



Northern Ireland Audit Office

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Promoting better use of public money, through independent professional scrutiny, underpinned by our commitment to:

- Integrity
- Equality
- Openness
- Innovation

To make a difference for the people of Northern Ireland.

The Department for Communities, with the consent of the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland, has designated Mrs Louise Mason as the Local Government Auditor. She, and the Northern Ireland Audit Office, are totally independent of Local Government. She certifies the accounts of all Local Government bodies in Northern Ireland and is also responsible for councils' performance improvement audits and assessments.

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ARMAGH CITY, BANBRIDGE AND CRAIGAVON BOROUGH COUNCIL

AUDIT AND ASSESSMENT REPORT 2017-18

A REPORT TO THE COUNCIL AND THE DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES UNDER SECTION 95 OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (NORTHERN IRELAND) ACT 2014

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Section 1

Introduction and status of this report

Introduction

1.1 Part 12 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 (the Act) sets out that all councils are under a general duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of their functions. It sets out a number of council responsibilities under a performance framework. It also sets out key responsibilities for the Local Government Auditor. The Department for Communities (the Department) has published ‘*Guidance for Local Government Performance Improvement 2016*’ (the Guidance) which councils and the Local Government Auditor have to follow.

The improvement audit

1.2 Each year the Local Government Auditor has to report whether each council has discharged its duties in relation to improvement planning, the publication of improvement information and the extent to which each council has acted in accordance with the Department’s Guidance. The Local Government Auditor’s procedures to do so are called “improvement audits”.

The improvement assessment

1.3 The Local Government Auditor also has to assess annually whether a council is likely to make the required arrangements to secure continuous improvement in that year. This is called the “improvement assessment”. The Local Government Auditor also has the discretion to assess and report whether a council is likely to comply with these arrangements in future years (see paragraph 2.5).

1.4 Improvement audits and improvement assessments are undertaken in accordance with the Local Government Auditor’s statutory responsibilities¹ and the Department’s Guidance. They are planned and conducted in accordance with the performance improvement Audit Strategy issued by the Local Government Auditor to councils, her Code of Audit Practice for Local Government Bodies in Northern Ireland and the Statement of Responsibilities.

Status of this report

1.5 This report has been produced by staff of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the NIAO) on behalf of the Local Government Auditor in discharging her duties under section 95 of the Act. It certifies that she has carried out an improvement audit and improvement assessment for 2017-18 and states whether, as a result, she believes that the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council (the Council) has discharged its performance improvement duties.

1.6 This report has been prepared for the sole use of the Department and the Council. The Local Government Auditor and NIAO do not accept responsibility to any third party for losses arising from reliance being placed on this report.

¹ Sections 93 and 94 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014

Section 1

Introduction and status of this report

Other performance improvement reports by the Local Government Auditor

The Annual Improvement Report on the Council

- 1.7 The Act requires the Local Government Auditor to summarise all of her work carried out (in relation to her responsibilities under the Act) at the Council, in an “annual improvement report”. This will be published on the NIAO website in due course, making it publicly available.

Special inspections and statutory recommendations

- 1.8 The Local Government Auditor may also, in some circumstances, carry out special inspections which will be reported to the Council and the Department, and which she may publish, or make statutory recommendations.

