

The Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Scotland

Report on the 2006-07 Audit

28 September 2007

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Executive Summary

Introduction

We have audited the financial statements of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Scotland (the Commissioner) for 2006-07 and examined aspects of the Commissioner's performance and governance arrangements. This report sets out our key findings.

Financial Statements

We have given an unqualified opinion on both the financial statements of the Commissioner for 2006-07 and on the regularity of transactions undertaken during the financial year. During the year, the Commissioner incurred expenditure of £399,000 against a budget of £397,000. Staff costs accounted for 48% of total expenditure with administration (50%) and depreciation costs (1%) accounting for the remainder.

The Commissioner's accounts record a small net deficit position in the balance sheet, resulting mainly from a timing issue in relation to the receipt of cash funding from the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB). The Commissioner should plan to achieve a surplus position for net assets on the balance sheet for future years.

The Commissioner's draft financial statements were presented for audit on 8 May 2007, significantly in advance of the prior year. The accounts and supporting working papers were of a high standard and, as a result, few adjustments were required to be processed following our audit.

Governance

We found that the Commissioner's governance arrangements operated well and within a generally sound control environment. The Commissioner complies with the good practice guidance in relation to governance, as outlined in the Scottish Public Finance Manual, in so far as it is relevant to the role of the Commissioner.

The Commissioner could make further progress in developing and embedding corporate governance arrangements in line with best practice in the following key areas:

- further clarification of the role of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body in the budget approval and authorisation process;
- clarification of the Commissioner's indemnity status in relation to personal liabilities which may arise in respect of the activities of her office.

We note that these issues will require engagement and agreement with the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB).

Performance

We carried out an overview of the Commissioner's arrangements in relation to the duty to deliver best value and efficiency in the operations of her office.

The Commissioner's office is a small organisation with limited resources and management capacity. In keeping with the size and scale of her operations, the Commissioner does not have a formal process in place for best value or for measuring and monitoring efficiency. However, the Commissioner keeps these matters under review and has implemented a range of operational and structural changes that have led to increased efficiency.

In 2005-06, Audit Scotland issued a report on behalf of the SPCB which reviewed the opportunities for the Commissioner to share services with the other ombudsman and commissioner bodies. Our review considered the Commissioner's response to the report, and the steps taken to address the recommendations raised. We found that:

- the Commissioner's office continues to work closely with the other ombudsman and commissioner bodies, and has considered a shared service approach in some areas; and
- staff continue to meet regularly with their counterparts in the other ombudsman and commissioner bodies to discuss operational issues. This has led to the sharing of good practice across a range of administrative matters.

The Way Forward

Our findings and recommendations are summarised in an Action Plan (Appendix A) that accompanies this report. The Action Plan has been agreed with management and incorporates the management response to audit recommendations.

The report includes some specific recommendations to strengthen internal controls. It is the responsibility of the Commissioner to decide the extent of the internal control system appropriate for the management of her office.

Acknowledgements

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Commissioner and her staff who have been involved in this review for their assistance and co-operation.

This report is part of a continuing dialogue between the Commissioner and Grant Thornton UK LLP and is not, therefore, intended to cover every matter which came to our attention. Our procedures are designed to support our audit opinion and they cannot be expected to identify all potential weaknesses or inefficiencies which may exist in the Commissioner's systems and work practices.

The report is not intended for use by third parties and we do not accept responsibility for any reliance that third parties may place on. The report will be submitted to the Auditor General for Scotland and will be published by him on his website at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk.

Grant Thornton UK LLP

28 September 2007

Financial Statements

Our Responsibilities

We audit the financial statements and give an opinion on whether:

- they give a true and fair view, in accordance with the Public Appointments and Public Bodies etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 and directions made thereunder by the Scottish Ministers, on the state of affairs of the Commissioner as at 31 March 2007 and of its net expenditure, recognised gains and losses and cash flows for the year then ended;
- they, and the part of the Remuneration Report to be audited, have been properly prepared in accordance with the Government Financial Reporting Manual (FReM) and directions made thereunder by the Scottish Ministers; and
- in all material respects the expenditure and receipts shown in the financial statements were incurred or applied in accordance with any applicable enactments and guidance issued by the Scottish Ministers.

We also review the Statement on Internal Control by:

- considering compliance with Scottish Executive guidance;
- considering the adequacy of the process put in place by the Commissioner, in her role as Accountable Officer, to obtain assurances on systems of internal control; and
- assessing whether disclosures in the Statement are consistent with the information emerging from our normal audit work.

