

Annual Audit Letter

**Armagh City and District
Council**

Year to 31 March 2007

Issued by

Alfred Knox

Local Government Auditor (NIAO)

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.

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 of this report

This report is issued under Article 13 of the Local Government (Accounts and Audit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006.

The report 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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Financial management

- 1 As your statutory appointed auditor I issued my audit opinion on the Statement of Accounts on 26 September 2007. I gave an unqualified opinion on your accounts.
- 2 However, the 2003-04 audit, which remained open at the beginning of the 2006-07 audit, cannot be formally concluded and a final report issued until the investigations relating to the Council's appointment of a Chief Executive in 2001 are completed. The auditor will have to consider whether this matter will require him to exercise his statutory powers of surcharge. The amounts which are the subject of the investigations will not have a material effect on the disclosures included in the Statement of Accounts. The investigation is on hold pending the outcome of a case involving another council. This case has been heard by the High Court but a decision has not been handed down.

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 25 June 2007. Members of the Executive Committee approved the accounts on 25 June 2007 which was within statutory guidelines. Following minor adjustments arising from the audit the accounts were authorised for issue by the Chief Financial Officer on 20 September 2007.

Financial standing

- 4 The Council's financial position remains generally stable; however, there is a significant balance of unfinanced capital expenditure (see next paragraph). As a measure of prudence, a council should retain a sufficient balance in its District Fund to cover unexpected revenue expenditure in the foreseeable future. The District Fund balance at £3.3m represents 26.6% of the net operating expenditure. The average for the 26 Councils is 14.4% (based on the accounts presented for audit). As this balance is significantly more than would appear appropriate to cover unexpected expenditure I would encourage the Council to set out the rationale for the balance in its next accounts.

- 5 The Council's accounts recorded at 31 March 2007 capital expenditure of £4,068,976 which was shown as not financed i.e. a 'deficit'. There is a risk that the District Fund may not be debited with sufficient transfers to the capital financing account. The Council should look at financing this expenditure (e.g. by borrowings or revenue contributions) and reduce the 'deficit' to a reasonable level in the 2007/2008 accounts. All completed projects should be fully financed.

District fund spending and balances

- 6 The financial position remains relatively stable. The Council increased by £947k the District Fund in 2006/07, leaving the District Fund balance at £3,282k as at 31 March 2007. The Council has also a Useable Capital Receipts Reserve of £599k.

Capital Programme

- 7 The Council has Fixed Assets totalling £45.2m with loans outstanding of £20.2m. The Statement of Accounts reports a capital programme totalling £6.1m in the course of or planned for delivery.

Systems of internal financial control

- 8 I was able to place reliance on the Council's internal financial control environment for the purposes of forming my opinion on the financial statements.

Internal Audit

- 9 As part of my evaluation of the general control environment I assessed the quality of the Internal Audit function in accordance with ISA 500. The Council has an internal auditor and an Audit Committee was operational during the year.

Council Performance

Scope of my audit

- 10 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.”

- 11 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”.
- 12 A review of the council’s corporate governance and VFM arrangements for 2006-07 was carried out. The finding from the review was included in my audit file and a summary report, prepared for me, was copied to the Chief Executive. This corporate governance and VFM arrangements review provided no evidence that the Council does not have proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.
- 13 I noted the following from the corporate governance and VFM arrangements review:
- The Council was to develop a Business Continuity plan in 2007-08. I will examine further progress on this in my forthcoming audit of the Council.
 - The Council has deferred the appointment of an independent member to the Audit Committee.
 - The insurance brokerage is due for review during 2007-08. I will examine further progress on this in my forthcoming audit of the Council.

Absenteeism

- 14 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 2005-06. Similar unpublished absenteeism reviews had been undertaken for several years by the Chief Local Government Auditor. This data enabled the 2005-06 report to address absenteeism performance beyond that year for each council, and for the sector as a whole.
- 15 In his 2005-06 report, published in March 2007, the Chief Local Government Auditor analysed absenteeism for each council over a three year period and an average annual absenteeism rate was derived for this period. This analysis counters the impact of annual fluctuations in absenteeism which would distort the findings, particularly within smaller councils.
- 16 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 at Annex A annual absenteeism data which includes 2006-07 figures. Also included is the three yearly data from the Chief Local Government Auditor's 2005-06 report. The 2006-07 data will be included in a revised three yearly derived absenteeism rate which will be part of the Chief Local Government Auditor's 2006-07 report on all councils. The report will be published later this year.
- 17 The 2006-07 absenteeism figure for the Council is 7.77 days. This represents a fall of 2.2 days or 22%. The trend since 2004/5 has been decreasing absenteeism.
- 18 Absenteeism within this Council has been low for some time. Over the three year period 2003-6 the Council had the 7th lowest average annual absenteeism rate in Northern Ireland at 10.92 days. At 8.3 days the Council had the lowest absenteeism rate for the 2000-2003 period. The absenteeism rate for 2003-06, however, remains well below the Northern Ireland Council average. Had the Councils' 2003-06 absenteeism rate matched that of Fermanagh District Council annual productivity gains of £72,000 may have been possible.

