

Issued by the Local Government Auditor  
25<sup>th</sup> November 2008



## Belfast City Council

Year to 31 March 2008

## 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 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 his Annual Audit Letter on the NIAO website at [www.niauditoffice.gov.uk](http://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 31 October 2008. I gave an unqualified opinion on your accounts.

## *Matters arising from the final accounts audit*

- 2 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 19<sup>th</sup> June 2008. Members of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee approved the accounts on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2008 which was within statutory guidelines. Following a number of minor and material adjustments from the audit the accounts were authorised for issue by the Chief Financial Officer on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2008.
- 3 A number of minor and material amendments adjustments were made as a result of our audit findings.

## *Financial standing*

- 4 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 at the start of the year.
- 5 The district fund balance at £6,267k represents 5.3% of the net operating expenditure. The average for the 26 Councils is 12.9% (based on the accounts presented for audit). As such the Council's financial standing would appear to be in need of an injection of additional income or savings in estimated expenditure to increase the District Fund balance.
- 6 It should be noted that the Council's accounts do not reflect debtors of unpaid rates at the 31 March 2008. 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 reported on 6 November 2008.
- 7 The "final penny product" finalisation clawback adjustment for the year of £4.1m was notified to the Council after the completion of the accounts but has been adjusted for before audit certification as the amount was material. 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***

- 8 While the overall financial position remains good the Council decreased by £8.868m the District Fund in 2007-08, leaving the Fund balance at £6.267m as at March 2008.

The Council has agreed to a number of major capital projects and with such low reserves it appears likely that the Council will now be forced to fund some of these projects by long term loans rather than from District Fund monies.

- 9 In addition, the Council has the following earmarked reserves :

<b>Funds</b>	<b>Balance at 31 March 2008</b>
City Investment Fund	£ 2.075m
Renewal & Repairs Fund – to meet future landfill closure costs	£ 14m
Capital Receipts Reserve	£ 1m

## ***Capital Programme***

- 10 The Council has almost £600m of Fixed Assets which are fully financed. During the year it advanced £11m from its Loans Fund Account to finance capital expenditure for which long term funding had still to be arranged. The Statement of Accounts reports future capital commitments with schemes underway estimated to cost (after grant aid) £105m.

## ***Annual Governance Statement***

- 11 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.

- 12 The Chair of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, the Chief Executive and the Chief Financial Officer approved the Annual Governance Statement on 27 June, 30 June and 19 June respectively. 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 but paragraphs 19 and 20 to this Audit Letter include matters I considered.

### ***Internal Audit***

- 13 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 a dedicated Audit, Governance and Risk Services Department.
- 14 During the course of 2006/07 Audit, Governance and Risk Services was subject to a review by CIPFA (NI). The purpose of the review was to determine whether the Service was meeting professional standards for internal audit in local government, as prescribed in the CIPFA Code of Practice for Internal Audit in Local Government. CIPFA concluded that the Service complied with the fundamental principles of the Standards, while identifying some areas for improvement. The Audit Panel was re-constituted during 2007/08 with revised terms of reference based on CIPFA's model best practice guidance, an external independent member was appointed and members received bespoke training from CIPFA on Best Practice in Audit Committees.

### ***Revaluation of Land and Buildings – 2008/2009 Accounts***

- 15 The Council operates a five year rolling programme for its revaluation of Land & Buildings with approximately 20% of these assets being re-valued each year.

### ***Transition to International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS)***

- 16 In central government, International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) applies to 2009/10 accounts. The Central Government 2008/2009 accounts will be prepared on a normal Financial Reporting Standard basis in June 2009 then again on a shadow IFRS basis in September 2009 which audit will check before the end of December 2009.

For Local Government the Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountancy (CIPFA) website outlines the latest position regarding the development of the "IFRS - based Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting which will apply to local authority accounts from 1 April 2010". Councils will need to start considering the implications of the transition to IFRSs.

# Council Performance

## *Scope of my audit*

17 My audit is conducted in accordance with a Code of Audit Practice (the Code). 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.”*

18 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”. Part of the way Councils monitors this is by benchmarking aspects of its financial data against other Council's and this information is also provided to the Department of the Environment.

19 A review of the council's corporate governance and VFM arrangements for 2007-08 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.

20 The Council noted the following in its Governance Statement as significant governance issues:-

- Risks identified from the new financial system and associated business processes are managed by being allocated to risk owners
- Over reliance on a small number of key staff in Financial Services
- Risk of being unable to comply with the targets of the Northern Ireland Landfill Allowance Scheme (NILAS)
- Effective management, at a corporate level, of the resource requirements of large projects, for example, the Titanic Signature Project, North Foreshore and Connswater Greenway.
- Action plan to address all the issues arising from the Annual Assurance Statements, which have been prepared by all the Directors, Heads of Service and senior officers for their area of responsibility

21 I noted the following additional issues from the corporate governance and VFM arrangements review:

- The Whistleblowing policy is currently being reviewed / updated by Audit, Governance and Risk Services.
- During 2007/08 each Service has been developing its Value Creation Map (VCM). The process of creating these maps and developing associated business plans will come into full effect during 2008/09.
- Council's IT strategy will be finalized once Services have completed their information management strategic elements in conjunction with Information Systems Belfast (ISB).
- At December 2007 ISB had started to prepare its Business Continuity Plan.
- Council is currently in the process of purchasing an automated performance management system which will help with performance reporting.

