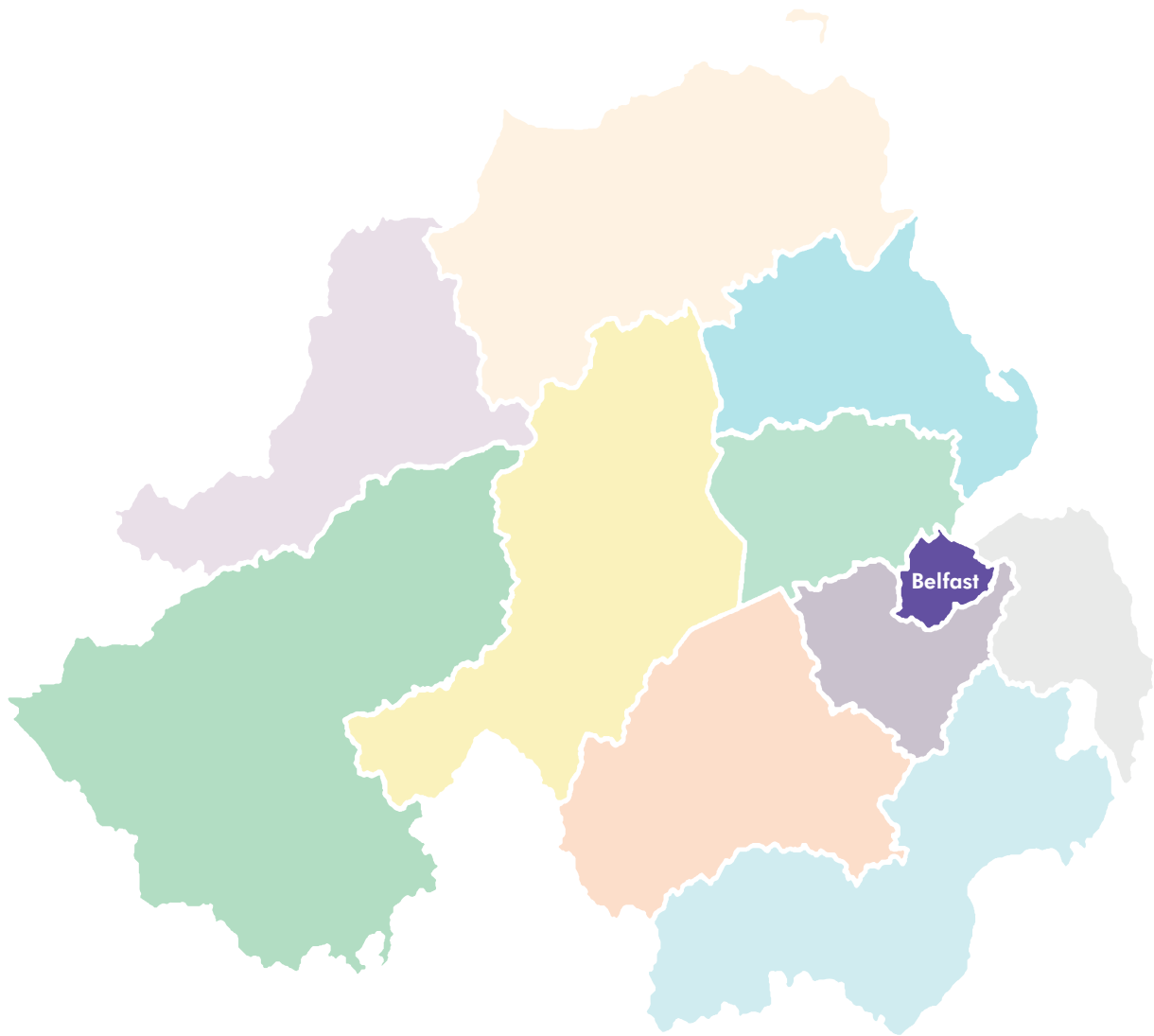




Northern Ireland Audit Office

# Annual Improvement Report

## Belfast City Council 2016-17



**Louise Mason**

Local Government Auditor  
Northern Ireland Audit Office

1. Councils have new responsibilities to continuously improve their functions and services. These responsibilities are collectively referred to as *Performance Improvement*. Each year I am required to perform an improvement audit and assessment at the Council and summarise the findings in this public report.
2. I am satisfied that the Council has discharged its statutory performance improvement and reporting duties and that it has acted in accordance with the legislation and guidance. No statutory recommendations<sup>1</sup> or special inspections<sup>2</sup> were required at the Council this year.
3. As this was the first year in which the Council was required to implement the new performance improvement framework, its arrangements to secure achievement of its improvement objectives were at an early stage of development and implementation. Going forward, I expect to see these arrangements become more refined and mature.
4. While the Council has begun to establish arrangements to secure continuous improvement, it is too early for it to demonstrate the extent to which improvements are being made. Consequently, the Council was not required to publish what improvements it has made. For 2017-18 it is required to assess what improvements were made this year and publish this information by the end of September 2017. I expect
5. the Council to demonstrate clearly any improvements being made.
5. The Council published an improvement plan as part of its corporate plan, setting out its priorities for improving its functions and services during the year, which includes eleven improvement objectives.
6. In my report to the Council I outlined a number of proposals for improvement to assist the Council by sharing knowledge and good practice which exists elsewhere in the United Kingdom. These relate to matters which, if accepted and implemented, I believe will assist the Council in meeting its performance improvement responsibilities and help ensure the work that it does is transparent and meaningful to citizens.
7. You should be able to access more specific and detailed information in relation to the work that your Council is doing to meet its improvement responsibilities on its website, or you can contact them directly.

**Louise Mason**  
**Local Government Auditor**  
31 March 2017

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1 issue a statutory recommendation if I consider that the Council has not complied with the legislation or guidance issued by the Department of 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.

# 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 2015-16 and its 2016-17 improvement plan 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 2016-17 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 by it by Government departments.

The Act requires the Council to publish its 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. For 2016-17, in its performance assessments, the Council must use information collected in relation to statutory performance indicators and standards completed during 2015-16 to establish baseline figures for 2017-18 and subsequent years. No further comparison or assessment for 2016-17 was required.

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 requirement to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of its duties.

## 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. 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.

### **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 the Act and has acted in accordance with the Department for Communities' guidance sufficiently, including its guidance on the publication of improvement information in 2016-17.

### **Improvement assessment**

As a result of my assessment, I believe the Council has as far as possible discharged its duties under Part 12 of the Act and has acted in accordance with the Department for Communities' guidance sufficiently.

2016-17 was the first year in which councils were required to implement the statutory performance improvement framework. Therefore arrangements to secure achievement of its improvement objectives at the Council are at an early stage

of development and implementation. This is to be expected in this first year. Whilst the Council has begun to establish arrangements to secure continuous improvement for 2016-17, it is too early for the Council to demonstrate, or for me to determine, the extent to which improvements are being made for the current financial year.

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 financial 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.

**LOUISE MASON**  
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30 November 2016