Grant claims

- 19 The Chief Local Government Auditor has developed a more risk based approach to the certification of grant claims. We plan to reduce our audit scope of these claims and where appropriate we adopt a controls-based approach on all of the Council's grant claims.

- 20 Central government funding bodies have been advised of the new approach through a Department of Finance and Personnel circular DAO(DFP) 09/07 dated 6 August 2007.

Conclusion

- 21 This letter has been discussed and agreed with the Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Services.
- 22 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.

Availability of this letter

- 23 This letter will be published on the Northern Ireland Audit Office's website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk, and also on the Council's website.

Alfred Knox

Local Government Auditor

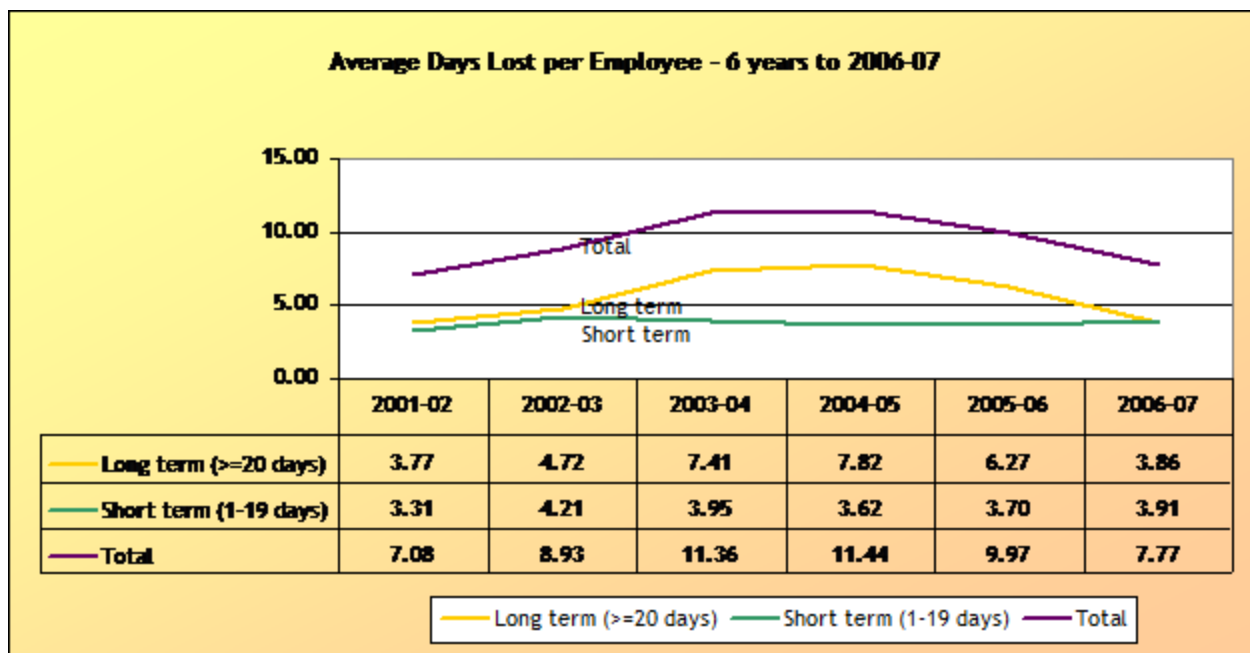
21 November 2007

ANNEX A

Armagh Absenteeism

Annual Absenteeism

The chart below tracks absenteeism for the 6 years to 2006-07 for total days lost per employee.



2006-07 absenteeism compared to Northern Ireland councils as a whole*

	Armagh	NI Councils	Variance	Variance %
Average total days lost per employee	7.77	13.81	-6.04	-44%

* The Northern Ireland Council position is derived from figures as at 21/09/07. Final Figures will be included in the Chief Local Government Auditor's report on Absenteeism in Northern Ireland Councils 2006-07. The report is due to be published in December 2007. The 2005-06 report included the following for the period 2003-06:

3-year absenteeism (2003-06) compared to Northern Ireland councils as a whole

	Armagh	NI Councils	Variance	Variance %
Average total days lost per employee	10.92	14.28	-3.36	-24%

