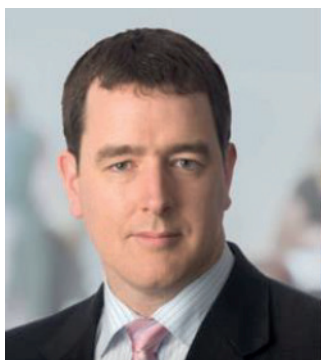


NOAC Scrutiny Process and Overview

Report from 2017

NOAC Report No. 28 - May 2021



Chair's Opening remarks

The Local Government Reform Act 2014 introduced significant changes to a wide range of aspects of the local government system, including in relation to matters of accountability and oversight. In that regard, the Act provided for the establishment of the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) as the statutory body overseeing the local government sector. NOAC was established in July 2014 under the 2014 Act to provide independent oversight of the local government sector. NOAC's functions are wide ranging, involving the scrutiny of performance generally and financial performance specifically, supporting best practice, overseeing implementation of national local government policy and monitoring and evaluating implementation of corporate plans, adherence to service level agreements and public service reform by local government bodies.

Since I became Chair of NOAC in September 2018, I continued the good work that had been started by the previous NOAC Chair in meeting with the Chief Executives of the local authorities and their Management teams. As outlined below this process has evolved over time and continues to evolve.

The preparation of the profile report also identifies the performance of local authorities in relevant NOAC reports and provides for further examination of the results of these reports. The Scrutiny Process requires time and resources from NOAC and the local authorities in preparation of the profile report and for the Stage 1 and Stage 2 meetings. NOAC considers to date that the investment of time and resources has been worthwhile and necessary.

I have been struck by the welcome and sharing of information that has taken place at the meetings. It has provided an opportunity to learn, to listen to how the particular local authority operates, the challenges they face, the plans and ideas that have been developed and gives an opportunity to reflect on what is working well and areas that need to be addressed. It has identified areas of good practice and many of these ideas have been showcased at the NOAC Good Practice Seminars over the years. I look forward to continuing to work closely and collaboratively with all the local authorities and want to use this opportunity to thank all the Chief Executives and their teams for the time and courtesy and welcome extended to NOAC in this process.



Michael McCarthy Chair
20 May 2021



Background to Profiles and Scrutiny Programme

In February 2017, NOAC, in accordance with its statutory functions, began to review the performance of individual local authorities. The starting point was getting an overall picture derived from the performance indicator report results, the Local Government Audit Service (LGAS) audit reports, the financial position and revenue collection performance. Information on private rented sector inspections, housing stock management and maintenance data and Customer Satisfaction was all considered by using the relevant data contained in the NOAC reports published to date.

At the outset the importance of the meetings was emphasised over and above the data which NOAC had regarding local authorities. There was also an objective to broaden the NOAC members' understanding of the work of the local authorities and the individual priorities and pressures they faced and to put the information in context. Therefore, NOAC wanted to get the background perspective from the authorities and any other datasets that the Councils consider should be taken into account. Significant work is required to bring this part together and the work of the NOAC Secretariat and the local authority NOAC Coordinators must be acknowledged.

Following an initial face to face meeting, which is called a Stage 1 meeting, local authorities were invited to a Stage 2 meeting where more detailed questions would be carried out in the areas of interest to NOAC, including customer service and IT investment, collection rates, the quality of information provision to the public etc. These meetings would take place after or latterly before the main NOAC board meeting with all the board members present.

The purpose

The process gives NOAC the opportunity to have oversight of all the local authorities and considers the factors that facilitates them in performing well, along with the barriers that may exist relevant to the individual local authority. The meetings enable the local authorities to outline their strong and weak performing areas. It allows for further examination of the results of the performance indicators and shows the results in context. It must be emphasised that these meetings differ from the Performance Indicator (PI) Validation meetings which are carried out by the Performance Indicator Working Group to interrogate the results reported in relation to selected performance indicators. These meetings, while very informative, are specific to the performance indicator process and do not consider other areas of performance that NOAC have oversight of, including Customer Service, Internal Audit, Corporate Plans etc.