Section 2

Matters required to be reported on

Matters required to be reported on

Improvement audit and improvement assessment

- 2.1 The Local Government Auditor's audit opinions in relation to the improvement audit and her improvement assessment are in the Annex to this report.
- 2.2 In the Annex, the Local Government Auditor certifies that she has performed the improvement audit and improvement assessment for the Council and that, as a result of this work, she is satisfied that the Council has discharged its statutory performance improvement and reporting duties and that it acted in accordance with the Guidance.
- 2.3 She also reports that, as 2017-18 was the second year in which councils were required to implement the new performance improvement framework, the Council's arrangements to secure continuous improvement are, as is expected, still in various stages of development and implementation. The Council is strengthening its arrangements to secure continuous improvement, and delivered measurable improvements to its services in 2016-17. However, until the Council's arrangements mature and it can demonstrate a track record of continuous improvement the Local Government Auditor is unable to determine, the extent to which improvements will be made.
- 2.4 The Local Government Auditor anticipates that the Council should be able to demonstrate that it is meeting its responsibility to continuously improve over the next couple of years, with the benefit of mature performance improvement arrangements, particularly in relation to the collection and use of data.
- 2.5 The Local Government Auditor has decided at present not to perform the discretionary assessments of whether councils in Northern Ireland are likely to comply with the requirements in future years. She will keep this decision under review as the new framework establishes itself and the track records of councils accumulate.

Special inspections and statutory recommendations

- 2.6 No special inspections or statutory recommendations were required at the Council this year.

Other matters

- 2.7 Whilst the Local Government Auditor has no statutory recommendations to make and there is no requirement for a special inspection this year there are some areas which need further development. These are set out under Section 3 'Key audit and assessment findings' of this report.

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Key audit and assessment findings

Key audit and assessment findings

- 3.1 This section outlines observations arising from the thematic areas of the Council’s audit and assessment. Some findings, where relevant, give rise to proposals for improvement. These are not formal recommendations, which are more significant matters which require action to be taken by the Council in order to comply with the Act or Guidance.
- 3.2 Proposals for improvement include matters which, if accepted, will assist the Council to meet its performance improvement responsibilities. The Local Government Auditor believes that agreed proposals to the Council, should be implemented and will follow them up in subsequent years.
- 3.3 Our procedures were limited to those considered necessary for the effective performance of the audit and assessment. Therefore, the Local Government Auditor’s observations should not be regarded as a comprehensive statement of all weaknesses which exist, or all improvements which could be made.
- 3.4 Each year we review progress the Council has made on these proposals and it is recommended that the Council’s Performance and Audit Committee should monitor and track their progress.

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Key audit and assessment findings

1. General duty to improve

The Council is required to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of all of its functions. These arrangements should enable the Council to understand local needs and priorities, collect performance data and as a result, use this information to identify and prioritise those functions which will benefit most from improvement. This will enable it to select its improvement objectives and in turn, make best use of its resources and capacity to deliver outcomes.

The Council's arrangements were constructed within the seven relevant criteria set out in legislation and the current functions which were prioritised and selected for improvement are aligned to its strategic themes and its community plan outcome statements. These relate to a wide range of the Borough's functions, for example leisure services, community development, management of the built, natural and cultural heritage and economic development, and include cross cutting thematic priorities such as increased participation, volunteering, and customer satisfaction and accessibility to council services. Management told us that following a review these functions were selected on the basis of identified priorities that align and support the Council's strategic themes and specifically the community plan outcomes. The objectives closely follow those identified in the prior year, but with a shift in emphasis as the Council's performance improvement processes mature.

The Council's review of its interim Corporate Plan (2015-17) and its development of its Community Plan (2017-30) has strengthened its understanding of community needs. This process fed into its arrangements to secure continuous improvement and has enabled the Council to build and develop them, giving it a stronger understanding of what its citizens and stakeholders want. However the development of an enhanced performance management system, linked to the Corporate Plan and departmental business plans, to measure how each of its functions are performing will enrich the Council's understanding of which functions will benefit most from improvement. The Council is currently developing its existing performance management system and is researching new performance management software to facilitate the collection and reporting methods. The programme of service reviews which the Council has embarked upon will also inform these considerations in the future.

The Council is making progress in developing effective arrangements and embedding them. For example, new posts of 'improvement manager' and 'customer relations officer' have been filled, recruitment for the strategic director for performance is underway, and a Corporate Plan is under development and Performance Improvement Policy has been drafted.

Our review last year recommended a number of proposals for improvement. These have largely been implemented or are being implemented.

