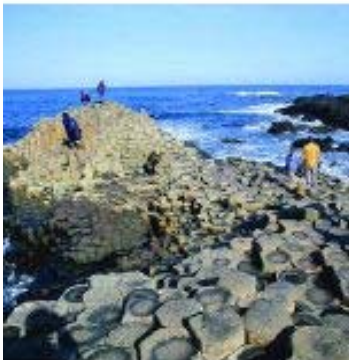




Annual Audit Letter

Issued by the Local Government Auditor



Newtownabbey Borough
Council

2014-15

To the Members of
Antrim and Newtownabbey
Borough Council

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1. Introduction

I have been designated the Local Government Auditor for Newtownabbey Borough 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 NEW 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. Newtownabbey Borough Council was amalgamated together with Antrim Borough Council into Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough 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 new 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 new councils have now taken the lead in community planning and are expected to deliver high quality services in an effective and efficient manner under a new performance improvement framework. Powers such as planning have transferred from central government to the new councils. The Act also sets out arrangements for the transfer of staff, assets and liabilities to the new councils.

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 new council for the winding up and final accounts of existing councils.

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council struck the 2015-16 rates and approved business and financial plans in advance of 1 April 2015. As Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough 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 new councils 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 each of the new councils.

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

Newtownabbey Borough Council

The accounts of Newtownabbey Borough 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 Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough 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 Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council on 31st October 2015 in accordance with the regulations.

For the year ended 31 March 2015 I gave the following unqualified opinion 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 Newtownabbey Borough 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.

On 27 November 2015 I issued a Report to those charged with Governance on the results of the audit, noting the most significant issues and making recommendations. This report will be presented separately to your Audit Committee.

Financial Performance

The Statement of Comprehensive Income and Expenditure of Newtownabbey Borough Council shows that during the year ended 31 March 2015 the Council spent £30,550,417 on the provision of services. It also received income of £38,636,852.

The major items of expenditure were

- Recreation and Sport £9,510,046
- Waste Collection £5,159,443
- Waste Disposal £2,694,211

The major areas of income were

- Taxation and Non-specific grant income £31,496,143
- Recreation and Sport £2,153,273

At 31 March 2015 Newtownabbey Borough Council had net non-current assets of £97,048,741. The majority of these non-current assets are in the Land and Buildings category. Total loans outstanding were £41,366,260.

At 31 March 2015 Newtownabbey Borough Council had usable reserves of £5,706,936 as set out in the table below.

Usable Reserve	£
General Fund	2,912,768
Capital Grants Unapplied	2,794,168
Total	5,706,936

Legislation¹ placed a duty on the Chief Financial Officer to make arrangements for the proper administration of Newtownabbey Borough 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 Code² and a recent LAAP Bulletin³.

¹ The Local Government Finance Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

² The Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities (2011 Edition)

³ LAAP Bulletin 99 *Local Authority Reserves and Balances*, July 2014

3. Governance

The Good Governance Standard for Public Services⁴ 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 Newtownabbey Borough 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 Statement⁵.

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.

- Following the decision to proceed with Local Government reform in 2015 the council together with Antrim Borough Council established a Statutory Transition Committee (STC) in July 2013, comprising of eight elected representatives from each council. The committee and the Transition Management Team (TMT) met regularly to progress the work associated with the creation of the new council. The STC was dissolved on 19 June 2014 after the election of the Shadow Council on 22 May 2014. The new council operating in shadow form was tasked with making essential preparations for a successful merger on 1 April 2015. These included approving business and financial plans, setting rates for 2015/16 and appointing senior staff. Following the appointment of Jacqui Dixon as Chief Executive of the new council, changes in the senior management structure of this council were effective from 1 April 2014, which

⁴ The Good Governance Standard for Public Services, OPM and CIPFA, 2004

⁵ Local Government (Accounts and Audit) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2006 and DOE circular LG/04/08

included Hugh Kelly undertaking the work of Chief Executive except for civic duties and the chief financial officer role.

