

Issued by the Local Government Auditor



Strabane District Council 2014-15

To the Members of
Derry and Strabane District
Council

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1. Introduction

I have been designated the Local Government Auditor for Strabane District Council by the Department of the Environment with the consent of the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland.

As an auditor independent of the audited body, I seek to examine that the body has proper arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources and that public money is properly accounted for.

This report provides a summary of the findings from my 2014-15 audit. The audited body no longer exists due to the implementation of Local Government Reform from 1 April 2015 so the report is issued to the Members of Derry and Strabane District Council which is the relevant successor council.

Local Government Reform

Under the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 (The Act) the number of local councils in Northern Ireland reduced from twenty six to eleven on 1 April 2015. Strabane District Council was amalgamated together with Derry City Council into Derry and Strabane District Council.

The Act now forms the legislative framework for Northern Ireland's eleven councils. This includes how decisions are made, how positions of responsibility are shared across political parties, how improvements in the delivery of council functions can be achieved to reflect the needs of local communities, and how effectively and efficiently council services are delivered to people. It provides for statutory governance in councils and introduces a Derry and Strabane District Council ethical standards framework which includes a mandatory code of conduct for councillors.

Every aspect of the governance, management and provision of local government services has been impacted. The Derry and Strabane District Council have now taken the lead in community planning and are expected to deliver high quality services in an effective and efficient manner under a Derry and Strabane District Council performance improvement framework. Powers such as planning have transferred from central government to the Derry and Strabane District Council. The Act also sets out arrangements for the transfer of staff, assets and liabilities to the Derry and Strabane District Council.

The Local Government (Transitional, Supplementary, Incidental Provisions and Modifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 made transitional provision with respect to local government reorganisation including positions of responsibility within the Derry and Strabane District Council for the winding up and final accounts of existing councils.

Derry and Strabane District Council struck the 2015-16 rates and approved business and financial plans in advance of 1 April 2015. As Derry and Strabane District Council was operational to a limited extent during the 'shadow' period, I am required to audit the accounts of this body for the 2014-15 period. This is the subject of a separate letter to the Audit Committee.

As well as additional audit work required in relation to the Derry and Strabane District Council operating in shadow form and the audit of statutory transition committees in the transitional year of

2014-15, the Act provides that I will undertake improvement audits and assessments each year for Derry and Strabane District Council. These will specifically entail:

- undertaking improvement audits, to review whether councils have discharged their duties for publishing improvement planning and performance information;
- carrying out improvement assessments, to determine whether councils are likely to comply with legal requirements to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of their functions; and
- reporting on improvement audit and assessment work.

In preparation for this extra work I have been engaging with relevant external stakeholders. I have established a team to manage and develop a best practice audit approach and methodology which will enable my staff to carry out their work with independence, integrity and objectivity, in accordance with the key principles set out in my 'Code of Audit Practice'.

2. Financial Statements

Summary of Audit Findings

Strabane District Council

The accounts of Strabane District Council must be prepared in accordance with International Financial Accounting Standards as interpreted for Local Government in the 'The Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom'. This code sets out the accounting treatment and disclosures for all normal transactions of local authorities.

The financial statements were signed by the Chief Financial Officer of Derry and Strabane District Council on 29th June 2015. This is within the statutory timeframe of 30th June. Following the audit, the accounts were re-signed on 26th October and published on the website of Derry and Strabane District Council on 30th October 2015 in accordance with the regulations.

For the year ended 31 March 2015 I gave the following unqualified opinion, inclusive of an Emphasis of Matter paragraph on the financial statements:

In my opinion

- the financial statements give a true and fair view, in accordance with relevant legal and statutory requirements and the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2014-15, of the financial position of Strabane District Council as at 31 March 2015 and its income and expenditure for the year then ended; and
- the financial statements have been properly prepared in accordance with the Local Government (Accounts and Audit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 and the Department of the Environment directions issued thereunder.

Emphasis of Matter: Material Uncertainty over Grant Receipt

Without qualifying my opinion, I draw attention to Note 13 of the financial statements which indicates uncertainty over the payment of a grant due to the council at 31 March 2015 of £851,774. The ultimate outcome of the matter cannot be accurately determined at present. My opinion is not modified in this respect.

At the end of the audit I issued a Report to those charged with Governance, addressed to the Chief Executive of Derry and Strabane District Council, on the results of the audit, noting the most significant issues, making recommendations and seeking comments. That report is presented separately to your Audit Committee.

