

Issued by the Local Government Auditor
21 December 2009



Strabane District Council

Year to 31 March 2009

Introduction

The Department of the Environment may, with the consent of the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland, designate persons who are members of the staff of the Northern Ireland Audit Office as local government auditors (Article 4(3) of the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005). For the year ending 31 March 2009 I have been designated the local government auditor for the Council.

As an auditor independent of the audited body I seek to examine that the body has managed its affairs having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness and that public money is properly spent or in the case of income properly accounted for.

Status and Availability of this Annual Audit Letter

This Annual Audit Letter is issued under Article 13 of the Local Government (Accounts and Audit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006. The Regulations require the local government body to publish this Annual Audit Letter as soon as reasonably possible. The local government auditor will place a copy of this Annual Audit Letter on the NIAO website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk

The Audit Letter is addressed to members and prepared for the sole use of the audited body; no responsibility is taken by auditors to any member or officer in their individual capacity, or to any third party.

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Audit of Accounts

- 1 As your statutory appointed auditor I reported my audit opinion on the Statement of Accounts on 13th October 2009. I gave a qualified opinion on your accounts.
- 2 The Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 requires that in auditing accounts a local government auditor must by examination of the accounts or otherwise satisfy himself that:
 - (a) they are prepared in accordance with regulations;
 - (b) they fully comply with the requirements of all other statutory provisions applicable to the accounts;
 - (c) proper practices have been observed in the compilation of the accounts; and
 - (d) the body whose accounts are being audited has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

Matters arising from the final accounts audit

- 3 The published accounts are an essential means by which the Council reports its stewardship of the public funds at its disposal and its financial performance in the use of those resources. The Council's annual accounts were signed by the Chief Financial Officer on 26th June 2009 and members of the Audit Committee approved the accounts on 26th June 2009 which was within the statutory guidelines which requires this to be completed by 30 June. Following minor adjustments from the audit, the accounts were authorised for issue by the Chief Financial Officer on 9th October 2009.

Financial standing

- 4 The Council continues to have adequate financial management arrangements overall.
- 5 As a measure of prudence, a council should retain a sufficient balance in its District Fund to cover unexpected revenue expenditure or an unexpected drop in income in the foreseeable future. In recent years relevant examples of these include unforeseen costs associated with employment issues and reduced rates income from that estimated by Land & Property Services at the start of the year.
- 6 The district fund balance at £921k represents 10.3% of the net operating expenditure. As such the Council's financial standing would appear to be satisfactory. The average for the 26 Councils as at 31 March 2009 is 8.5%, based on the accounts presented for audit, (12.9% as at 31 March 2008).

- 7 It should be noted that the Council's accounts do not reflect debtors of unpaid rates at 31 March 2009. These are carried by the Land and Property Services (an agency of the Department of Finance and Personnel) in their Statement of Rate Levy and Collection. The Council is therefore vulnerable to later adjustment in respect of uncollectible rates. The Statement of Rate Levy and Collection was the subject of a Public Accounts Committee hearing on 18 September 2008 and report on 6 November 2008.
- 8 The "final penny product" finalisation adjustment for the year [£299k] was notified to the Council in May 2009 and included in the accounts. It should be noted that when the estimates for the year were prepared they were based on an "estimated penny product" and thus when final figures are received from Land and Property Services this can lead to additional funds or clawback adjustment.

District fund spending and balances

- 9 The overall financial position remains stable. The Council decreased by £138k the District Fund in 2008-09, leaving the District Fund balance at £921k as at March 2009. The decrease was largely due to a planned use of the district fund to reduce the level of rates increases.
- 10 It is important that in preparing accounts the Council includes for all known liabilities and provisions in relation to committed events. In this regard preparation of the 2010-11 estimates and the accounts for 2009-10 and 2010-11 should include consideration of such topics as the outworking of single status, revenue contributions to capital in relation to any unfinanced capital expenditure and the early departure of staff not transferring to the new Council. I would also consider that Councils take into account the need for the new Council to have an opening capital position and thus discussion through the Transition Committee and any advice from the Department should be taken into account.
- 11 The Council's capital expenditure is fully funded [per note 11 to the accounts] and so there is no immediate demand on the District Fund surplus.
- 12 In addition, the Council has the following earmarked reserves :

Funds	Balance at 31 March 2009
Depot Capital Fund	£1,239,710
Renewal & Repairs Fund	£182,270
Capital Receipts Reserve	£344,357

Capital Programme

- 13 The Council has Fixed Assets totalling £15m with loans outstanding of £2.5m. As at 31 March 2009 the Council has fully funded its expenditure on Fixed Assets.
- 14 The Statement of Accounts reports a future capital programme totalling £280k. I understand that the Council plans to fund this programme via available capital receipts. As the Council moves towards RPA in May 2011 this leaves two financial years (2009-10 and 2010-11) in which to fully account for the financing of capital expenditure not met from grants or loans.

