

DEVON AUDIT PARTNERSHIP ADDED VALUE FOR PLYMOUTH CITY COUNCIL 2010/11

Devon Audit Partnership is committed to providing value for money to the Council and its stakeholders and, where possible, to identifying examples of specific, tangible benefits achieved. The following are examples of recent benefits delivered by Internal Audit:-

Challenge to 2008/09 HB Subsidy

Internal Audit played a significant role in working with the Housing Benefit Team and Finance to mount a successful challenge to the DWP in respect of the 2008/09 Housing Benefit (HB) subsidy claim. Following qualification of the claim, the Secretary of State proposed to recover £540k from the Authority but, as a result of this collaborative working, this has subsequently reduced to £127,763 a saving of £412k.

As a result of observations made during the challenge exercise, Internal Audit identified a framework to mitigate the risk of the department failing to maximise its HB subsidy in the future. This was distributed to key staff from Housing Benefits and Finance who are most closely involved in the subsidy claim process to act as a check list upon which they can gain assurance that the claim process is robust in the future.

On receiving confirmation from the DWP of the revised figure, the Revenues and Benefits Service Manager emailed “this is fantastic news. A big thank you to all of you for the hard work you put into this to 'make it right', it was a difficult claim and we have certainly learned a lot from this experience”.

Data Quality

Robust performance information based on good quality data is critical to supporting the strategic decisions needed to effectively manage services, deliver shared priorities and achieve outcomes for the people of Plymouth. Internal Audit were engaged to examine and comment on the adequacy of the arrangements in place to accurately and effectively report performance.

Within Community Services, auditors worked alongside Policy and Performance Officers to provide independent assurance on the adequacy and effectiveness of management and operational arrangements for the collection of data and completion of the Government returns. The accuracy, validity and timeliness of the RAP (Referrals, Assessment & Packages of Care), ASC-CAR (Adult Social Care Combined Activity) and PSSEX (Personal Social Services Expenditure) returns were also reviewed.

Feedback received from Community Services was that they appreciated the ‘objective eye’ to their approach and that our report was valuable in improving their methods and lent weight to their own vision for improvement. Auditors are currently in the process of repeating this exercise for the current RAP and ASC-CAR returns.

NI 179 Value for Money

National Indicator 179 related to the total net value of ongoing cash-releasing value for money gains. Prior to the submission of the Council's efficiency savings for 2009/10 Internal Audit reviewed the arrangements in place to report on the savings achieved for the year. Some weaknesses in the system were identified and Internal Audit worked closely with Finance officers to ensure that the Council has a robust framework in place for effectively identifying and reporting efficiency savings achieved in the future. In addition to driving improvements in business processes, Internal Audit also identified additional efficiency savings of £600k.

Whilst central government no longer requires this information to be reported to them in the future, the Council still has to make efficiency savings and the work carried out by Internal Audit supports this ongoing requirement.

Standards & Good Practice Guide for Revenues Staff

Internal Audit have played a primary, pro-active role, working with managers of the Revenues Division, in the setting up and rolling out of a Standards and Good Practice Guide for Revenues staff. This included a series of presentations to staff and followed investigations into the use of partnership organisations' I.T. systems by Council employees. The aim of the presentations was successfully achieved by improving awareness of what staff in the Division can and cannot do in relation to data held by the Council and its partners, and positive feedback was received with regard to the value added.

Internal Audit / External Audit Relationship

Devon Audit Partnership considers that strong working relationships have been forged between Devon Audit Partnership and Grant Thornton. This conviction was supported by the recently departed Grant Thornton Audit Manager who expressed her appreciation of the depth of knowledge and skills the internal audit team possess and the way in which the team had helped her to develop an understanding of how Plymouth City Council works.

Positive Feedback Received from Clients

- Following an audit of a Plymouth school prior to changing to Academy status, the Senior Education Advisor responded "an object in swift and effective audit practice. Getting this final report out so quickly will help enormously". The Business Manager of this same school thanked the auditor both for the report and the way he dealt with the process. At the time, the school administration was under considerable pressure due to the change in school status and expressed appreciation that due to the approach the auditor adopted he had not "made life much worse".

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- The Business Manager of another secondary school stated that the auditor “has a great understanding of the pressures facing the financial administration in schools and offers pragmatic and sensible solutions which always improve our processes. I am extremely grateful for his help during the audit and as an advisor at other times.”
- Following achievement of the standard in financial management in schools (FMSIS), the Business Manager of a primary school responded as follows “thank you, this is really great news. Can I say a personal thank you for all your help and patience over the last few months in guiding this new boy through the process.”
- After a complex and lengthy irregularity investigation carried out by Internal Audit which followed complaints received from members of the public, those local citizens wrote a letter to formally thank the Auditors involved for their help. The letter stated that Auditors “grasped the situation very quickly and took our concerns seriously from the beginning. We appreciated the way you kept us informed and were always there to answer all our questions. You undertook your role in a professional manner, yet still remained approachable.”
- Comments from the Education Advisor for ICT and E-Learning following the review of Capita ONE was that the verbal feedback and discussion was particularly useful and the report timely, coming at a point where decisions on the future of Capita ONE and the functionality it provides are being reviewed by Children’s Services in the light of the capacity of the Council and future needs of the department.
- Following the review of the corporate management arrangements for business continuity, the Civic Protection Officer commented on how beneficial the report was and on the courtesy, understanding and very good advice provided by the auditor.
- The Headteacher of one of the City’s new primary schools confirmed that they found “the whole process was a very useful audit tool, which enabled us to rally focus on what we needed to do to improve our systems. It was also good to know we were doing so much right. This was a great confidence builder.”
- “An independent overview is always appreciated” (Strategic Procurement Manager commenting on our review of Security Services Contract)
- Devon Audit Partnership’s work and robust challenge on the following projects, the Plymouth Life Centre, Leisure Management and South West Devon Waste Partnership, has received good feedback from management and Members. The Project Boards and Teams have welcomed Audit’s input and assurance.