- Having recorded an increase in sickness absence for the year 2012-13 despite initiatives taken by the council to improve health and wellbeing, a review of the Managing Attendance Policy and Procedure was carried out in conjunction with the Trades Unions. This led to agreed changes to the formal system for managing attendance. For the period April 2013 – March 2015, there has been a reduction in both the long and short term sickness absence and the average days per employee has reduced from 13.95 to 11.57 days. The top three reasons for absence remain under review and a number of practical initiatives are in place to address these. Additionally, work was undertaken with Antrim Borough Council to align the policy and practices of both councils.

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. The Newtownabbey Borough Council was a combination of in-house provision and contracted-out services during 2014-15. A review of the effectiveness of the system of internal audit 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 Newtownabbey Borough Council met 3 times in the year and the agenda items included:

- Review of NIAO documents
- Internal Audit Update Report
- Internal Audit recommendations follow up
- NIAO recommendations follow up
- National Fraud Initiative
- Overtime levels
- Report on Absenteeism

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 resources⁶.

My review of Newtownabbey Borough 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 and Asset Management based on my risk assessment of the Council.

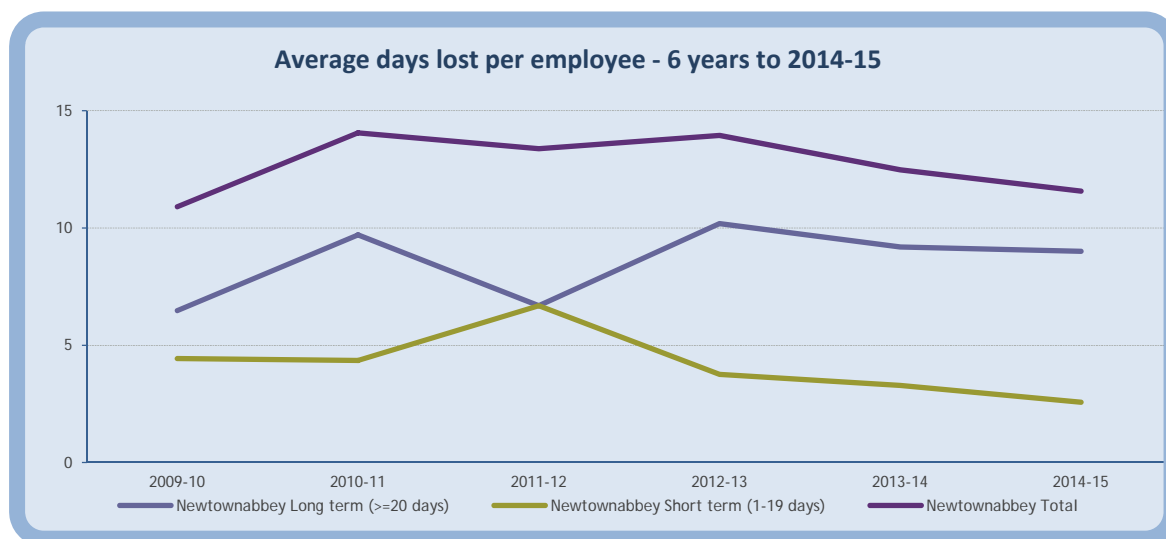
On the basis of my work I am satisfied that the Council had in place proper arrangements to ensure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources.

⁶ Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005

5. Other Audit Work

Absenteeism

The 2014-15 absenteeism figure for Newtownabbey Borough Council is 11.57 days. This represents a decrease of 0.91 days on the previous year. The Council has told me that this is due to changes to the current formal system for managing attendance. The trend over the years 2009-10 to 2014-15 is shown below.



Joint Committees

The Newtownabbey Borough Council was a member of:

- the GROW South Antrim Rural Development Joint Committee which is the delivery mechanism for the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-13; and
- the Carrickfergus, Antrim and Newtownabbey for the CAN 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 Newtownabbey Borough Council is addressed to the Members of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough 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 Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council.

Both Newtownabbey Borough Council and subsequently Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough 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 Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council Audit Committee by my staff. I have also asked the Chief Executive to provide a copy to all Members of the Council.



Local Government Auditor

27 November 2015