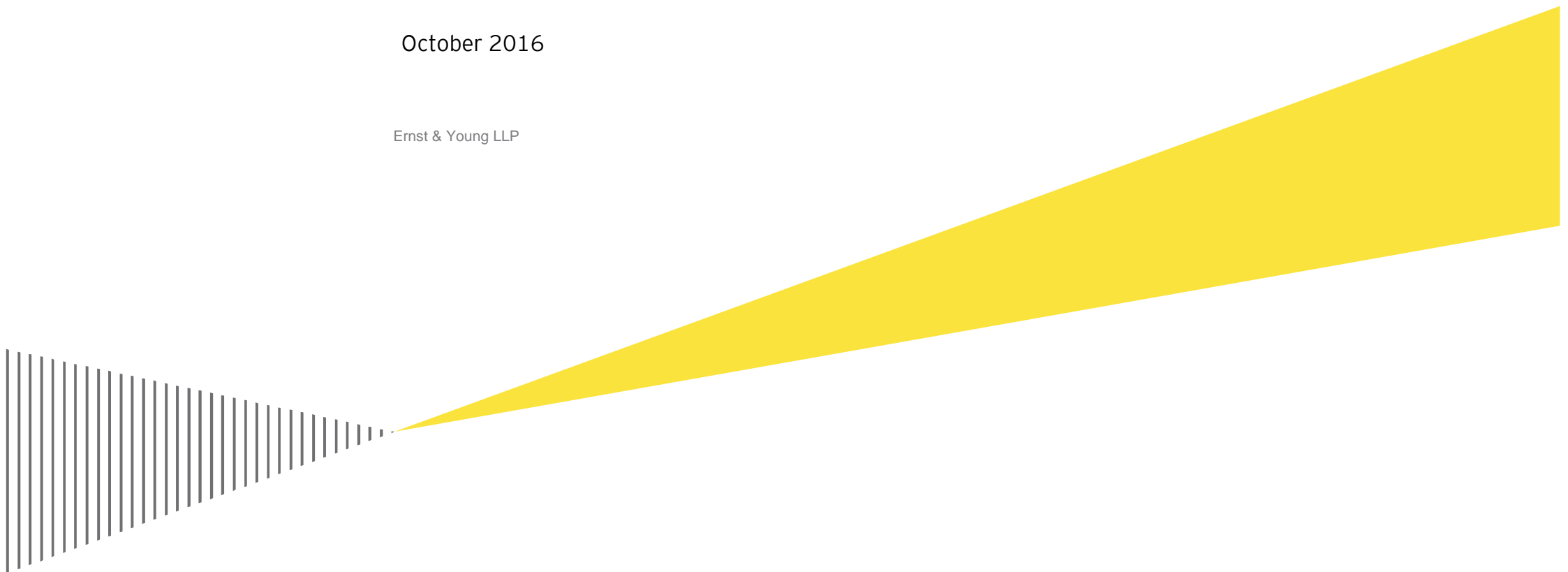


Harlow District Council

Annual Audit Letter for the year ended 31 March 2016

October 2016

Ernst & Young LLP



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

The Statement of responsibilities serves as the formal terms of engagement between appointed auditors and audited bodies. It summarises where the different responsibilities of auditors and audited bodies begin and end, and what is to be expected of the audited body in certain areas.

The ‘Terms of Appointment from 1 April 2015’ issued by PSAA sets out additional requirements that auditors must comply with, over and above those set out in the National Audit Office Code of Audit Practice (the Code) and statute, and covers matters of practice and procedure which are of a recurring nature.

