

Minutes of the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) meeting
Tuesday 22nd August 2017

Venue: Main Conference Room, Custom House, Dublin 1

Attended by:

Chairman Pat McLoughlin
Members John Buckley
 Tara Buckley
 Connie Hanniffy
 David Holohan
 Paul Lemass
 Michael McGreal
 Martina Moloney
 Sharon O'Connor
 Colleen Savage

Secretariat Sheila McMahan

Minutes of last meeting and matters arising

The minutes of the meeting of 4th July 2017 were agreed without amendment. On matters arising, the Chairman confirmed that he had met with the Director of the Local Government Audit Service since the previous meeting and the discussion had included NOAC follow-up with local authorities on some of the issues raised in the audit reports on the 2015 Annual Financial Statements. The members confirmed that they were not aware of any conflicts of interest in relation to the items for discussion at the meeting.

Performance Indicators Report 2016

Martina Moloney, chair of the Performance Indicators Sub-Group, summarised the issues raised generally, and in relation to the five reviewed indicators, at the validation visits to six of the local authorities. The current Customer Survey Sub-Group project might feed into how best to measure social media engagement. She highlighted the fact that the visited authorities are carrying out comparisons of indicator outcomes with other authorities that they consider to be equivalent and that Wexford County Council is a model of good practice in this area. Following the Council's analysis of its relative performance, it selected three indicators on which to focus and is developing its ICT system to better support data gathering for the indicators.

The data tables circulated for the meeting had only been received the previous day, so the circulated draft NOAC commentary was provisional and incomplete. In terms of presentation of the report, the sub-group has decided to include some maps from the MapRoad system to better demonstrate the pavement surface condition outturns and it has also decided to present some of the data within maps of Ireland as an alternative to the existing all table

format. The Department's Statistics and Data Analytics Unit is assisting the secretariat in this regard. Although the private drinking water supply data was still awaited from the EPA and some individual data items were still being pursued by the LGMA with a number of local authorities, it remains the target to publish this report in September.

The members discussed the impact of the report when published and the inclusion of material on social housing targets in the commentary. It was clarified that where a target has been established for the sector or accepted by local authorities themselves, it is appropriate for NOAC to comment on the extent of achievement. Michael McGreal said that while the overall level of social housing provision in 2016 is encouraging, he finds the number of units actually constructed by local authorities disappointing and suggested that NOAC scrutinise whether this is the most efficient and effective method of delivering the housing programme and whether it delivers the best value for money. The secretariat is to check for any specified social housing targets for 2016 and circulate to the members to consider if commentary is warranted. The sub-group will continue to work on the draft text and if a final draft of the report is ready prior to the next NOAC meeting in September, it will be circulated to the members for approval by email. It was agreed that the final report will be provided to relevant Government Departments before publication.

ICT Strategy

The members resumed their discussion of the presentations made to the last meeting in relation to the ICT strategy being developed by the LGMA and the factors impacting on the cost of ICT per local authority. The view was expressed that the ICT strategy nearing completion needs to indicate what this part of the LGMA function will deliver in the next five years, what local authority systems will be supported and what the take up of that service by local authorities will be. The comment was made that the accounting arrangements for ICT expenditure were somewhat unusual with, for example, all Housing Assistance Payments costs being attributed to Limerick City and County Council as the administering authority, instead of being distributed across all authorities. Members queried if the strategy proposals will be for clearance by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, but this was considered unlikely as this expenditure is not voted. Expenditure by the sector on ICT is considerable (€72m in 2016) of which about €1m goes to the LGMA, so an analysis of what the remainder is being spent on would be useful. It is not possible to carry out an 'apples to apples' comparison of expenditure by authorities on ICT, because the smaller authorities have negative economies of scale and just keeping their systems operational uses up their resources. Overall, the concern is that NOAC does not have a clear understanding of the cost variables, the breakdown between the services available from the LGMA and what authorities must arrange themselves and whether the security risk is being properly managed.

Suggestions as to what NOAC should examine in this area included: a comparison of licensing costs, expiration of licences and likely obsolescence of systems used by each authority; a

review for a selection of the services provided by authorities of the systems in use and how they are paid for; and cyber security and data recovery arrangements. The Chairman said that NOAC should review the adequacy of the strategy when finalised so as to ensure that issues such as VFM and risks for smaller local authorities are covered. He indicated that he would draft a letter to the CCMA ICT Committee to put it on notice as to the issues that NOAC proposes to look at over the next few years and requesting the Committee's comments and will circulate the letter to the members for any views before it issues.

Customer Survey Project

Colleen Savage, chair of the Customer Survey Sub-Group, spoke to the paper she had prepared summarising the information provided in the responses to the customer survey. These showed a considerable variation in the seriousness with which customer service was being taken by local authorities. The material at the end of the paper relates to the authorities whose responses indicated that they were more proactive in this area. The survey showed that the breakdown of costs is not comparable across authorities and that the communication channel most employed for engagement with customers is the website in some cases and the phone in others. The subjects on which there was the greatest customer engagement are housing and planning issues, although libraries and recreational facilities also feature significantly in website usage and community services feature in the more rural authorities as well. The responses indicated that not all authorities have a Customer Service Officer, although this is a requirement of the *Putting People First* policy, and the customer charters are not being updated regularly by most authorities.

The sub-group needs to meet again shortly to review the responses in more detail. They provide interesting information as a starting point and the group will look at what form of national survey of a few service areas might be needed in light of very little action by way of surveys being conducted by the authorities themselves. In this regard, Paul Lemass advised that the LGMA are currently looking at carrying out a national survey of customer services within the sector. The sub-group is of the view that it might be useful to visit the seven or so authorities most actively engaged with their customers and will also consider whether a workshop with local authority customer service staff would be of benefit. Its work should eventually lead to a NOAC report that will cover compliance with *Putting People First* policy and with the Department of the Taoiseach's *12 Principles of Quality Customer Service*, particularly in the areas of information provision, customer feedback, services/functions and complaints processes. It should also identify best practice from the information gleaned from the local authorities for this project.

Next Meeting

The Chairman indicated that due to another NOAC related commitment, he can't be in Dublin for the next scheduled meeting of NOAC on Tuesday 26th September. It was decided to change this meeting to 1.00 p.m. on the previous day, i.e. Monday 25th September 2017.