Annual Governance Statement

- 15 The Local Government (Accounts and Audit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 and DOE Circular No: LG/04/08 required Councils 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 then approve an Annual Governance Statement.
- 16 The Annual Governance Statement was approved by the Chairman on behalf of the Council, and by the Chief Executive, on 26 June 2009. My opinion on the accounts includes the Annual Governance Statement. I am required to report if the Governance Statement is inconsistent with the guidance provided by DOE or if disclosures in the Statement are inconsistent with my understanding of the Council. I noted no Governance Statement matters in my report.

Internal Audit

- 17 The Local Government (Accounts and Audit) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2006 also required 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 Council has contracted out its internal audit to a private sector firm.

Revaluation of Land and Buildings – 2008-09 Accounts

- 18 The Council instructed the District Valuer to revalue the council's land and buildings at 1 April 2008 for the 2008-09 accounts. For a number of reasons, this valuation was not completed in time for the revaluation to be incorporated into the accounts. Consequently, the Council was not in compliance with the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2008 requirement to revalue properties every five years and the audit opinion was qualified accordingly.

Transition to International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS)

- 19 In central government, International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) apply to the 2009-10 accounts and the Central Government 2008-09 accounts were prepared for the last time on the UK Financial Reporting Standard basis in June 2009. In preparation for the change the 2008-09 accounts of Central Government will be prepared again on a shadow IFRS basis in September 2009 with an audit review to be undertaken before the end of December 2009.
- 20 For Local Government the change to IFRS will take place a year later (i.e. from 2010-11). The Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountancy (CIPFA) issued a Local Authority Accounting Panel (LAAP) Bulletin 80 in March 2009 on the implementation of IFRS. This included a Project Plan with key steps and dates. The DoE commissioned CIPFA (NI) to provide training and support to local government bodies in Northern Ireland to help take forward IFRS issues. A series of training days will be held in late 2009 and early 2010. A new IFRS - based Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting which will apply to local authority accounts from 1 April 2010 is being developed by CIPFA. As was the case in Central Government, Councils will be required to re-state their final UK Financial Reporting Standard based accounts (2009-10) on an IFRS basis and have this subject to audit review.

Council Performance

Scope of my audit

- 21 My audit is conducted in accordance with a Code of Audit Practice (the Code) issued by the Chief Local Government Auditor. The Code prescribes the standards, procedures and techniques which comprise a local government audit. The Code notes that due to the special accountabilities attached to public money and the conduct of public business:

“the scope of auditors’ work is extended to cover not only the audit of financial statements but also aspects of corporate governance and arrangements to secure the economic, efficient and effective use of resources.”

- 22 Throughout the public sector the economic, efficient and effective use of resources is known as Value for Money (VFM). More particularly in the context of the Local Government (Best Value) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 “a council shall make arrangements for continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness”. One way the Council monitors this is by benchmarking aspects of its financial data against other Councils. This information is also provided to the Department of the Environment.
- 23 A review of the council’s corporate governance and VFM arrangements for 2008-09 was carried out separately from the audit of the accounts. The finding from the review was included in my audit file and a summary report, prepared for me, was copied to the Chief Executive. I used this information, together with information obtained during the course of the audit of the accounts, to examine the Governance Statement.
- 24 The Council noted the following in its Governance Statement as a significant governance issue:
- The Council’s Audit Committee was not in place for the majority of the 2008-09 financial year. It held its inaugural meeting on 25 February 2009.
- 25 I noted the following additional issues from the corporate governance and VFM arrangements review:
- Financial regulations have not been formally documented.
 - Council does not carry out an annual exercise seeking declarations of interest.
 - Council does not have a hospitality policy in place.
 - The Corporate risk register does not include an assessment of the risks relating to the reliability and accuracy of the information produced and used by the Council.