During the meeting NOAC can see areas where consistent under-performance is highlighted and which can be examined further. It also allows for exemplars of best practice to be identified and used to share with other local authorities. The process as outlined, is not a follow up to the PI reports, but does enable consideration of issues that may warrant further clarification or investigation in the PI process. Local authorities have all indicated in the meetings thus far that they compare their performance and results in relation to what they deem as similar local authorities. This grouping could be reviewed further by NOAC and adopted for the results of some of its reports. Groupings are not only on size but, on levels of finances, urban and rural, staff numbers and other factors.

The Scrutiny Process

The process has evolved over time, allowing it to become more structured, formal and documented. Given the importance of the work, it is led by the Chair of NOAC (or a delegated alternate, if required) with support from NOAC members and the Executive. The formal process agreed by the Board is termed as a constructive dialogue and is laid out below.

1

Stage 1 (NOAC Scrutiny Visit)

Meeting held with NOAC Chair (or alternate) and/or one additional NOAC member and member(s) of the NOAC Executive. The Chief Executive and members of the management team, as invited by the Chief Executive shall attend.

- Stage 1 notice issued to Chief Executive of the local authority.
- Profile report prepared by NOAC Executive with input from the local authority. This is circulated along with an agenda to the local authority and NOAC attendees in advance of the visit. The report is based on general and specific information from NOAC reports relating to the local authority in question.
- Local authority to present on issues arising and take questions from attending NOAC members.
- Meeting minutes prepared and issued for comment.

2

Stage 2 (NOAC Scrutiny Meeting)

Appearance at full NOAC meeting. The Chief Executive and members of the management team, as invited by the Chief Executive shall attend.

- Stage 2 notice to attend NOAC meeting issued to Chief Executive of local authority.
- Profile report updated as required and circulated along with an agenda to local authority and NOAC members in advance of the meeting.
- Local authority to present on issues arising and take questions from full NOAC board.
- Meeting minutes prepared for circulation to local authority for its comment.

3

Stage 3 (NOAC Sign off and Publication)

Following completion of Stages 1 and 2 the Executive shall collate the material and present it to the NOAC Board as follows: -

- Final sign off on minutes / documents / reports.
- Comments / Findings / Recommendations to be made as required.
- Approval for completed records to be published.

Progress to date

2017

To commence the process, profiles were prepared in respect of Cork City Council, Louth and Offaly County Councils and these were forwarded to the Chief Executives of the authorities concerned. The NOAC Chair at the time, Pat McLoughlin, began this process with a meeting with the Chief Executive of Louth County Council for a general discussion on the profile in August 2017. This Stage 1 meeting was followed by a similar meeting with the Chief Executive of Cork City Council in September 2017. The final Stage 1 meeting to take place in 2017 was held with the Chief Executive of Offaly County Council in October 2017. In December 2017 Louth County Council attended a meeting with NOAC after the main NOAC Board meeting. This was the first Stage 2 meeting, which formed an important part of the overall process. These meetings served a particularly important function which allowed the Council to give an overview of their work and also gave an opportunity to the full NOAC Board to put questions to the Council and understand their situation in more depth.

2018

In 2018 the schedule consisted of eight meetings with local authorities, four each for Stage 1 and Stage 2. A Stage 2 meeting was held with Offaly County Council in January 2018. This was followed by another Stage 2 meeting with Cork City Council in March 2018.

A new Chair, Michael McCarthy, was appointed on 24 September 2018. The process continued with Westmeath County Council in October 2018 and Kerry County Council in December 2018. These were Stage 2 meetings with the full NOAC board as in these cases, the 2018 Performance Indicator validation meetings for these authorities were deemed sufficient as Stage 1 meetings. Further Stage 1 meetings were held with Roscommon County Council and Tipperary County Council.

2019

The format continued with 8 meetings with local authorities during the year. Five Stage 1 meetings and three Stage 2 meetings. The Stage 1 meetings were with Donegal County Council, Laois County Council, Clare County Council, Waterford City and County Council and Carlow County Council. Stage 2 meetings took place with Roscommon County Council, Tipperary County Council and Donegal County Council.