In our report last year in relation to the general duty to improve, we stated that *"Going forward the Council will need to continue to ensure that the process by which functions are prioritised and selected is transparent, well documented and subject to appropriate levels of scrutiny"*. The availability of supporting documentation for the performance information used when addressing the general duty to improve however remains limited.

To assist the Council we recommend the following proposal for improvement:

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Key audit and assessment findings

- The Council should continue to prioritise the development of its performance management system to enable the performance of all of its functions and services to be measured, to support the identification of those areas which would benefit most from improvement.

Section 3

Key audit and assessment findings

2. Governance Arrangements

It is important that the Council's governance arrangements support robust and effective decision making in relation to its statutory responsibility to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in its functions. Last year, the Council began to establish governance arrangements to assist it in meeting its performance improvement responsibilities. These are now well developed and embedded.

The Council has assigned responsibility for the development and approval of its performance improvement plan, including the improvement objectives, to its Governance, Policy and Resources Committee, while the Performance and Audit Committee has responsibility for overseeing the work of performance improvement. In addition, there is scrutiny and monitoring of departmental business plans by service committees as part of the Council's wider strategic planning framework.

The Governance, Policy and Resources Committee received detailed papers, on the 2017-18 draft Performance Improvement Plan at pre-consultation and post-consultation stages. The draft plans were approved by the committee and subsequently the Council approved the Performance Improvement Plan in May 2017. A paper on the final draft Performance Improvement Plan was also presented to the Performance and Audit Committee for notation.

The Council's Performance and Audit Committee, in addition to receiving the year-end self-assessment report on the performance improvement plan for consideration and approval, also received a mid-year progress report. This is an important part of its monitoring and oversight of progress against the performance improvement objectives. The latest mid-year report included details of progress against each of the local (non-statutory) performance indicators and standards for each objective, and actions that were on-going or which would be taken over the remaining six months of the plan.

A number of issues which were identified and reported by the Local Government Auditor last year have yet to be addressed. These include, the recommendations that the terms of reference for the Governance, Policy and Resources Committee should fully reflect its scrutiny role in respect of the Council's performance improvement arrangements and that the Performance and Audit Committee should monitor the activity of the other Council committees charged with the scrutiny of performance improvement.

To assist the Council we recommend the following proposal for improvement:

- The Performance and Audit Committee, as part of its responsibility to consider the adequacy of management response to issues identified by audit activity, should receive regular updates on progress against the 'proposals for improvement'.

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Key audit and assessment findings

3. Improvement Objectives

The Council is required to establish improvement objectives each year and we assess these in line with legislation and supporting statutory guidance. Councils are expected to determine their own priorities for improvement based on a thorough understanding of the communities they serve. Improvement, in the context of the legislation, means more than just quantifiable gains in service output or efficiency, or the internal effectiveness of an organisation. Improvement for councils should mean activity that enhances the sustainable quality of life and environment for ratepayers and communities. It also requires improvement objectives to be legitimate, clear, robust, deliverable and demonstrable.

The Council has carried forward its four 2016-17 improvement objectives with some enhancements which were primarily informed by the community planning process. There are no additional objectives for 2017-18. Clear links exist between the improvement objectives and the Community Plan.

Objectives have an outcome focus, with details provided on what improvements residents, businesses or visitors can expect. Whilst improvement objectives are generally legitimate and clear, and associated with a range of key actions and 'measures' by which progress will be assessed, the objective to "improve economic growth across the borough" is set at a strategic, broad, aspirational and open ended level. The Department for Communities' statutory guidance makes clear that improvement objectives that are too broad and aspirational may lack the capability to inform effective action and accountability. The Council may be able to demonstrate the extent of improvement at the individual project or activity level, but demonstrating the extent to which improvement arising from individual projects is contributing to the overall objective and concluding on whether the objective has been delivered, will be more difficult. If improvement arising from projects is having a limited impact on these improvement objectives then the Council should consider whether these objectives have been set at too broad a level. Experience elsewhere in the United Kingdom indicates that the selection of broad improvement objectives has led to difficulty in concisely reporting improvement.

