



## Extraordinary Audit of Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council

Northern Ireland's Local Government Auditor has today (Thursday 7 July 2022) published a report summarising the findings of an extraordinary audit of Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council.

The report by Mrs Colette Kane follows a direction from the Communities Minister in November 2020, for an extraordinary audit of the accounts of the Council, concentrating on land disposals and easements, and related asset management policies and procedures. It details the findings and recommendations emanating from the audit of land disposals and easements since the Council was formed in April 2015.

The report details four key themes found during the audit:

- The Council failed to demonstrate that it obtained best price in the transacting of land disposals and easements;
- There were significant governance failings in the Council's transacting of land disposals and easements;
- The behaviour of some Senior Council Officers has fallen short of the standards expected in a public body, and
- The Council failed to have adequate policies and procedures in place to protect its assets.

Two particular cases, where a number of significant failings were evident, are highlighted by the report, relating to an easement granted in 2016 at Ballyreagh Road, Portstewart and a disposal of land in 2016 at Castleroe Road, Coleraine. The failings identified in both cases included;

- A failure to demonstrate that best price was obtained;
- Inadequate information presented by Senior Council Officers to Committees and Council to enable them to make informed decisions;
- Inadequate records kept of key matters; and
- The conduct of some Senior Council Officers falling well short of expected standards.

As a consequence of the issues found as part of the audit the Local Government Auditor stated that, in both cases, there is a case for finding the easement/ disposal has not been granted lawfully.

In response to these findings, the report makes a number of recommendations. These include:

- An independent review of the Council's governance arrangements, overseen by the Department for Communities,
- The provision of enhanced training to elected Members, to facilitate their understanding of the level of challenge and scrutiny needed when holding Council Officers to account.
- Council should take appropriate action where it has been demonstrated from that the behaviour of Senior Council Officers has fallen short of the standards expected of an official in a public body, and suggest Officers are referred to the relevant professional bodies as appropriate.
- The Department for Communities should carry out a detailed consideration of its responsibilities for this Council in light of the significant failings identified by this audit and take the required appropriate action, using its powers to intervene if necessary.

In the report Mrs Kane concludes

“Throughout this audit, I have identified evidence that adherence to legislation and best practice in land and property matters was not part of the culture of the Council. There was evidence that Senior Officers were advocating actions that were contrary to best practice. This leads me to conclude that a culture existed of bypassing best practice and guidance to get land ‘deals done’ which set the wrong tone from the top of the organisation. In some cases legal advice was ignored and, on one occasion, inaccurate and unreliable information was provided to the Local Government Auditor. There was also evidence of poor governance, for example, there was a lack of clarity over roles and responsibilities, with various Officers being involved in land transactions that appeared to be outside their remit.

“My review has identified clear evidence that the behaviour of some Senior Council Officers has fallen short of the standards expected of employees in a public body. I consider this should be dealt with through Council and / or professional body processes.”

ENDS

#### Notes for Editors

1. As Local Government Auditor, Mrs Colette Kane is responsible for leading all local government audits across Northern Ireland. The scope of external audit in Local Government covers not only the audit of the financial statements, but also the audited bodies arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources, as well as councils’ performance improvement responsibilities. The Local Government Auditor has statutory authority to undertake comparative and other studies designed to enable her to make recommendations for improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of services by local government bodies and to publish her results and recommendations.
2. The report is available on the Audit Office website at [www.niauditoffice.gov.uk](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk). The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on 07 July 2022.
3. On 30 November 2020 the Minister for Communities wrote to the Local Government Auditor, issuing a direction under Article 22 of the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 that the hold an extraordinary audit of the accounts of Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, concentrating on land disposals and easements and related asset management policies and procedures. The relevant legislation for undertaking an extraordinary audit is Article 22 of the Local Government (NI) Order 2005.
4. A summary of the Terms of Reference for this extraordinary audit, and the audit approach taken, can be found in Annex B of the report.
5. For further queries, please contact Francis Casey ([francis.casey@niauditoffice.gov.uk](mailto:francis.casey@niauditoffice.gov.uk); tel: 07786 416965)