

Minutes of the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) meeting
Tuesday 28th February 2017

Venue: Conference Room, Offices of the RTB, O'Connell Bridge House, D'Olier St., Dublin 2

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 Maurice Coughlan

Diarmuid O'Leary

Sheila McMahon

Mark Crosbie

Apologies Henry Upton

Minutes of last meeting and matters arising

The minutes of the meeting of 17th January 2017 were agreed without amendment.

On matters arising and the request for information as to reviews of local authority functions being conducted, the secretariat reported that the LGMA is conducting research into the role local government plays in relation to tourism and the D/HPCLG is considering expenditure reviews at the moment but the topics have not yet been selected; a check of other Departments' websites did not identify research of this nature.

The members confirmed that they were not aware of any conflicts of interest in relation to the items for discussion at the meeting.

Chairman's review

Following on from his presentation to the recent LGAS conference, the Chairman gave a presentation on NOAC's work from July 2014 to December 2016 in the context of the 2017 work plan. He concluded that the level of output and the consultative way of working were positive achievements since NOAC's establishment and compared well with other State bodies.

He posed the question as to whether the future focus should move to improving local authority performance.

The question of any action on foot of NOAC's reports to date was raised and the members were advised that NOAC reports are presented and considered by the Management Board of the D/HPCLG and that the report on the rented sector functions had been particularly timely and fed into the recent Rebuilding Ireland publication on rented sector strategies.

The members discussed the need to revisit reports and hone in on areas where large variations in performance and/or cost had been identified and to work more with the CCMA as it is the management structure for local authorities. The difficulty for NOAC in identifying and driving customer satisfaction and of having to work with outdated data was raised. The point was made that the data quality issues may relate to a lack of integration with D/HPCLG data management systems.

The absence of a public response to NOAC's work was raised. Members felt that interaction with Oireachtas Committees would raise the profile of NOAC's work outputs and their impact, particularly if Chief Executives and relevant Departmental officials were also involved. It was suggested also that greater impact at the local level might be achieved by engaging more with the chairs of the Audit Committees, as their functions have the potential for the greatest influence, and that NOAC should talk to the Committee chairs about the changes that it is trying to achieve.

The Chairman undertook to meet again with the CCMA chair and seek agreement to the assignment of staff to work on the showcase event, which should focus on the wide range of issues that came to light in the two housing thematic reviews, the areas of good practice and the agreed priorities for improvement. There was a discussion of the possibility of producing a scorecard comparatively rating local authority performance under each indicator or whether comparisons should only be against own performance over a period of time. Comparison with certain national standards, e.g. copying all private rental inspection reports to the tenants, should be possible.

It was agreed that NOAC should separately review the performance of each local authority. For this purpose, starting as a pilot with Offaly County Council, the secretariat is to put together an overall picture based on the performance indicator results, the LGAS audit reports, the financial position and revenue collection performance, private rented sector inspections, housing stock management and maintenance data, etc., for consideration at the next meeting. NOAC should then meet with the local authority Chief Executive, perhaps in conjunction with the performance indicator validation visits, and ask the chair of the Audit Committee to attend also. This approach would involve reviewing about 6 local authorities per year.

LGAS and VFM Unit Work

The Chairman reported on the recent meeting with Níamh Larkin and Pat Guiney of the LGAS and commented that, while NOAC must respect the independence of the LGAS, co-operation between the two bodies will be of benefit. NOAC and the LGAS will meet annually and NOAC will have input to the VFM report process and review LGAS reports. In this context, the circulated documentation for the meeting included the recent VFM Unit report on Corporate Estates. The members noted that the capacity for VFM work was still quite limited and it will not be clear until 2018 how well the new arrangements to free up additional resources for VFM studies are working out. The meeting agreed to convey to Níamh Larkin members' suggestions for the next formal VFM study into areas of significant risk or expenditure included in the circulated note.

NOAC's 2017 Workplan

The ICT scoping paper prepared by the secretariat was discussed. The meeting agreed that the scope of the project needs to be further explored before decisions are made on its direction. The secretariat will meet the LGMA on March 9th and the Office of the Chief Information Officer on March 22nd. These meetings will help map out the framework in which ICT systems currently operate and will inform on work currently underway in the sector. (In particular, the LGMA's proposed sector wide ICT strategy will be explored). Relevant cost data available from the 2015 Performance Indicators report will be reproduced for the next meeting.

The secretariat will report back at that meeting by which time it should be clearer as to what areas the review should target; the overriding approach should be on focused assessment of a limited number of key issues and avoiding a review that is too wide in scope. A sub-group for the review will be established at that point.

A second thematic review will not be commenced in light of the decision taken at the meeting to undertake individual performance reviews of local authorities.

The Chairman suggested that the chairs of each of the sub-groups consider what external assistance/consultancy might be needed during the year and asked that this item be included on the agenda for the next meeting. Martina Moloney, chair of the Performance Indicators Sub-Group, advised that outside expertise would be required in relation to the presentation of the 2016 performance indicator data.

Customer Survey

Colleen Savage reported on the recent meeting of the Sub-Group. The desk top exercise is complete. The group is moving to the next stage which will involve issuing a questionnaire to the NOAC liaison officials in local authorities. The questionnaire will be designed to collect information on customer service officers, customer charters, means through which services are delivered and how local authorities assess their own performance. It will provide drop down

boxes to cater for the possible range of responses and minimise the use of an 'other' category for text input. Once the questionnaire is issued and information collected, the next stages will involve a workshop with customer service officers and a survey of service users. The objective of the exercise is that a national set of customer expectations, similar to the performance indicators, will emerge.

Draft Housing Management and Maintenance Report

The Housing Sub-Group propose to have one more meeting to complete the report but do not envisage that the final document will vary much from the circulated draft. Members suggested that the recommendations relating to a sliding scale of funding and the disposal of voids may require further consideration and the sub-group will also review the text relating to data discrepancies and consider adding a reference to LCDCs delivering SICAP.

Updates

The circulated note outlined the proposed course of action of the Financial Performance Sub-Group in relation to the Audit Committee reports and the 2015 AFS Audit reports. The Performance Indicators Sub-Group had participated in the workshop on 9th February organised by the LGMA for the local authority Heads of Implementation in relation to the 2016 Performance Indicators report. The secretariat reported that a meeting to review the available data on the location of approved housing body units and voids was scheduled for 2nd March and that the D/JEI had advised that the review of the LEO service level agreement was not yet finalised. The request for the 2016 Public Spending Code data has issued. A letter had also issued to Chief Executives seeking information on implementation of their Corporate Plans, because the necessary information was not available from the local authority websites.

Any Other Business

The secretariat circulated a recent PQ concerning local authority performance indicators and an email and note of a follow-up phone call requesting NOAC to conduct an audit into the disposal of two dwellings by a local authority. The members were of the view that the matter was not appropriate to NOAC because it related to the handling of an individual sale by a single local authority. The members expressed their appreciation of Maurice Coughlan's contribution to NOAC, wished him well in his new assignment in the Department and welcomed Diarmuid O'Leary to the secretariat.

Next Meeting

The next meeting of NOAC is scheduled for Tuesday 11th April 2017 at 10.00 a.m. in the offices of the RTB.