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

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

A hand with white nail polish is writing on a document with a blue pen. In the background, there is a calculator, a white cup, and a laptop. A yellow rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

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

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

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

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

| Area of Work | Conclusion |
|---|---|
| Reporting to the National Audit Office (NAO) on our review of the Council's Whole of Government Accounts return (WGA). | The Council is below the specified audit threshold of £350 million. Therefore, we did not perform any audit procedures on the consolidation pack. |

As a result of the above we have also:

| Area of Work | Conclusion |
|---|---|
| Issued a report to those charged with governance of the Council communicating significant findings resulting from our audit. | Our Audit Results Report was issued on 26 August 2016 |
| Issued a certificate that we have completed the audit in accordance with the requirements of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and the National Audit Office's 2015 Code of Audit Practice. | Our certificate was issued on 16 September 2016 |

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

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

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

Purpose



Purpose

The Purpose of this Letter

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

We have already reported the findings from our audit work in our 2015/16 Audit Results Report and Addendum to the 7 September 2016 meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee, representing those charged with governance. We do not repeat those detailed findings in this Letter. The matters reported here are the most significant for the Council.



Responsibilities

Responsibilities

Responsibilities of the Appointed Auditor

Our 2015/16 audit work has been undertaken in accordance with the Audit Plan that we issued on 9 March 2016 and is conducted in accordance with the National Audit Office's 2015 Code of Audit Practice, International Standards on Auditing (UK and Ireland), and other guidance issued by the National Audit Office.

As auditors we are responsible for:

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

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

Responsibilities of the Council

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

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

Financial Statement Audit

The background of the image is a blurred office scene. In the foreground, there are several clear glass tumblers filled with water, some in sharp focus and others blurred. Behind the glasses, there are papers and documents, including one with a pie chart and another with a grid of small squares. A laptop is visible in the background, displaying some data. The overall lighting is bright and natural, suggesting a window nearby.

Financial Statement Audit

Key Issues

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

We audited the Council's Statement of Accounts in line with the National Audit Office's 2015 Code of Audit Practice, International Standards on Auditing (UK and Ireland), and other guidance issued by the National Audit Office and issued an unqualified audit report on 16 September 2016.

Our detailed findings were reported to the 7 September 2016 meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee.

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

| Significant Risk | Conclusion |
|--|---|
| Management override of controls A risk present on all audits is that management is in a unique position to perpetrate fraud because of its ability to manipulate accounting records directly or indirectly, and prepare fraudulent financial statements by overriding controls that otherwise appear to be operating effectively. Auditing standards require us to respond to this risk by testing the appropriateness of journals, testing accounting estimates for possible management bias and obtaining an understanding of the business rationale for any significant unusual transactions. | We obtained a full list of journals posted to the general ledger during the year, and analysed these journals using criteria we set to identify any unusual journal types or amounts. We then tested a sample of journals that met our criteria and tested these to supporting documentation. We have not identified any material weaknesses in controls or evidence of material management override. We have not identified any instances of inappropriate judgements being applied. We did not identify any other transactions during our audit which appeared unusual or outside the Council's normal course of business. |
| Revenue and expenditure recognition Auditing standards also required us to presume that there is a risk that revenue and expenditure may be misstated due to improper recognition or manipulation. We respond to this risk by reviewing and testing material revenue and expenditure streams and revenue cut-off at the | Our testing has not revealed any material misstatements with respect to revenue and expenditure recognition. Overall our audit work did not identify any issues or unusual transactions which indicated that there had been any misreporting of the Council's financial position. |

year end.

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

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

Classification and valuation of investment property and property, plant and equipment

The Council undertakes an annual exercise to revalue property assets. The valuation of property assets represents a significant accounting estimate. The accounting entries arising from changes in value are complex and will have a significant impact on the Council's financial statements.

The Council's Fixed Asset Register is unable to calculate the accounting entries arising from changes in the valuation of its property assets. The Council therefore relies on excel-based spreadsheets to manually calculate the accounting entries.

During 2015/16 the Council reclassified assets previously recorded as investment property to other land and buildings. These assets had a market value at 31 March 2015 of £19.5 million.

We responded to this risk by:

- assessing the reliability of the work undertaken by District Valuer on valuing the Council's property assets
- Testing the accounting treatment applied to changes in the valuation of property assets and the classification of property assets within the balance sheet.
- Testing the prior period adjustment arising from the reclassification of investment property. e

We completed our planned audit procedures and found that:

- We were able to place reliance on the work undertaken by management's valuation experts.
- The information provided to management's experts was reliable.
- Property, plant and equipment assets had been classified in accordance with the Accounting Code.
- The prior period adjustment arising from the reclassification of investment property assets was consistent with guidance in the accounting code. The accounts do however need to be updated to include a note explaining the prior period adjustment and the areas of the accounts impacted.

