

Minutes of the National Oversight & Audit Commission (NOAC) meeting

Tuesday 26th May 2015

Venue: Offices of the LGMA, Local Government House, 35-39 Usher's Quay, Dublin 8

Attended by:

Chairman Pat McLoughlin
Members Kevin Baneham
John Buckley
Connie Hanniffy
Paul Lemass
Padraig McNally
Martina Moloney
Micheál Nolan
Colleen Savage
Henry Upton

Secretariat Declan Grehan
Sheila McMahon

Apologies Tara Buckley

The Chairman opened the meeting and acknowledged the resignation of Garrett Fennell with effect from 11 May 2015 due to pressure of his business commitments.

Minutes of meeting of 17/04/2015

The minutes of the meeting of 17 April 2015 were agreed without amendment.

Under matters arising, the secretariat explained that the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) sub-group had not yet met, pending obtaining relevant data on their activities as a starting point. In this regard, the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation had issued a press release on the day of the last NOAC meeting with summary details of LEO activity in 2014 and the secretariat was endeavouring to obtain from the D/JEI a copy of the underlying data collated on its behalf by Enterprise Ireland. It was agreed that the email and phone communication to date should be followed up with a letter from the Chairman so as to advance the matter.

Update on the Performance Indicators Report

The members were circulated with the position regarding the submission of performance indicator data to the LGMA's eReturns system as at 15 May 2015. The most prevalent Approved category related to data that had been signed off by the relevant section of the relevant local authority and had passed the limited validation applicable to the data entry, but had not yet been checked by the LGMA. Some data had been inputted for most

indicators by most of the authorities with the exception of Sligo and Wicklow County Councils. The next stage would be a meeting with the LGMA to go over the returned data and progress in checking it and it was agreed that the Performance Indicator sub-group would meet after that to decide the approach it would take to selecting indicators and local authorities for detailed examination as part of the assessment process. The sub-group will update the members on progress at the next meeting on 30 June 2015.

Presentation by Colleen Savage on the Customer Awareness Survey

Following from the customer awareness survey conducted by Amárach Research in late 2014, Colleen had obtained a recut of the data to look at awareness, engagement, satisfaction and perception of value for money in respect of respondents who had ever used a local authority service. From these she had prepared a presentation for the members interpreting the data and drawing conclusions. Findings highlighted were that when prompted, 96% of respondents were aware of at least one service provided by local authorities and 96% of over 55s were aware of at least 10 services. When prompted, services such as libraries, traffic and parking management become more top of the mind than roads maintenance and parks which were all still higher than 75%. The responses given to questions as to services availed of seemed to be based on an actual interaction with the local authority in relation to the service. Engagement with local authorities is lower among younger respondents and those who are single or childless. Satisfaction with the information available from LAs is greater for those respondents with a higher level of awareness of LA services. Reasons for dissatisfaction were poor websites, lack of clear language and difficulty getting to speak to the appropriate person on the phone. Both customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction is higher for those who have availed of LA services. Satisfaction is highest in Munster and among older persons. Levels of satisfaction with LA effectiveness increase for those who are more aware of LA services and increase further for those who have availed of services. However, perception of delivering value for money, even for the latter group, is still low with 27% agreeing and 35% disagreeing and this unfavourable impression was most pronounced in the 45-54 age cohort.

The Chairman and members thanked Colleen for providing the useful presentation of the survey information and commented on the findings. The general view was that citizens appear to be remote from local government which could suggest an issue with communication on the part of LAs. All agreed that the survey highlighted the need for Corporate Plans to include a communications strategy and for the sector to be encouraged to provide a co-ordinated response. It was suggested that Paul Lemass should raise the issue at the meeting this coming Friday of the Programme Management Office (PMO) oversight group of which he is a member and put it to the Chief Executives that NOAC would like to see a co-ordinated plan for better local authority communication with customers and will be including a customer satisfaction element in its thematic reviews. It was agreed that

while the survey was not appropriate for publication as a standalone report, the next Annual Report could include a synopsis of it and what happened on foot of it.