2020

A meetings list was scheduled for 2020 to cover 6 additional local authorities. The year commenced with a Stage 1 meeting with Monaghan County Council in February, along with two Stage 2 meetings with Laois County Council and Waterford City and County Council. Further meetings were scheduled for April, however due to the COVID crisis these meetings were required to be deferred.

The COVID restrictions presented some challenges to the meetings but it was decided to continue the Stage 2 meetings virtually and meetings were held with Clare, Monaghan, Waterford City and County, Carlow and Sligo. These were carried out by the WebEx platform.

A socially distanced Stage 1 meeting was held in person with Limerick City and County Council in August and with Sligo County Council in September 2020.

2021

COVID has had a huge impact on local authorities, and in particular, for NOAC on the Scrutiny process. The Stage 1 meetings have all been held in person thus far and restrictions have allowed for no Stage 1 meetings to be held yet in 2021. The Stage 2 meetings have progressed as these were capable of being held remotely, with one held in January 2021 with Limerick City and County Council. It is hoped to make up for lost time as the restrictions are relaxed and plans are in place to commence Stage 1 meetings as soon as it is possible to do so.

Future meetings and reports

This report outlines the purpose and the procedures and while the process may continue to evolve it would not be expected at this time to produce another master report, similar to this one. This report takes into account the first 13 local authorities which have completed the process. It would be intended that once all stages in the scrutiny process has been fully completed with the relevant other local authorities that the report would be published on that basis and would form part of the suite of reports under the umbrella of the Scrutiny Report Process. Later in quarter 2, 2021, Sligo County Council and Limerick City and County Council reports will be published. It is anticipated that progress will continue to be made with further Stage 1 and Stage 2 meetings so that each local authority will have participated in the process. It must be outlined that significant changes and delays have been experienced due to the restrictions imposed by COVID in 2020 and 2021.

Conclusion

In this overall document the details of the timelines for the local authorities are outlined and given that some of the meetings took place as the process evolved it was agreed by the board that it would not be prudent to include recommendations retrospectively. Therefore for the purpose of this report no recommendations will be included for the process completed thus far. For the future, recommendations will be included if made by the board following the Stage 2 meetings.

A separate individual report will be available for each completed local authority which will make it easier for readers to access information regarding a particular local authority. Appendix one give details of the timelines and the documents associated with each completed local authority. It is important to note that the material in this report is reflective of the position at the time of the meeting for the relevant authority. Therefore any changes to the profile to reflect results from later NOAC reports are not included in the reports.

The process thus far allowed for the NOAC Chair and members to get a greater understanding and insight into the challenges that face each of the local authorities. Also, issues such as collection rates, staff numbers, inspection rates, finances that are included in reports in some cases benefit from the explanation and discussion as to the reason behind these figures. The meetings also enabled NOAC to see the various priorities that each local authority considered relevant to their citizens and how they overcame various challenges and how they work collaboratively with other local authorities, state bodies and stakeholders. Areas of Good Practice have been identified along the way and these have contributed to presentations of these projects at the NOAC Good Practice Seminars in 2017, 2019 and 2020.

Summary

1

Louth County Council had their Stage 1 meeting in August 2017 and their Stage 2 meeting in December 2017. Areas where Louth County Council has performed particularly well in was in the re-letting and vacancy rates in social housing. The Council outlined how considerable resources had been allocated to reduce average re-letting times which at that time was 10 weeks but was still not quick enough given the extent of the housing needs in the county. Choice based lettings have also helped hugely by eliminating vacant periods associated with waiting for offers to be accepted. Lettings in the county are all choice-based now, apart from disabled units. Louth was also invited to present at NOAC's first Good Practice Event in November 2017 on the work it had carried out using the Compulsory Purchase Orders process to acquire derelict and vacant units. Discussions took place also on the financial pressures facing the authority and how this was being addressed.

2

Cork City Council had their Stage 1 meeting in September 2017 and their Stage 2 meeting in March 2018. There were interesting discussions on the proposed boundary changes with Cork City and Cork County and how this was likely to proceed and the impact it might have. The Directly elected Mayor and Housing were also topics of interest and extensive discussions took place on them. Cork City outlined many of its innovations it had developed and awards that they had achieved. Some of the standouts were the Customer Relationship Management system litter fines project and the Choice Based Letting project. Both projects have results in improved outcomes.