The Performance Improvement Plan links each of the improvement objectives to a number of departments, and each department's business plan for 2017-18 sets out the link and contribution it makes to the plan. In the case of the fourth objective – "increase customer satisfaction and accessibility to council services" – there is recognition that all departments are responsible, with the cross departmental Customer Care Project Team taking a lead role in developing a Customer Care Strategy and overseeing the implementation of an associated Customer Care Plan which were formally launched in September 2017.

The Council has taken action to address a number of issues raised by the Local Government Auditor in last year's report. These have either been implemented or, given their nature, are still being progressed towards full implementation.

To assist the Council we recommend the following proposal for improvement:

- The Council should provide an explanation in the Performance Improvement Plan of any changes in improvement objectives compared to those in the previous year, given that the improvement objectives play a critical role for the arrangements being put in place for continuous improvement.

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Key audit and assessment findings

4. Consultation

We looked at how well the Council involved local people and those that work with and for it, in deciding its priorities for improvement. The Council carried out extensive consultation during its community planning process to identify and understand community needs. This also informed the drafting of the Performance Improvement Plan, which was submitted for approval prior to being put out to public consultation.

The Council conducted an eight week consultation process on the draft Performance Improvement Plan using the intranet for staff and the staff magazine, social media, emails to businesses, statutory partners and letters and emails to Section 75 groups, the Council website and the local press. In addition, the Council provides its citizens and stakeholders with an opportunity to propose new improvement objectives during the year via the website. In this respect, the Council has met its statutory duty to consult on its improvement objectives.

It is the Council's responsibility to promote and encourage its citizens and stakeholders to engage with it. In last year's report we shared a number of good practice methods for raising the public profile of the concept of performance improvement along with ways to improve the consultation process, which if adopted, should encourage more citizens and stakeholders to participate in future consultations. These were actioned by the Council.

Although there was some internal feedback from staff during the consultation period, the Council received no formal responses to its consultation, compared to the previous year when it received four responses. Discussions are taking place between Council departments to review and increase consultation methods, with the development of an engagement strategy, consultation policy and customer feedback.

To assist the Council we recommend the following proposal for improvement:

- The Council should try to identify why it did not receive any formal responses to its performance improvement consultation exercises, with a view to tailoring its efforts to promote its performance improvement responsibilities and engage with citizens and stakeholders.

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Key audit and assessment findings

5. Improvement Plan

The Council published its Performance Improvement Plan in June 2017 which is available in electronic format from the Council's website, in hard copy at Council offices, and in other formats on request. The document contains a high level description of the Council's plan for discharging its statutory performance improvement duties. It includes a description of its annual performance improvement objectives, how these were selected, the key actions to be undertaken in order to achieve each of the objectives, and how progress will be measured. However the plan makes clear that the availability of appropriate and relevant performance data underlying the plan is limited. There was a commitment that, over the next year and beyond, appropriate information systems will be developed to fully support the improvement planning process.

The plan also provides a summary of the Council's consultation process and the outcome of that process, together with information on how citizens and stakeholders may propose new objectives during the year and how performance against the plan will be reported.

Whilst the plan includes details of the statutory performance indicators and standards to be met, it does not include a description of its plans to meet the standards as required by Section 92(4) of the 2014 Act. In addition, although the plan refers to the commitment to continuous improvement in the delivery of services, there is no description of its plans to achieve this duty, outside of the four performance improvement objectives. The plan should contain a description of the Council's plans to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of its functions (as required by Section 92(4) of the 2014 Act). In relation to these two matters, without additional clarity in its future plans, the Council is at risk of not being fully compliant with the legislation.

Good practice suggests that the Council should provide a rationale within its improvement plan for any prior year improvement objectives which have changed. The Council should also continue to monitor any ongoing improvement delivered by prior year short term improvement objectives and projects (that is, those lasting only one year) as part of its duty to continuously improve. This may be done corporately through the performance management framework and does not necessarily require publication in the Improvement Plan or the Annual Report.