We did however find that the in year changes in the valuation of council dwellings had been applied incorrectly in the Council's Fixed Asset Register. As a result, the value of council dwellings and revaluation reserve in the financial statements were both overstated by £3.6 million. The revaluation reserve is an accounting reserve and does not represent available resources for the Council. This error, which was corrected by management, therefore had no impact on the financial position of the Council.

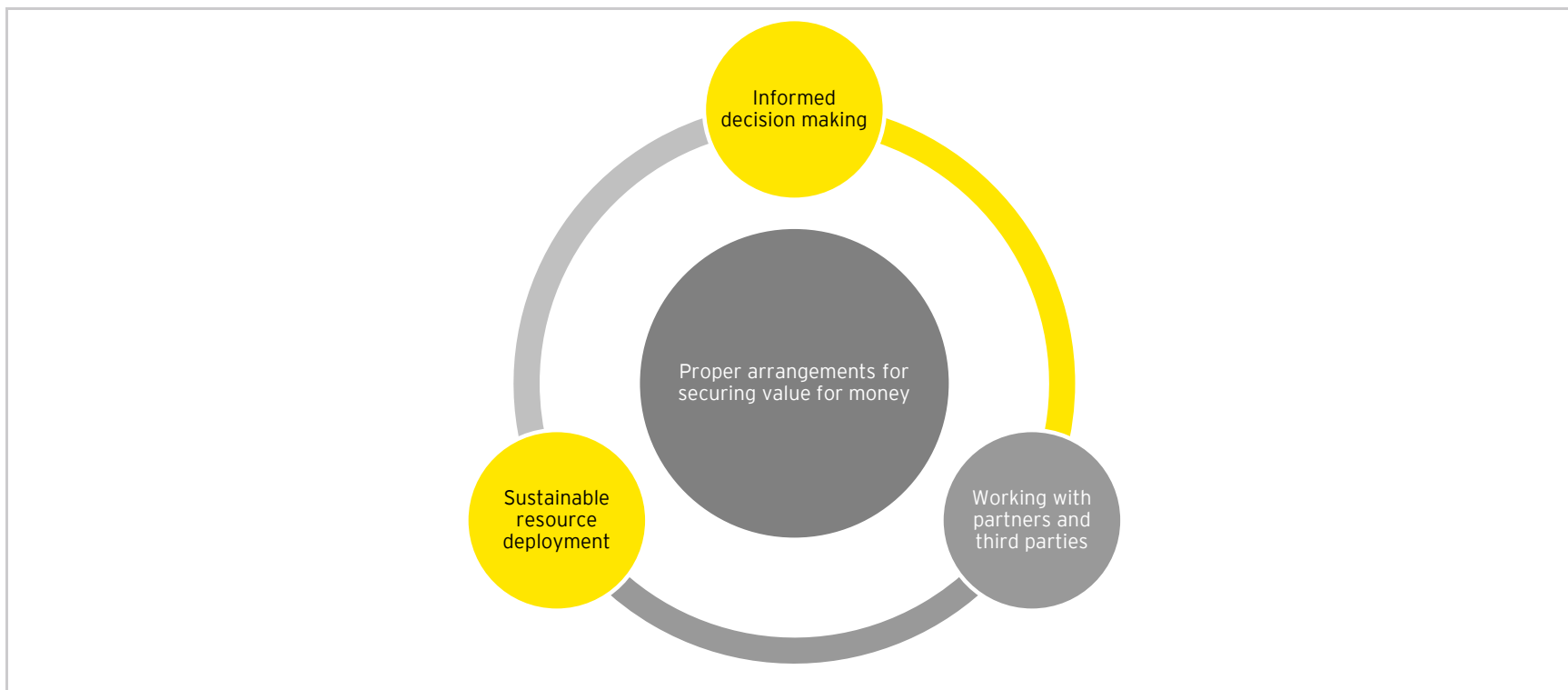
Value for Money

Value for Money

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

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

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



We issued an unqualified value for money conclusion on 16 September 2016.