Absenteeism

- 26 The Chief Local Government Auditor may, in accordance with the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005, undertake and publish studies which examine the provision of services by local government bodies. A study of absenteeism in Northern Ireland councils was completed in respect of 2007-08 and published in January 2009. Similar absenteeism reviews had been undertaken for several years by the Chief Local Government Auditor. This data enabled the 2007-08 report to address absenteeism performance beyond that year for each council, and for the sector as a whole.

- 27 A 2008-09 absenteeism study was published in December 2009. In this, the Chief Local Government Auditor has analysed absenteeism for each council over the three year period (2006-07, 2007-08 and 2008-09) and derived an average annual absenteeism rate for this period. This analysis counters the impact of annual fluctuations in absenteeism which would distort the findings, particularly within smaller councils.
- 28 The Chief Local Government Auditor recommends that councils monitor their absenteeism regularly as part of an ongoing process of absenteeism management. To facilitate this I attach Annex A which contains the most recent absenteeism rates for your Council. This includes annual rates of absenteeism for the last six years and the three-yearly absenteeism rate for the period ending 31 March 2009 which has been included in the Chief Local Government Auditor's 2008-09 report.
- 29 The 2008-09 absenteeism figure for the Council is 11.29 days. This represents a decrease of 0.50 days on the previous year.
- 30 Whilst Strabane District Council's three-year absenteeism rate has increased by 2.18 days from 10.15 days in 2003-06 to 12.33 days in 2006-09 it is still lower than the Northern Ireland average for this latter three year period.

Waste Minimisation and Recycling

- 31 The DoE, as Allocating Authority under the Waste and Emissions Trading Act 2003, allocates Biodegradable Municipal Waste (BMW) allowances to district councils for the amount of waste which can be sent to landfill. The Council's allowance for the year was 14287 tonnes and the volume of waste disposed of to landfill was 11540 tonnes.
- 32 The Landfill Allowance Scheme (NI) Regulations 2004 place a statutory responsibility on district councils, in each scheme year, to landfill only the quantity of BMW they have allowances for. To exceed this may result in financial penalties of £150 per tonne of exceeded allowance (Landfill Allowance Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) SR 2005/588).
- 33 While there is some provision for the re-allocation of allowances, the Council needs to give careful consideration as to the risk of incurring penalties under the scheme.

Payment of invoices

- 34 In November 2008 the Minister at the Department of Finance and Personnel reduced the target for the payment of invoices by the public sector from 30 days to 10 days. This was to assist small business in the changed financial circumstances prevailing, thus assisting businesses with their cash flow.

- 35 While district councils have not yet been formally required to comply the Council is encouraged to review its arrangements in this regard and to have in place steps for measurement against such a target.

Equality

- 36 The Council has an established Equality Scheme and Policy and has developed a process for undertaking equalities impact assessments of its strategies so that it understands the likely impact on its diverse population. During the financial year no impact assessments were carried out.

Other Audit Work

Joint Committee

- 37 The Council is a member of the North West Regional Waste Management Group [NWRWMG] Joint Committee which is established for the purposes of managing waste. During the year the Council advanced £4,789 towards funding the expenditure of the Joint Committee.
- 38 For 2008-09 the funding of the NWRWMG is included in the statement of accounts of Derry City Council but it is anticipated that separate accounts will be prepared for 2009-10.
- 39 The Council also participates in Joint Committees for the purpose of delivering programmes funded by the European Union. Under this arrangement Peace III and INTERREG IVA funding will be available from the Special EU Programmes Body and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development through to 2013. It is anticipated that a statement of accounts for the Joint Committee will be prepared for 2009-10.

District Policing Partnership (DPPs)

- 40 Under the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000, DPPs have been established by each district council. The Policing Board for Northern Ireland provide a grant equal to three-quarters of approved DPP expenses. The set-up arrangements provide for DPP expenditure to be audited annually by Local Government Auditors.
- 41 The 2008-09 DPP audit, comprising expenditure of £133k, was completed in June 2009.

Grant Claims

- 42 The Chief Local Government Auditor in accordance with Article 25 of the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 has made arrangements for the certification of local government body grant claims. These arrangements, which are not an audit but a different form of engagement designed to provide reasonable assurance, apply where their application has been agreed with the grant paying body. The key principle is that the certification of grant should be proportionate to the amounts involved and the associated risks. Specifically financial thresholds apply and grants below £25,000 are not examined.