To assist the Council we recommend the following proposal for improvement:

- In relation to the information available to underpin the general duty to improve and to develop the Performance Improvement Plan, the plan should detail the progress that the Council is making in establishing the information systems and using data to support the plan and demonstrate improvement in its functions.

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6. Arrangements to improve

The Council is required to establish arrangements to deliver on its improvement objectives each year. The Department for Communities' guidance states that the Council should be able to understand and demonstrate the impact of their arrangements for continuous improvement on the outcomes for citizens.

In accordance with the Council's strategic planning framework, the key actions underpinning the Council's performance improvement plan are delivered through departmental business plans and budgets. These are being managed and have lines of accountability to senior management and Committees/Council members and are incorporated within risk management processes. However, the performance management framework is an interim arrangement that is to be re-aligned and finalised upon completion of a new Corporate Plan and linked with business planning. In addition, a performance improvement policy is still to be finalised.

The mid-year progress report on the 2017-18 Performance Improvement Plan will help inform the Performance and Audit Committee on progress and issues on key actions. However, whilst the Council has arrangements in place to deliver the business plans, including individual 'key actions' associated with the performance improvement objectives, the high level nature of the improvement objectives and the developing management information systems makes it difficult to determine the extent to which continuous improvement will be delivered.

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7. Collection, use and publication of performance information

The collection, use and publication of performance information is critical within the performance improvement framework. It enables the Council to measure and evaluate improvement, assists in the identification of priority areas, facilitates comparison and benchmarking and supports the communication of outcomes and progress with its citizens and other stakeholders.

The Council had additional responsibilities this year specifically, in relation to carrying out of a self-assessment of its performance improvement in 2016-17 and reporting this by 30 September 2017.

The type of information required to be collected, used and reported falls under three key areas:

- the general duty to improve;
- the improvement objectives; and
- statutory and local (non-statutory) performance indicators and standards.

In relation to local performance indicators and standards the Council is also now required to make internal comparisons year on year to measure its performance and demonstrate the extent of any improvement, both for its general duty for continuous improvement across all of its functions and any standards and indicators in relation to its individual improvement objectives. For local performance indicators and standards associated with the general duty, councils should make comparisons with other councils where it is reasonably practical to do so.

Some councils have told us that they are unclear as to the purpose or extent of the collection, use and reporting of local performance information. Clearly, some aspects of this responsibility would benefit from additional clarity and formal guidance from the Department for Communities. This would enhance current understanding of the legislation's requirements and also the Department for Communities' expectations of councils.

The Local Government Auditor's interpretation of this part of the legislation currently is that:

- a council is expected to select a small range of local indicators and set associated standards across its functions, with baselines and targets established for improvement. This will help to identify its improvement priorities and objectives, and will be required to fully meet its responsibility to collect and use information in relation to the general duty to improve across all of its functions;
- in relation to local performance indicators and standards, a council must publish the results of its performance and provide a year on year comparison within its annual self-assessment report; and
- in relation to comparisons with other councils, the Council must continue to work with the Department for Communities and the other councils to agree a suite of local indicators to facilitate comparison. Until this is agreed and implemented, it will not be practicable to publish meaningful comparisons.

This was the first year that councils were required to meet this responsibility. The Local Government Auditor's current view is that, to encourage councils to comply fully and to allow more time for the framework to mature, she will not issue any statutory recommendations in relation to this matter this year. Instead 'proposals for improvement' will be used to highlight any matters of non-compliance. If not addressed by councils, these may become statutory recommendations next year.

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Key audit and assessment findings

Performance information

The Council has a limited performance management system and limited availability of appropriate, relevant performance data to assist with monitoring performance in relation to its general duty to improve, and fully support the performance improvement planning process.