The Statutory Transition Committee of Derry City and Strabane District Councils

The Statutory Transition Committee of Derry City and Strabane District Councils (STC), consisting of 8 members from each of Strabane District and Derry City Councils, was formed through regulation¹ to ensure that the Derry and Strabane District Council was able to adopt its full range of powers and functions from 1 April 2015. The STC was set up to gather information, consider and advise on matters relevant to moving to the Derry and Strabane District Council, to prepare a draft budget and to prepare a draft corporate and business plan. The other regulatory role of the STC was to appoint a clerk of the Derry and Strabane District Council, as well as any other staff it deemed appropriate. Under regulation the STC ceased to exist on 19 June 2014, following the election held in May 2014 to determine the Members of the Derry and Strabane District Council.

The STC was a statutory local government body and I therefore had responsibility to audit its financial statements, in accordance with the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 and the Local Government Code of Audit Practice. I gave an unqualified opinion on the 2014-15 financial statements of the STC.

Financial Performance

The Statement of Comprehensive Income and Expenditure of Strabane District Council shows that during the year ended 31 March 2015 the Council spent £20.4m on the provision of services. It also received income of £18.3m.

The major items of expenditure were

- Recreation and Sport £4.1m
- Waste Collection £3.2m, and;
- Minor Works £2.6m.

The major areas of income were

- District Rates £8.5m,
- De-rating and Rates Support Grant £2.2m, and;
- Minor Works £2.5m.

At 31 March 2015 Strabane District Council had net non-current assets of £22.5m. The majority of these non-current assets are in the Buildings category. Total loans outstanding were £6.2m.

¹ The Local Government (Statutory Transition Committees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013

At 31 March 2015 Strabane District Council had usable reserves of £2.0m as set out in the table below.

Usable Reserve	
General Fund	£ 942,207
Capital Receipts	£ 313,255
Renewal and Repairs Fund	£ 764,145
Other balances and reserves	£ 28,000
Total	£ 2,047,607

Legislation² placed a duty on the Chief Financial Officer to make arrangements for the proper administration of Strabane District Council's financial affairs, including the submission to the Council of a report on the adequacy of any proposed financial reserves. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and its Local Authority Accounting Panel (LAAP), which includes representatives from UK local authorities and audit institutions, provide guidance on finance and accounting issues relevant to councils. Specific guidance on financing capital expenditure and the establishment and maintenance of local authority reserves and balances is included in both the CIPFA Prudential Code³ and a recent LAAP Bulletin⁴.

² The Local Government Finance Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

³ The Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities (2011 Edition)

⁴ LAAP Bulletin 99 *Local Authority Reserves and Balances*, July 2014

3. Governance

The Good Governance Standard for Public Services⁵ sets out the following key principles of good governance. Good governance means

- focusing on the organisation’s purpose and on outcomes for citizens and service users;
- performing effectively in clearly defined functions and roles;
- promoting values for the whole organisation and demonstrating the values of good governance through behaviour;
- taking informed, transparent decisions and managing risk;
- developing the capacity and capability of the governing body to be effective; and
- engaging stakeholders and making accountability real.

Annual Governance Statement

The Strabane District Council is required to conduct a review at least once in a financial year of the effectiveness of its governance framework (including its system of internal control) and to then approve an Annual Governance Statement.⁶

I am required to report if the Annual Governance Statement

- does not reflect compliance with the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2014-15;
- does not comply with proper practices specified by the Department of the Environment; or
- is misleading or inconsistent with other information I am aware of from my audit.

I have no inconsistencies to report as a result of my review.

The Council noted the following significant governance issues in its Governance Statement.

Grant Debtor

There is uncertainty concerning a grant debtor of £851,774 in relation to a project largely funded by Central Government as a result of an outstanding issue. Whilst the ultimate outcome of the matter cannot be accurately determined at present, no provision has been made in the accounts on the basis that Council are confident that the dispute will be resolved.

⁵ The Good Governance Standard for Public Services, OPM and CIPFA, 2004

⁶ Local Government (Accounts and Audit) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2006 and DOE circular LG/04/08

Internal Audit

The Local Government (Accounts and Audit) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2006 requires councils to maintain an adequate and effective system of internal audit and to conduct a review at least once in a financial year of the effectiveness of its system of internal audit. Strabane District Council had an external Internal Audit provider. A review of the effectiveness of the system of internal control was carried out during 2014-15 by the Council and the findings of the review were considered by the Audit Committee.

Audit Committee

It is essential that Members exercise effective scrutiny of the internal control processes and procedures in place within the Council. One way that Members carry out this function is through the Audit Committee. The Audit Committee of Strabane District Council met 4 times in the year and the agenda items included

- NIAO audit reports;
- internal audit reports;
- risk register review; and
- other relevant business.

4. Proper arrangements

Legislation requires me to be satisfied that proper arrangements have been made for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources⁷.

My review of Strabane District Council's arrangements for securing value for money can cover the following ten areas which are referred to in my Code of Audit Practice.