3

Offaly County Council had its Stage 1 meeting in October 2017. Offaly attended the Stage 2 meeting in January 2018. NOAC was very impressed with the wellness approach that the Council had introduced for its staff and in particular enjoyed hearing about the staff choir. The Open Library Project was recognized as innovative and progressive and was chosen by NOAC as a project to present at the Good Practice Event in 2020.

4

Kerry County Council did not have a Stage 1 meeting as a comprehensive validation meeting for the Performance Indicators in June 2018 was deemed sufficient in this case. The Stage 2 meeting took place in December 2018. Kerry outlined how in 2017 they established a unit to oversee the implementation of the results of the NOAC Performance Indicator reports and used them to assist in their budgetary process. The work in this area was considered a useful project to showcase at the Good Practice 2019 event.

5

Westmeath County Council had no formal Stage 1 meeting as during July 2018 a very comprehensive validation meeting was held in connection with the Performance Indicator report and therefore it was deemed that in this case that it was in order to proceed to a Stage 2 meeting in October 2018. NOAC found the programme in Westmeath in relation to the income collection and also in relation to their housing and vacancies to be very informative. In relation to housing vacancies it was interesting to note that the Council explained that it used a contractor to undertake all repairs. This represented good value for money and they recently had their contract extended. The Council also explained that a small number of staff were on hand to deal with any housing emergencies. The Council advised that the low turnaround time in these properties was due to a special focus on the issue and a significant investment from the Council. It remains a challenge to find the internal funding to continue this practice.

6

Roscommon County Council had their Stage 1 meeting in November 2018 and Stage 2 meeting in January 2019. It was explained at the meeting how changes to work practices was difficult to make and gave rise to some unpopular decisions being made but has resulted in greater productivity and better value for the citizens that the local authority serves. Social media usage was also discussed and the Council explained how it uses twitter and Facebook and the target audience is mainly the younger population. There is a full time person dedicated to updating these. The greatest interaction took place during the bad weather. The county is in the middle of a digital transformation and that is a priority for the Council and it is planned to be completed within the year.

7

Tipperary County Council had their Stage 1 meeting in December 2018 and their Stage 2 meeting in March 2019. Tipperary County Council provided useful insight into the merger of North Tipperary County Council and South Tipperary County Council and the challenges and achievements arising from the merger. In response to the poor results of the Customer Survey report the Council advised that the findings were lower than expected and disappointing. However they consider this to be a snapshot and that future surveys would yield better results. A lot of time and effort had being put into its Customer Service and it was an area that they looked at frequently. Tipperary County Council were invited by the NOAC Chair at the Stage 1 meeting to present a project on the environment, climate and energy at the 2019 Good Practice Seminar.

8

Donegal County Council had their Stage 1 meeting in January 2019 and their Stage 2 meeting in April 2019. Donegal provided an insight into the real issues that Brexit would present with so much of the county bordering with the North of Ireland. Issues in relation to services such as education and medical services and cross border trade were discussed at length. Topics such as illegal dumping and the efforts made to address the problem provided NOAC with assurances that this matter of concern was being tackled. Presentations on the North West City Region and the National Planning Framework were informative in particular with regard to economic growth and investment.

9

Laois County Council had their Stage 1 meeting in March 2019 and their Stage 2 meeting in January 2020. It was interesting to learn about the efforts that are being undertaken to encourage more people to work in the county and reduce the flow of people out of the county for the purpose of work. The shared service centre was one such project that offers staff a change in lifestyle rather than the long commute to other destinations, with opportunities for lower cost housing with good access to education. It could be regarded as a successful rural regeneration programme and expansion is being considered to utilise the expertise that has been built up over the years and could increase employment further. It was also informative to hear about the cooperation that exists between neighboring counties that have been adopted to address the housing needs.