Corporate Plans Update

The secretariat advised the members that 23 Corporate Plans had now been received and two others had responded to the Chairman's letter with their expected submission dates. It was agreed that a further letter would now issue from the Chairman to the Chief Executives of the remaining authorities requiring that the Corporate Plans be submitted by the end of June. It was agreed that the secretariat would draft a report consisting of a summary of the outcome of the checks that had been conducted of compliance with the Corporate Plan guidelines issued by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and focussing particularly on the objectives and supporting strategies. The report would also include the NOAC member's observations arising from their review of the content of the Plans concentrating on the best and worst Plans and highlighting the elements that worked well.

Update from the Housing Review Sub-Group

Following on from the decision at the NOAC meeting of 17 April, the Housing sub-group met with the CCMA Housing Committee on 20 May 2015 - the first available opportunity in the CCMA Committee's schedule - in connection with NOAC's planned reviews of the local authority housing maintenance and management function and their inspections of private rented housing. The members discussed the report of the meeting and the subsequent contact with the LGMA about the formulation of a focus group of a representative subset of grade 8 officials working in the housing area. The CCMA proposal to include a Housing Director of Services on the group was agreed as was the inclusion of a relevant LGMA official in the context of the role it will play in gathering the information for the reviews. This is on the basis that NOAC will run the focus group and will circulate documentation and call meetings, etc. The list of names is expected before the end of the week, they will be provided with the draft questionnaires and asked to establish what information is available locally and would be relevant to the studies, following which a meeting will be arranged to decide the content of the questionnaires.

Paper re Valuation Process

The members considered the paper that was circulated following on from the last meeting and noted the position regarding the efforts by the elected representatives to seek changes to the valuation system. The Chairman suggested that the PMO should be asked to include an examination of the 6 best and 6 worst local authorities in terms of rates collection in their Debt Management Group's work. John Buckley made the point that the relative rankings of LAs change if waivers, write offs and arrears are disregarded, that factors such as the write-off policy should be considered and that averages over three years would produce smoother results, which means that NOAC needs to be clear as to what should define best

and worst collection performance. As any report that NOAC might want to produce on rates collection performance needs to be independent, PMO input could only be in respect of factual data and NOAC would provide an independent view. Martina Moloney referred to the relevance of the performance indicator dealing with revenue collection and suggested that this was one of the indicators that should be examined by the sub-group as part of the assessment process. The Chairman suggested the best approach might be a combination of PMO data collection and what emerges from the sub-group's assessment of the relevant indicator and he requested that this item be kept on the agenda.

LGAS 2015 Activity Report

There was a short discussion about this item and the changed format of this year's activity report which, unlike previous years, did not include all the items highlighted in the individual audit reports - just the elements referenced on pages 17 to 22 - the most significant of which were the adverse balances in the case of Sligo and Donegal County Councils. The Chairman referred to the apparent lack of consistency in what gets highlighted by the auditors in the individual audit reports which he had raised at the Local Government Audit Service conference he had attended in February. Paul Lemass commented that it was clear that NOAC needed to have a formal engagement with the Councils having the highest level of indebtedness, namely Sligo and Donegal. It was decided to defer consideration of the appropriate type of engagement on foot of the activity report to the next meeting of NOAC.

Any Other Business

Paul Lemass raised the deadline date specified by NOAC for the 2014 quality assurance reporting by local authorities under the Public Spending Code. The Heads of Finance had indicated that this was posing severe difficulties in light of other demands this year arising from the local government reform process. The Chairman acknowledged that this was raised as an issue at the Conference of Heads of Finance earlier this month at which he had given a presentation. It was agreed that the deadline would be extended to 30 September on the basis that all authorities would comply with the extended date without exception. The secretariat is to notify the head of the CCMA Finance Committee and the Chief Executives to that effect.

Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be in the Offices of the PRTB on Tuesday 30 June at 9.00 a.m. The Chairman will supply suggested dates for subsequent meetings that will be circulated by the secretariat.