We did not identify any significant risk in relation to our value for money conclusion. We performed the procedures outlined in our Audit Plan and concluded that the Council had adequate arrangements in place.

As part of our work we considered the following areas and made the following observations.

Key findings

Medium term financial plan and key assumptions

The Council's latest Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), which was updated in January 2016, identifies a cumulative budget gap in the financial years 2016/17 to 2018/19 of £3.4 million. The assumptions made in the MTFS are reasonable and prudent. The Council does not rely on as yet uncertain funding streams to balance its base budget. For example, funding from the New Homes Bonus is transferred to reserves and is therefore not included as part of funding for the base budget. Work is ongoing to address the budget gaps in future years and maintain its reserves. As part of this process, the Council needs to formalise the savings plans it is developing.

Levels of reserves

The level of useable general fund reserves held by the Council at 31 March 2016 is £29 million. Of these, a number are earmarked for specific purposes, leaving around £7 million that could be used to support spending if needed. The general fund working balance forms part of the general reserves and, at just under £4 million, is above the minimum level of £2.5 million recommended by the Head of Finance. We have therefore concluded that the Council has adequate levels of reserves

Budget setting and monitoring processes

The Council set a balanced budget for 2016/17, with no unmet budget gap to be addressed. The assumptions made by the Council in determining its budget are appropriate and we are satisfied that the Council's has established appropriate budgetary control procedures

Decision making processes and partnership working

The Council has appropriate governance, performance and risk management processes in place. There is evidence of the Council working effectively with partners in key areas, such as Kier Harlow for the repair of council dwellings and Veolia for waste collection. A clear vision for the Council is included in the Corporate Plan and the Council has effectively managed significant projects such as the development of the Enterprise Zone.



Other Reporting Issues

Other Reporting Issues

Whole of Government Accounts

The Council is below the specified audit threshold of £350 million. Therefore, we did not perform any audit procedures on the consolidation pack.

Annual Governance Statement

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

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

Report in the Public Interest

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

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

Written Recommendations

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

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

Objections Received

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

Other Powers and Duties

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

Independence

We communicated our assessment of independence in our Audit Results Report to the Audit and Standards Committee on 7 September 2016. In our professional judgement the firm is independent and the objectivity of the audit engagement partner and audit staff has not been compromised within the meaning regulatory and professional requirements.

Control Themes and Observations

We have adopted a fully substantive approach and have therefore not tested the operation of controls.

Focused on your
future



Focused on your Future

| Area | Issue | Impact |
|----------------------|---|--|
| EU referendum | Following the majority vote to end the UK's membership of the European Union (EU) in the EU Referendum held on 23 June 2016 there is a heightened level of volatility in the financial markets and increased macroeconomic uncertainty in the UK. All three major rating agencies (S&P, Fitch and Moody's) took action on the UK Sovereign credit rating and, following the rating action on the UK Government. For entities in the public sector, there is likely to be an impact on investment property valuations if confidence in the wider UK property market falls; and the valuation of defined benefit pension obligations may also be affected. It is too early to estimate the quantum of any impact of these issues, but there is likely to be significant ongoing uncertainty for a number of months while the UK renegotiates its relationships with the EU and other nations. | <p>Many of the issues and challenges that face the UK public sector will continue to exist, not least because continued pressure on public finances will need responding to. Additionally it may well be that the challenges are increased if the expected economic impacts of the referendum and loss of EU grants outweigh the benefits of not having to contribute to the EU and require even more innovative solutions.</p> <p>We are committed to supporting our clients through this period, and help identify the opportunities that will also arise. We will engage with you on the concerns and questions you may have, provide our insight at key points along the path, and provide any papers and analysis of the impact of the referendum on the Government and Public Sector market.</p> |

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ED None

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Ernst & Young LLP, 1 More London Place, London, SE1 2AF.

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