10

Waterford City and County Council had their Stage 1 meeting in October 2019 and their Stage 2 meeting in March 2020. The challenges Waterford faced in the merger of the City and County Council in 2014, while significant at the time, gave rise to an opportunity to focus on matters such as Customer Service and processes and has resulted in a more efficient service then ranked very well in the NOAC Satisfaction Survey 2019. NOAC was very interested in the focus on and results delivered in dealing with vacant social housing stock.

11

Clare County Council had their Stage 1 meeting in October 2019 and their Stage 2 meeting virtually due to COVID restrictions in June 2020. NOAC acknowledged that the team effort was what contributed to Clare County Council winning the Best Local Authority award in 2018 and the positive impact this award had on the staff and its citizens. A particular issue highlighted was the ESB power station at Moneypoint. Due to its downsizing, it is anticipated that there will be an impact both on jobs and on the commercial rate base for the Council.

12

Carlow County Council had their Stage 1 meeting in December 2019 and their Stage 2 meeting virtually due to the COVID restrictions in September 2020. One area of note was how Carlow compared favorably to their peers and the national average in terms of commercial rates, rent and annuities and housing loans collected. In relation to Local Property Tax and the Local Government Fund, Carlow advised that they are receiving less compared to similar sized local authorities. They are seeking clarification as to why this anomaly exists.

13

Monaghan County Council had their Stage 1 meeting in February 2020 and their Stage 2 meeting virtually due to the COVID restrictions in July 2020. NOAC noted that there was a good housing build programme and that they had exceeded their Rebuilding Ireland target. It was noteworthy that the results of the Performance Indicator reports was being used in the Council's planning and was being used also to produce its own report to see how it is performing relative to its peers. A copy of this report was given to NOAC. The Council had presented at the first Good Practice Seminar in 2017 on its Housing re-letting system. The Council in its presentation outlined how over the previous 2 years they had reduced average re-let times from 19.5 weeks to 8.03 weeks. The Council also presented at the 2019 Good Practice Seminar on Removing Barriers which demonstrated how by improving forms and communication that it was able to provide better customer service to all of its customers especially those who had difficulties reading, writing and communicating.

It is intended that all information will be published on the NOAC website www.noac.ie

APPENDIX 1

Meeting timelines and material generated

The following are the details of the meetings that have taken place and the materials associated with these meetings that are relevant to this report. Further meetings have taken place and will form part of the next report.

		Stage 1	Stage 2	Profile	Stage 1 minutes	Stage 1 presentation	Stage 2 minutes	Stage 2 presentation
29	Louth County Council	Aug 2017	Dec 2017	✓	✓	✓	✓	x
30	Cork City Council	Sept 2017	March 2018	✓	✓	x	✓	x
31	Offaly County Council	Oct 2017	Jan 2018	✓	✓	x	✓	x
32	Kerry County Council**	June 2018	Dec 2018	✓	x	x	✓	✓
33	Westmeath County Council**	July 2018	Oct 2018	✓	x	x	✓	x
34	Roscommon County Council	Nov 2018	Jan 2019	✓	✓	x	✓	x
35	Tipperary County Council	Dec 2018	March 2019	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
36	Donegal County Council	Jan 2019	April 2019	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Laois County Council	March 2019	Jan 2020	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
38	Waterford City and County Council	Oct 2019	March 2020*	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
39	Clare County Council	Oct 2019	June 2020*	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
40	Carlow County Council	Dec 2019	Sept 2020*	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
41	Monaghan County Council	Feb 2020	July 2020*	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
TBC	Limerick City and County Council***	Aug 2020	Jan 2021*	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
TBC	Sligo County Council***	Sept 2020	Nov 2020*	✓	✓	x	✓	✓

* Meetings held virtually by WebEx

** Validation meeting for Performance Indicator report was deemed to be Stage 1 due to level of discussion/detail

*** Limerick City and County Council and Sligo County Council reports are in draft form and will be published by end of Q2, 2021 as part of this series

This publication of the material signifies that all **Stage 3** of the process has been completed for the 13 local authorities included in this report and this will increase to 15 once the two further draft reports are published.



National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC)
An Coimisiún Náisiúnra Maoirseachta & Iniúchoóireachta

Postal Address: Custom House, Dublin 1, D01 W6X0.

Website: www.noac.ie

Email: info@noac.ie