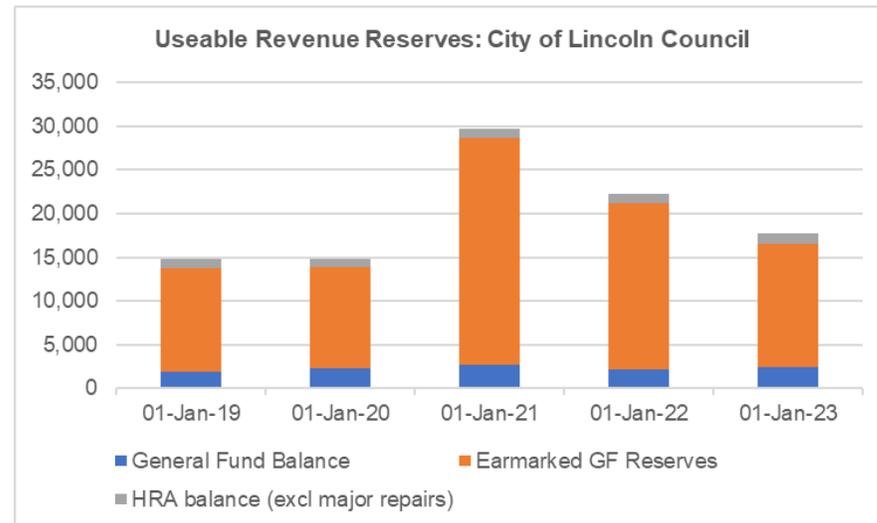
## Financial sustainability and reserves (continued)

The purpose of the Council’s general fund reserve is to meet costs arising from any unplanned or emergency events. It also acts as a financial buffer to help mitigate against the financial risks the Council faces and can be used to a limited degree to ‘smooth’ expenditure on a one-off basis across years. Whereas earmarked reserves, are set aside for specific purposes.

Through a review of the financial statements, we have considered the Council’s revenue reserves over time:

- As set out on the previous page, the Council’s opening revenue reserves are slightly below the median for district councils.
- Whilst reserves remain relatively stable, they are finite. The Council’s General Fund Balance has increased by 30% since 31 March 2019 from £1.8m to £2.4m, but overall revenue reserves are decreasing.

Overall, we are satisfied that the Council’s Reserves position does not give rise to an immediate risk of significant weakness in arrangements to secure financial sustainability but is something that needs to be monitored and managed through savings programmes going forwards.



Based on the above considerations we are satisfied there is not a significant weakness in the Council’s arrangements in relation to financial sustainability for the year ended 31 March 2023.

# 3. Commentary on VFM arrangements

## Governance

How the body ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks



# 3. VFM arrangements – Governance

## Overall commentary on the Governance reporting criteria

Significant weakness in 2021/22	Nil.
Significant weaknesses identified in 2022/23	Nil.

### Position brought forward from 2021/22

As set out in the table above, there are no indications of a significant weakness in the Council’s arrangements for financial sustainability brought forward from the previous year.

### The Authority’s governance structure

Based on our work, we are satisfied that the Council has established governance arrangements, consistent with previous years, in place. These are detailed in the Statement of Accounts and Annual Governance Statement. We have considered both documents against our understanding of the Council as part of our audit.

Our review of corporate governance arrangements confirms the Council has an agreed Constitution, setting out how it operates, how decisions are reached and what procedures are followed to ensure that these are transparent and accountable to local people.

Our review of Committee papers confirms that a template covering report is used for all reports, ensuring the purpose, risks, and recommendations are clear. Minutes are published and reviewed by Committees to evidence the matters discussed, challenge and decisions made.

### 2023/24 Budget Setting and the Medium-Term Financial Strategy

The Council’s budget setting and medium-term financial planning follows a similar process and format to previous years and our review is supported by discussions with officers during the year and experience from prior year audits. The arrangements in place for budget setting and updating the Medium-Term Financial Strategy are as expected for a District Council, with arrangements for: consultation, scrutiny, evaluation of financial risk, alignment to business plans and sources of funding.