It has established a number of local (non-statutory) indicators across each of its services which are included in their departmental business plans and are used to measure performance. The business plans are subject to scrutiny by their related functional Committee and progress against targets/deliverables is reported to Council. A new performance management framework is envisaged that will align with business planning and a new Corporate Plan which is currently being drafted.

The Council is liaising with other councils and the Department to agree a range of local performance indicators to facilitate effective comparison. However, this collaborative work is at a very early stage of development and it is too early to draw any conclusions about the extent to which this will benefit the Council. The Local Government Auditor is encouraging all councils and the Department to agree a suite of local performance indicators to facilitate effective comparison as soon as practicable.

The Local Government Auditor recommends that the Council adopts the following proposals for improvement to enhance its collection and use of information:

- in addition to any local indicators and standards relating specifically to improvement objectives, the Council should select a range of local indicators and standards to enable it to measure and monitor improvement across its full range of functions, as part of its general duty arrangements to continuously improve. This information should be included in the published self-assessment and provide year on year comparisons;
- the Council should ensure that a new performance management framework is established and embedded across all of its functions without delay; and
- the Council should continue working with other councils and the Department to agree a suite of local indicators and standards. This will enable meaningful comparisons to be made and published in line with its statutory responsibility.

Publication of performance information

The Council is required each year to publish a report, or reports, to include a self-assessment of its performance in a financial year:

- in discharging its general duty to improve;
- in meeting its improvement objectives for that year;
- by reference to its local and statutory performance indicators; and
- meeting its local and statutory performance standards.

In addition, the Council's assessment of its performance and its published report should include a comparison of its performance with previous years, and where reasonably practicable, with other councils.

The key purpose of the report is to show citizens, and other stakeholders how the Council is discharging its duty under legislation to secure continuous improvement as set out in its 2016-17 improvement

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Key audit and assessment findings

plan. It enables the Council to communicate progress against its improvement objectives and to highlight what visible improvements it has made to its functions and services.

In September 2017 the Council published its Self-Assessment Report 2016-17. It focused on performance of the initiatives which supported the Council's 2016-17 improvement objectives and includes a section on its performance in relation to the statutory indicators, with some comparisons against other councils in Northern Ireland. The self-assessment reports benefits from additional information by way of a number of additional local (non-statutory) indicators. Commentary has been provided on the performance against each of the indicators, including explanations where targets have not been met and the proposed action to rectify this. However, it does not provide an assessment on whether the improvement objectives themselves are being met.

The Local Government Auditor has made a number of observations and good practice suggestions for consideration in future self-assessment reports. These will be shared with councils as a separate publication later in the year. If adopted, these would further enhance the transparency of council's performance improvement to citizens and stakeholders.

The Local Government Auditor recommends that the Council adopts the following proposals for improvement to enhance transparency and clarity of future self-assessments:

- self-assessment reports must include a section on performance in relation to its general duty to improve as required under the legislation; and
- self-assessments should not focus solely on the underlying initiatives, but also include an assessment of the Council's progress in delivering its improvement objectives.

Section 4

Other matters

Statement on personal data

- 4.1 During the course of the audit and assessment we may have access to personal data to support our audit testing. We have established processes to hold this data securely within encrypted files and to destroy it where relevant at the conclusion of our audit. We can confirm that we have discharged those responsibilities communicated to you in accordance with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998.

Independence, integrity & objectivity of auditors

- 4.2 The NIAO's policy to ensure independence, integrity and objectivity of our auditors was set out in our Audit Strategy. Overall, the threat to the audit arising from issues affecting our independence, integrity and objectivity is low, and the safeguards in place ensure that the likelihood of any impact is low.
- 4.3 We have complied with APB Ethical Standards and, in our professional judgement, we are independent and our objectivity is not compromised. There are no relationships between NIAO and the Council that we consider to bear on our objectivity and independence.