- a) **Financial Planning.** Planning finances effectively to deliver strategic priorities and secure sound financial health.
- b) **Financial Performance.** Having a sound understanding of costs and performance and achieving efficiencies in activities.
- c) **Financial Reporting.** Reliable and timely financial reporting that meets the needs of internal users, stakeholders and local people.
- d) **Procurement.** Commissioning and procuring quality services and supplies that are tailored to local needs and deliver sustainable outcomes and value for money.
- e) **Data to support decision making and manage performance.** Producing relevant and reliable data and information to support decision making and manage performance.
- f) **Good governance.** Promoting and demonstrating the principles and values of good governance.
- g) **Risk.** Managing risks and maintaining a sound system of internal control.
- h) **Natural Resources.** Making effective use of natural resources.
- i) **Asset Management.** Managing assets effectively to help deliver strategic priorities and service needs.
- j) **Workforce Management.** Planning, organising and developing the workforce effectively to support the achievement of strategic priorities.

For 2014-15, I examined the areas of Financial Planning, Workforce Management and Good Governance based on my risk assessment of the Council.

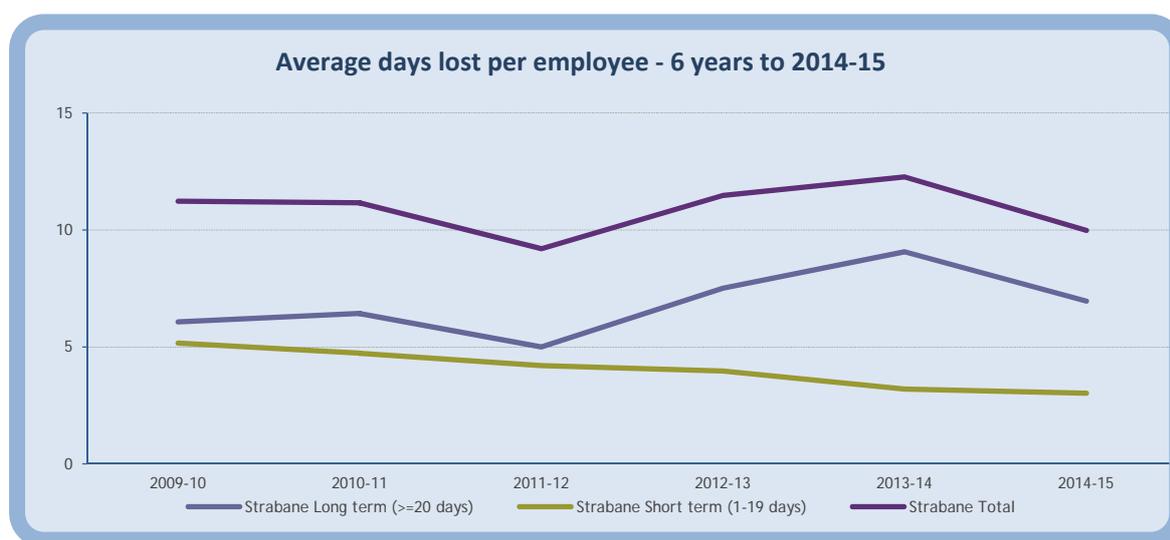
On the basis of my work I am satisfied that the Council had in place proper arrangements to ensure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources.

⁷ Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005

5. Other Audit Work

Absenteeism

The 2014-15 absenteeism figure for Strabane District Council is 9.98 days. This represents a decrease of 2.29 days on the previous year. The Council has told me that this is due to a number of staff who were on long term sickness absence in 2013-14 returning to work. The trend over the years 2009-10 to 2014-15 is shown below.



Joint Committees

The Strabane District Council was a member of:

- the North West Regional Waste Management Group Joint Committee which is established for the purposes of managing waste. During the year the Council advanced £25,537 towards funding the expenditure of the Joint Committee; and
- the Arc North West Rural Development Joint Committee which is the delivery mechanism for the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-13; and
- the North West Peace III Joint Committee under which Peace III and INTERREG IVA funding is available from the Special EU Programmes Body.

Separate accounts have been prepared by the Joint Committees and are audited by me. Separate annual audit letters are issued to each Joint Committee.

6. Closing Remarks

This letter concerning the 2014-15 audit of Strabane District Council is addressed to the Members of Derry and Strabane District Council and prepared for the sole use of the latter. No responsibility is taken by auditors to any member or officer in their individual capacity, or to any third party.

The factual accuracy of this Audit Letter has been agreed with the Chief Executive of Derry and Strabane District Council.

Both Strabane District Council and subsequently Derry and Strabane District Council facilitated the audit in a positive and constructive way. I would like to take this opportunity to express our appreciation for the assistance and co-operation provided.

This letter will be presented to the Derry and Strabane District Council Audit Committee by my staff. I have also asked the Chief Executive to provide a copy to all Members of the Council.



Louise Mason

Local Government Auditor

November 2015