We reviewed the Council’s balanced budget for 2023/24 as set by Council in February 2023, which approved a 2.91% increase in Council Tax.

We read the assumptions underpinning the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) as included in reports to the Executive. In our view, these include an adequate level of detail over the assumptions and cost pressures facing the council, which are consistent with our experience at similar sized authorities and not unreasonable. In addition, there is sufficient narrative to explain the rationale and key financial risks.

Over the duration of the MTFS, the general fund show an estimated balance of £1.5m by the end of 2027/28. Proposals to achieve this outcome are laid out in the report and include the need to deliver annual savings of £1.75m, of which the Council had identified (Feb 2023) £0.2m. The phasing of the savings are back-ended giving the Council time to firm up plans: £0.3m to be achieved in 2024/25 and the remaining £1.25m between 2025/26 an 2027/28. Over 2023/24 and 2024/25, the use of general fund and earmarked reserves to support the revenue budget are not significant but does increase from 2025/26 onwards to c£1.1m.

The MTFS was, of course, approved early in 2023 and the Council has the benefit of a further year to this point to develop and implement its strategy. We reflected on the progress in 2023/24 by reviewing the budget monitoring report to the November 2023 meeting of the Executive covering the period to Quarter 2 of 2023/24. The report gives an overview of the financial position, supported by adequate detail available within the appendices, ultimately showing that at the end of the financial year, the full savings target of £185k will be achieved and the General Fund is expected to be underspent by £118k against its budget, albeit with some risk in the second half of the year. Overall, the Council’s reported financial performance at Quarter 2 does not indicate any risk of significant weakness in the Council’s arrangements in setting the 2023/24 MTFS.

**Key observation: The Council recognises that planned use of reserves is not a sustainable option and is in the process of developing its MTFS for 2024 to 2029, which will influence the timing and extent of savings required to deliver against the Council’s priorities. Ensuring these are well developed, achievable and deliverable during 2024 will be key to support the 2025/26 budget.**

# VFM arrangements – Governance

## Overall commentary on the Governance reporting criteria

### Risk management

The Council has an established risk management framework and systems in place which are built into the governance structure of the organisation.

The Audit Committee is responsible for overseeing the effectiveness of the Council's risk management arrangements, challenging risk information and escalating issues to the Executive. We have attended meetings of the Committee and reviewed minutes and reports presented during the year, including matters relating to risk. From our attendance at meetings and review of the minutes, we are satisfied there is sufficient evidence of Member oversight of risk management, including holding Officers to account.

The Annual Governance Statement is a critical component of the Council's governance arrangements. It is an evidenced self-assessment by the Council on the Council's governance, assurance and internal control frameworks for the financial year. No significant weaknesses in internal control have been identified from our work to date and Internal Audit have not identified or raised any significant concerns. We reviewed the Annual Governance Statements as part of our work on the financial statements with no significant issues arising.

### Audit Committee

The Council has an established Audit Committee. We have reviewed supporting documents and confirmed the Committee meets regularly and reviews its programme of work to maintain focus on key aspects of governance and internal control. Our attendance at Audit Committee has confirmed there is an appropriate level of effective challenge.

### Internal Audit

We have met with management and the Head of Internal Audit regularly during the year, reviewed Audit Committee reports and attended Committee meetings to observe the performance of Internal Audit and the Audit Committee. We also confirmed that the Head of Internal Audit Opinion has been adequately reflected in the Annual Governance Statement. No issues arose from our review to indicate there is a significant weakness in the Council's arrangements for governance.

Overall, we have not identified any indicators of a significant weakness in the Council's arrangements relating to the Governance criteria for the year ended 31 March 2023.