Looking Ahead

- 43 The Environment Minister in March 2008 announced as part of the Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland that the current 26 council areas will be rationalised to create 11 new council areas. The Minister also outlined the functions to transfer to local government.
- 44 It is currently anticipated that a new council, incorporating Derry City Council and Strabane District Council will come into effect in May 2011. In moving towards this the Council participates in a Transition Committee (legislation anticipated to give it a statutory footing) with officers working in a Transition Management Team, to take forward the change process.

Conclusion

- 45 This Audit Letter has been discussed and agreed with the Chief Executive and the Head of Finance.
- 46 The Council has taken a positive and constructive approach to our audit. I would like to take this opportunity to express our appreciation for the council's assistance and co-operation.

Alfred Knox

Local Government Auditor

21 December 2009

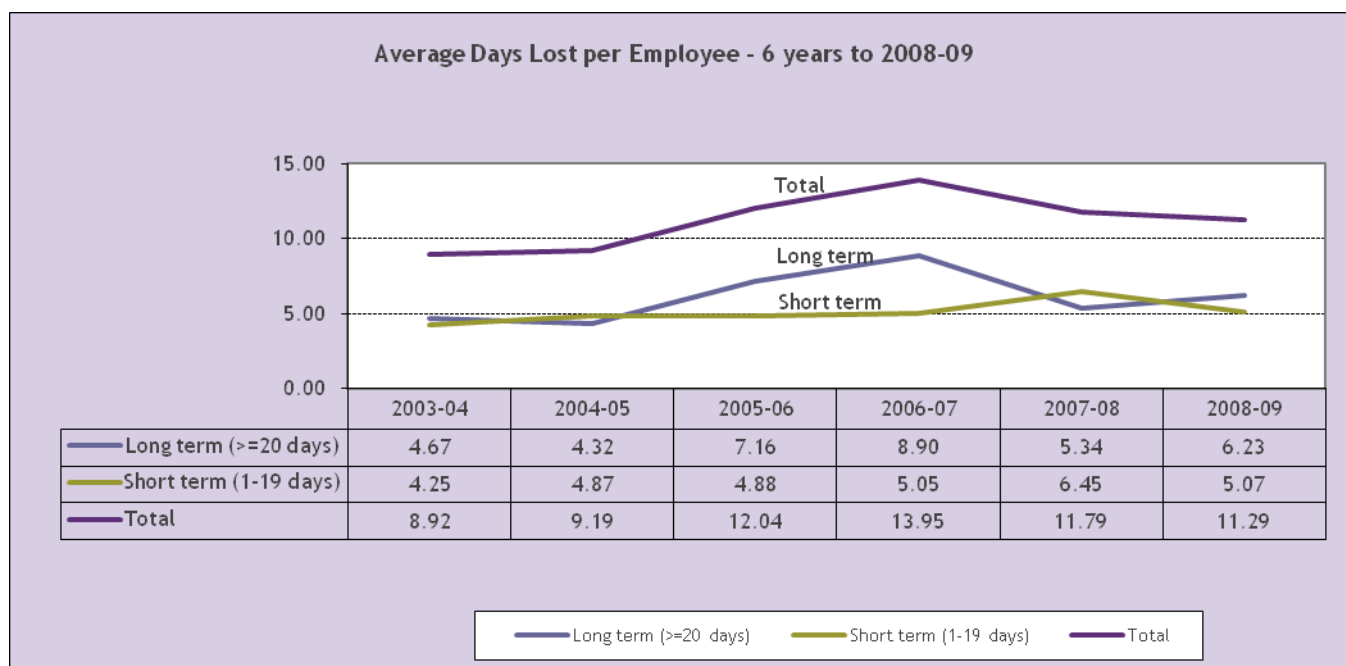
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Annual Audit Letter

Strabane District Council Absenteeism

Annual Absenteeism

The chart below tracks absenteeism for the 6 years to 2008-09 for total days lost per employee.



2008-09 absenteeism compared to Northern Ireland councils as a whole*

	Strabane	NI Councils	Variance	Variance %
Average total days lost per employee	11.29	12.43	-1.14	-9%

3-year absenteeism (2006-09) compared to Northern Ireland councils as a whole*

	Strabane	NI Councils	Variance	Variance %
Average total days lost per employee	12.33	13.31	-0.98	-7%

* The Northern Ireland Council position is derived from figures as at 4th November 2009. Final Figures will be included in the Chief Local Government Auditor's report on Absenteeism in Northern Ireland Councils 2008-09.