Complaints procedure

- 4.4 NIAO seeks to ensure that, when carrying out its audit work, it complies with the principles developed by the Public Audit Forum in its paper "What Public Sector Bodies can expect from their Auditors".
- 4.5 NIAO also wishes to gauge public sector bodies' perceptions of its audit processes in order to promote continuous improvement. In particular, it undertakes to act quickly on any complaint and ensure that the underlying causes of problems are addressed to prevent them recurring. In the first instance, complaints can be addressed to the member of the Directorate responsible for the audit within which the concern has been raised.
- 4.6 Failing resolution of the problem to the satisfaction of the complainant, the Chief Executive of the Council can then write directly to the Local Government Auditor who will ensure that a further review of the case will be undertaken.

Audit and assessment of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council's performance improvement arrangements

Certificate of Compliance

I certify that I have audited Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council's (the Council) assessment of its performance for 2016-17 and its 2017-18 improvement plan in accordance with section 93 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 (the Act) and the Code of Audit Practice for local government bodies.

I also certify that I have performed an improvement assessment for 2017-18 at the Council in accordance with section 94 of the Act and the Code of Audit Practice.

This is a report to comply with the requirement of section 95(2) of the Act.

Respective responsibilities of the Council and the Local Government Auditor

Under the Act, the Council has a general duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of its functions and to set improvement objectives for each financial year. The Council is required to gather information to assess improvements in its services and to issue a report annually on its performance against indicators and standards which it has set itself or which have been set for it by Government departments.

The Act requires the Council to publish a self-assessment before 30 September in the financial year following that to which the information relates, or by any other such date as the Department for Communities (the Department) may specify by order. The Act also requires that the Council has regard to any guidance issued by the Department in publishing its assessment.

As the Council's auditor, I am required by the Act to determine and report each year on whether:

- The Council has discharged its duties in relation to improvement planning, published the required improvement information and the extent to which the Council has acted in accordance with the Department's Guidance in relation to those duties; and
- The Council is likely to comply with the requirement to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of its duties.

Scope of the audit and assessment

For the audit I am not required to form a view on the completeness or accuracy of information or whether the improvement plan published by the Council can be achieved. My audits of the Council's improvement plan and assessment of performance, therefore, comprised a review of the Council's publications to ascertain whether they included elements prescribed in legislation. I also assessed whether the arrangements for publishing the documents complied with the requirements of the legislation, and that the Council had regard to statutory guidance in preparing and publishing them.

For the improvement assessment I am required to form a view on whether the Council is likely to comply with the requirements of Part 12 of the Act. My assessment of the Council's improvement responsibilities and arrangements, therefore, comprised a review of certain improvement arrangements within the Council, along with information gathered from my improvement audit.

ANNEX

The work I have carried out in order to report and make recommendations in accordance with sections 93 to 95 of the Act cannot solely be relied upon to identify all weaknesses or opportunities for improvement.

Audit opinion

Improvement planning and publication of improvement information

As a result of my audit, I believe the Council has discharged its duties in connection with (1) improvement planning and (2) publication of improvement information in accordance with section 92 the Act and has acted in accordance with the Department for Communities' guidance sufficiently.

Improvement assessment

As a result of my assessment, I believe the Council has as far as possible discharged its duties under Part 12 of the Act and has acted in accordance with the Department for Communities' guidance sufficiently.

2017-18 was the second year in which councils were required to implement the new performance improvement framework. The Council's arrangements to secure continuous improvement as is to be expected, are still in various stages of development and implementation. The Council is strengthening its arrangements to secure continuous improvement, and has delivered some measurable improvements to its services in 2016-17. However, until the Council's arrangements further develop and begin to mature and it can demonstrate a track record of ongoing improvement in relation to the framework, I am unable to determine, the extent to which improvements will be made.

I have not conducted an assessment to determine whether the Council is likely to comply with the requirements of Part 12 of the Act in subsequent financial years. I will keep the need for this under review as arrangements become more fully established.

Other matters

I have no recommendations to make under section 95 (2) of the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act 2014.

I am not minded to carry out a special inspection under section 95 (2) of the Act.

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30 November 2017