### 3. Commentary on VFM arrangements

#### Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness

How the body uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services



# 3. VFM arrangements – Improving Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness

## Overall commentary on the Improving Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness reporting criteria

Significant weakness in 2021/22	Nil.
Significant weaknesses identified in 2022/23	Nil.

### Position brought forward from 2021/22

As set out in the table above, there are no indications of a significant weakness in the Council's arrangements brought forward from the prior year.

### Performance Monitoring

The Council's arrangements are consistent with the prior year, which were deemed adequate, with the Council's Strategic Plan (Vision 2025) setting out what it wants to achieve for local residents and communities and is published on its website. The Council's overall financial objectives and strategy are documented in the Council's budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy which is reviewed and updated annually.

Our review of minutes and reports confirms Members receive regular reporting on performance measures. We reviewed the performance outturn for 2022/23 as evidence of the Council's approach to evaluating performance. In our view, reports contain sufficient narrative, including the appendices, to demonstrate that there are adequate arrangements to assess performance and identify areas for action.

### Partnerships and Commissioning

Through our work on the financial statements, our testing of expenditure, and consideration of key financial controls, has not identified any issues relating to procurement.

As in 2021/22, the Council continues to be the accountable body for the Lincoln Town Deal programme and governance and performance management arrangements are largely unchanged from the prior year to progress the associated projects. Our work on the financial statements included testing expenditure recognised in 2022/23 with no issues arising.

Overall, we have not identified any indicators of a significant weakness in the Council's arrangements relating to the Improving Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness criteria for the year ended 31 March 2023.

# 04

Section 04:

**Other reporting responsibilities and  
our fees**

## 4. Other reporting responsibilities and our fees

### Matters we report by exception

The Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 provides auditors with specific powers where matters come to our attention that, in their judgement, require specific reporting action to be taken. Auditors have the power to:

- issue a report in the public interest;
- make statutory recommendations that must be considered and responded to publicly;
- apply to the court for a declaration that an item of account is contrary to the law; and
- issue an advisory notice.

We have not exercised any of these statutory reporting powers.

The 2014 Act also gives rights to local electors and other parties, such as the right to ask questions of the auditor and the right to make an objection to an item of account. We did not receive any such objections or questions.

### Reporting to the NAO in respect of Whole of Government Accounts consolidation data

The NAO, as group auditor, requires us to complete the WGA Assurance Statement in respect of its consolidation data. As at the date of writing, instructions regarding sampled components have not yet been received.

## 4. Other reporting responsibilities and our fees

### Fees for work as the Council's auditor

We reported our proposed fees for the delivery of our work under the Code of Audit Practice in our Audit Strategy Memorandum. Having completed our work for the 2022/23 financial year, we can confirm that our fees are as follows:

Area of work	2021/22 Actual fees	2022/23 fees*	2023/24
Planned fee in respect of our work under the Code of Audit Practice	36,332	50,920	139,722
Additional work to reflect the Council's designation as a Public Interest Entity	5,000	-	-
Additional fees in respect of additional testing undertaken to comply with increased regulatory requirements relating to: IAS19 pension liabilities; and valuation of land, buildings and investment properties.	7,100	N/A included in revised scale fee	N/A included in revised scale fee
Additional fees in respect of additional work from the introduction of new auditing standards (ISA 540 estimates)	2,800	2,800	N/A included in revised scale fee
Additional fees in respect of additional work from the introduction of new auditing standards (ISA 315)	-	5,000**	-
Other additional testing (effect of the triennial pension review)	3,900	N/A	N/A
Additional fees in respect of the VFM Commentary	8,000	7,500	N/A included in revised scale fee
<b>Sub-total: variations</b>	<b>26,800</b>	<b>15,300</b>	<b>TBC</b>
<b>Total fees</b>	<b>63,132</b>	<b>66,220</b>	<b>TBC</b>

\*These costs are subject to PSAA review and approval. The Council received **£18,729** of grant funding to meet rising audit costs.