### ***Absenteeism***

- 22 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 2006-07. Similar absenteeism reviews had been undertaken for several years by the Chief Local Government Auditor. This data enabled the 2006-07 report to address absenteeism performance beyond that year for each council, and for the sector as a whole.
- 23 In his 2007-08 report, due to be published in January 2009, the Chief Local Government Auditor will analyse absenteeism for each council over the three year period to March 2008 and will derive 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.
- 24 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.
- 25 The 2007-08 absenteeism figure for the Council is 13.91 days. This represents a decrease of 1.15 days on the previous year. During the audit of the accounts the Chief Executive advised me of the steps being taken by Council to more closely monitor the levels of absenteeism.

- 26 Whilst Belfast City Council's absenteeism rate has decreased by 1.41 days from 2002-05 to 2005-08 it is still greater than the Northern Ireland average for this latter three year period.

## Other Audit Work

### Joint Committee

- 27 The Council is a member of the Arc21 Joint Committee which is established for the purposes of waste management. During the year the Council advanced £7.3m towards funding the expenditure of the Joint Committee.
- 28 The Arc21 Joint Committee is a partnership of eleven councils established to collaborate in implementing the Waste Management Plan to develop an integrated network of regional waste management facilities which would be cost effective to the public. Total expenditure by the Committee for the year was £23.5 million and the Committee's Accounts identify longer term capital expenditure in the region of £300 million.
- 29 The Joint Committee accounts for its funding by the provision of a statement of accounts which is prepared under the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 and subject to statutory audit by a local government auditor.

### District Policing Partnership (DPPs)

- 30 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.
- 31 The 2007-08 DPP audit, comprising total expenditure of £466,852.41, was completed in June 2008.

### Grant Claims

- 32 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

- 33 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.
- 34 While the Council will not be joined with another council it will nevertheless present a number of challenges to the Council not only in managing the transition process but also in maintaining effective delivery of services in the interim at a time of significant change in local government.

## Conclusion

- 35 This Audit Letter has been discussed and agreed with the Chief Executive and the Director of Corporate Services.
- 36 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.

John S Buchanan

Local Government Auditor

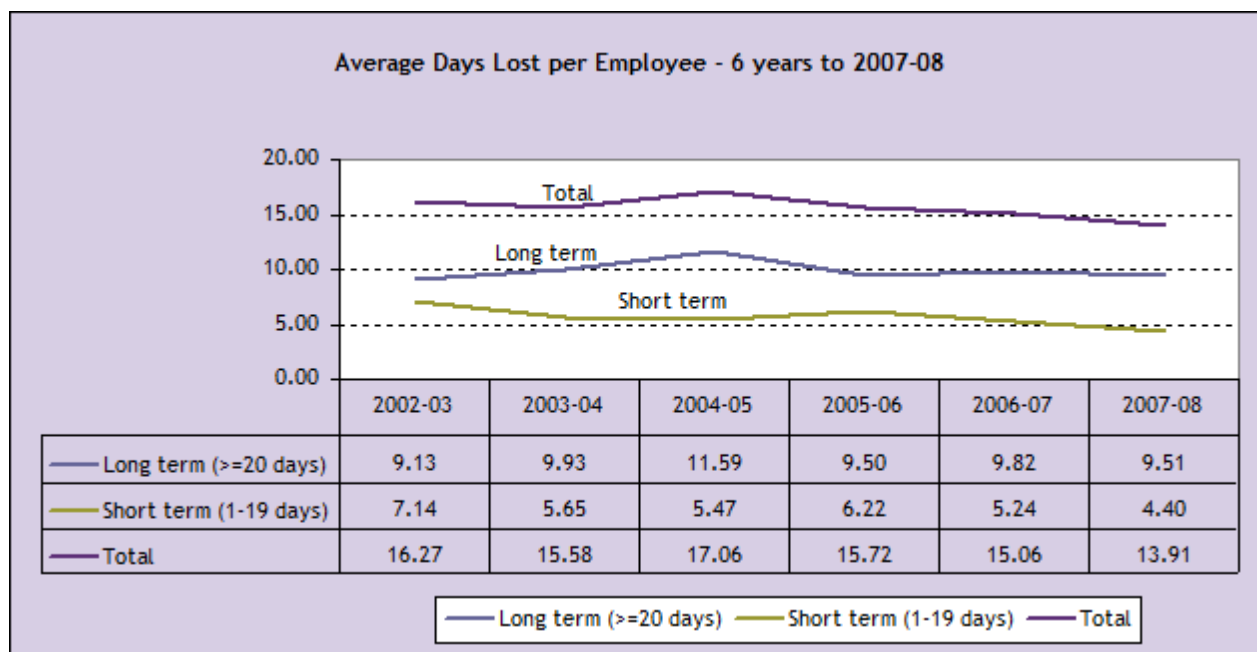
25<sup>th</sup> November 2008

## ANNEX A

# Belfast City Council Absenteeism

### Annual Absenteeism

The chart below tracks absenteeism for the 6 years to 2007-08 for total days lost per employee.



### 2007-08 absenteeism compared to Northern Ireland councils as a whole\*

	Belfast	NI Councils	Variance	Variance %
Average total days lost per employee	13.91	13.70	0.21	2%

### 3-year absenteeism (2005-08) compared to Northern Ireland councils as a whole\*

	Belfast	NI Councils	Variance	Variance %
Average total days lost per employee	14.90	13.75	1.15	8%