



Northern Ireland Audit Office

Annual Performance Improvement Report

Belfast City Council

2021-22

Colette Kane

Local Government Auditor

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1. Councils have statutory responsibility to improve their functions. These responsibilities are collectively referred to as *Performance Improvement*. As Local Government Auditor I am required to perform an improvement audit and assessment each year, and summarise the findings of work I have conducted during the year in this report.
2. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on all councils with council resources and priorities being refocused over the course of the pandemic. Initial efforts were centred on responding to the emergency situation and then subsequently recovery and so performance improvement arrangements have had to evolve accordingly. In addition changes to performance improvement requirements were made by the Department for Communities in light of the pandemic and this also impacted on the timing of my audit for 2020-21, whilst legislation was being progressed. As a result during 2021-22 I have issued two reports to the Council under Part 12 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014, covering 2020-21 and 2021-22. This report therefore covers both of these periods.
3. Councils were not required to publish a performance improvement plan by June 2020 due to the pandemic. In light of this, there was no improvement plan for 2020-21 and my audits could not therefore consider this plan or the reporting of outcomes in September 2021 against self-imposed objectives that would normally have been set in that plan. An improvement plan was produced for 2021-22, however, and I considered this during my audit work.
4. I am satisfied that the Council has discharged its statutory performance improvement reporting duties, and that it has acted in accordance with the legislation and guidance for both periods. No statutory recommendations¹ or special inspections² were required at the Council for these periods.
5. The Council has been able demonstrate some evidence of a track record of improvement. However, in light of the impact of COVID-19 on Council services, I have been unable to place reliance on this trend information in order to form an assessment as to whether Council is likely to comply with Part 12 of the Local Government Act (Northern

1 A statutory recommendation is issued if the Local Government Auditor considers that the Council has not complied with the legislation or guidance issued by the Department for Communities. The Council is obliged, by law, to address the matter.

2 A special inspection may be necessary if the Council does not meet its improvement responsibilities.

Ireland) 2014 during 2020-21 or 2021-22.

6. In my reports to the Council, I outlined one proposal for improvement. Matters such as these, if accepted and implemented, will, I believe, assist the Council to meet its performance improvement responsibilities, and also help to ensure that the work it does is transparent and meaningful to citizens.
7. Legislation requires the comparison of performance improvement information amongst councils so far as is reasonably practicable. In common with other councils, progress is essential in the coming year to allow the performance of a broader range of functions to be compared.
8. You should be able to access more specific and detailed information in relation to the work that your Council is undertaking to meet its improvement responsibilities on its website, or you can contact it directly.

Colette Kane
Local Government Auditor

31 March 2022

Annex A – Audit and Assessment Certificate – 2020-21

Audit and assessment of Belfast City Council’s performance improvement arrangements

Certificate of Compliance

I certify that I have audited Belfast City Council’s (the Council) assessment of its performance for 2019-20 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 2020-21 on whether the Council is likely to have complied with the requirements of Part 12 of the Act.

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 requirement to set improvement objectives and publish an improvement plan was not required for 2020-21 under the Local Government (Meetings and Performance) (Northern Ireland) Act 2021. 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 requirements of Part 12 of the Act.

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 audit of the Council’s assessment of performance, therefore, comprises a review of the Council’s publication to ascertain whether it included elements prescribed in legislation. I also assessed whether the arrangements for publishing the document 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, informed by:

- A forward looking assessment of the Council’s likelihood to comply with its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement; and
- A retrospective assessment of whether the Council has achieved its planned improvements to inform a view as to its track record of improvement.

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.

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

Publication of improvement information

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

Improvement assessment

In light of the impact of COVID-19 on Council services I have been unable to assess whether the Council has discharged its duties under Part 12 of the Act and has acted in accordance with the Department for Communities' guidance sufficiently during 2020-21.

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 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.

COLETTE KANE

Local Government Auditor

Northern Ireland Audit Office

1 Bradford Court

Belfast

BT8 6RB

9 December 2021

Annex B – Audit and Assessment Certificate – 2021-22

Audit and assessment of Belfast City Council’s performance improvement arrangements

Certificate of Compliance

I certify that I have audited Belfast City Council’s (the Council) assessment of its performance for 2020-21 and its improvement plan for 2021-22 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 2021-22 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 requirements of Part 12 of the Act.

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, informed by:

- A forward looking assessment of the Council’s likelihood to comply with its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement; and
- A retrospective assessment of whether the Council has achieved its planned improvements to inform a view as to its track record of improvement.

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.

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 of the Act and has acted in accordance with the Department for Communities' guidance sufficiently.

Improvement assessment

In light of the impact of COVID-19 on Council services I have been unable to assess whether the Council has discharged its duties under Part 12 of the Act and has acted in accordance with the Department for Communities' guidance sufficiently during 2021-22.

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 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.

COLETTE KANE

Local Government Auditor

Northern Ireland Audit Office

1 Bradford Court

Galwally

BELFAST

BT8 6RB

25 February 2022