\*\*At the time of issuing this report, the additional fees for 2022/23 have not been agreed with the Council.

### Fees for other work

In 2022/23, we were engaged to provide assurance related services on the pooling of housing capital receipts (c£3,500) and Housing Benefits Assurance (c£7,000)



# Appendix

# Appendix A: Further information on our audit of the financial statements

## Main financial statement audit risks and findings

Our audit approach is risk-based and primarily driven by the issues that we consider lead to a higher risk of material misstatement of the accounts. Once we have completed our risk assessment, we develop our audit strategy and design audit procedures in response to this assessment. Following the risk assessment, we identified risks relevant to the audit of financial statements and the significant audit risks and conclusions reached are set out below:

Audit Risk	Level of audit risk	How we addressed the risk	Audit conclusions
<p><b>Management override of controls</b></p> <p>This is a mandatory significant risk on all audits due to the unpredictable way in which such override could occur.</p>	<p><b>Significant risk:</b> an area that, in our judgment, requires special audit consideration.</p>	<p>We addressed the risk through performing work over accounting estimates, journal entries and considering whether there were any significant transactions outside the normal course of business or otherwise unusual. In addition, we made enquiries of management and used our data analytics and interrogation software to test accounting journals.</p>	<p>There are no significant matters to report.</p>
<p><b>Valuation of the net pension liability</b></p> <p>The defined benefit liability relating to the Local Government and Fire-Fighter's pension scheme represents significant balances on the Council's balance sheet and involves a high degree of estimation uncertainty. The Council uses two actuaries to provide an annual valuation of these liabilities in line with the requirements of accounting standards.</p>	<p><b>Significant risk</b></p>	<p>Our procedures to address this risk included, but was not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>critically assessing the competency, objectivity and independence of each actuary;</li> <li>liaising with the auditors of the Lincolnshire Pension Fund to gain assurance that the controls in place at the Pension Fund are designed and implemented correctly. This included the processes and controls in place to ensure data provided to the Actuary by the Pension Fund for the purposes of the valuation is complete and accurate;</li> <li>reviewing the appropriateness of the Pension Asset and Liability valuation methodologies applied by the Pension Fund Actuaries, and the key assumptions included within the valuations, including comparing them to expected ranges using a consulting actuary;</li> <li>agreeing the data in the valuation report provided by the Fund Actuaries for accounting purposes to the financial statements; and</li> <li>considering whether the pension asset should be capped.</li> </ul>	<p>Following amendments to the financial statements to take account of updated information from the pension fund actuary, there are significant matters to report.</p>
<p><b>Valuation of land &amp; buildings, council dwellings and investment properties</b></p> <p>Land, Building and Investment Property assets are significant balances on the Council's balance sheet and the valuation of these assets is complex and is subject to a number of management assumptions and judgements.</p>	<p><b>Significant risk</b></p>	<p>Our procedures to address this risk included, but was not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>considering whether the overall valuation methodologies used by the Council's valuers are in line with industry practice, the CIPFA Code of Practice and the Council's accounting policies;</li> <li>assessing whether valuation movements are in line with market expectations by using third party information to provide information on regional valuation trends;</li> <li>critically assessing the approach that the Council adopts to ensure assets that are not subject to revaluation are materially correct; and</li> <li>engaging our own valuation expert to support our testing of a sample of individual valuations back to source records to ensure appropriateness and to gain assurance over whether the correct accounting treatment has been applied.</li> </ul>	<p>There are no significant matters to report.</p>

# Mark Surridge, Key Audit Partner

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Mazars is an internationally integrated partnership, specialising in audit, accountancy, advisory, tax and legal services\*. Operating in over 90 countries and territories around the world, we draw on the expertise of 40,400 professionals – 24,400 in Mazars' integrated partnership and 16,000 via the Mazars North America Alliance – to assist clients of all sizes at every stage in their development.

\*where permitted under applicable country laws.