Overall Conclusion

We have given an unqualified opinion on the financial statements of the Commissioner for the 2006-07 financial statements. We are able to conclude that the financial statements of the Commissioner give a true and fair view of the financial position for the period from 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007 and that, in all material respects, the expenditure and receipts shown in the accounts were incurred or applied in accordance with applicable enactments and relevant guidance.

Standard of accounts and supporting papers

The Commissioner's draft financial statements were presented for audit on 8 May 2007, significantly in advance of the prior year. The accounts and supporting working papers were of a high standard and, as a result, few adjustments were required to be processed following our audit. This represents a significant improvement in year end audit processes.

Financial Performance

The Commissioner's Operating Cost Statement for the year records net expenditure for the financial year of £397,000. This total includes depreciation charges of £4,000. The capital expenditure for the year was £2,000. Overall, the total expenditure of £399,000 was £2,000 over budget. The funding from Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB) was £397,000 in line with net expenditure.

Staff costs accounted for 48% of total expenditure with other operating costs (51%) and depreciation costs (1%) accounting for the remainder.

The Commissioner's accounts record a small net deficit position in the balance sheet resulting mainly from a timing issue in relation to the receipt of cash funding from the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB). The Commissioner should plan to achieve a net surplus position for net assets on the balance sheet in future years.

Action plan point 1

Statement on Internal Control

The Statement on Internal Control sets out the arrangements established and operated for risk identification and management; proposed future development of arrangements, and review of effectiveness of the system of internal control.

We are satisfied that the Statement complies with Scottish Executive guidance, that the process put in place by the Accountable Officer (the Commissioner) to obtain assurances on systems of internal control is adequate and that the contents of the Statement are consistent with the information emerging from our normal audit work.

ISA 260: Communication of Audit Matters to Those Charged with Governance

Our responsibilities in relation to the communication of audit matters to those charged with governance are covered in the International Standard on Auditing 260 and outcomes against the requirements of the Standard are contained in Appendix B. In this context, our audit has not identified any unadjusted errors that we need to bring to the Commissioner's attention.

Governance

Introduction

Corporate governance is the system by which organisations direct and control their functions and relate to their stakeholders, and incorporates the way in which an organisation manages its business, determines strategy and objectives and goes about achieving those objectives. It is concerned with structures and processes for decision-making, accountability, control and behaviour at the upper levels of the organisation. Three fundamental principles of corporate governance apply equally to all public sector bodies - openness, integrity and accountability.

As part of our 2006-07 audit, we assessed the adequacy of the Commissioner's governance arrangements against good practice standards for the public sector. We examined:

- the structures and processes for decision making;
- risk management and systems of internal control;
- arrangements for the prevention and detection of fraud and irregularities;
- standards of conduct, integrity and openness; and
- reporting arrangements and monitoring of the Commissioner's overall financial position.

Key outcomes from our 2006-07 audit

We found that the Commissioner's governance arrangements operated well and within a generally sound control environment. The Commissioner complies with the good practice guidance in relation to governance as outlined in the Scottish Public Finance Manual in so far as it is relevant to the role of the Commissioner.

The Commissioner does not have an internal audit function due to the small size of her Office.

However, the Commissioner could make further progress in developing and embedding corporate governance arrangements in line with best practice in the following key areas:

- further clarification of the role of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body in the budget approval and authorisation process; and
- clarification of the Commissioner's personal liability status in respect of the activities of her office.

We note that the Commissioner may require the engagement and agreement of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB) before proceeding to address these issues.

Action plan points 2 & 3

Performance

Introduction

Public audit is more wide-ranging than in the private sector and covers the examination of, and reporting on, performance and value for money issues. As part of our annual audit we are required to plan reviews of aspects of the arrangements to manage performance, as they relate to economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources.

The Commissioner, as Accountable Officer for her office, has a duty to ensure public resources are used economically, efficiently and effectively. These arrangements were extended in April 2002 to include a duty to ensure 'best value' in the use of resources.

Best value and efficient government

We carried out an overview of the Commissioner's arrangements in relation to the duty to deliver best value and efficiency in the operations of his office.

The Commissioner's office is a small organisation with limited resources and management capacity. In keeping with the size and scale of its operations, the Commissioner does not have a formal process in place for best value or for measuring and monitoring efficiency.

However, the Commissioner regularly keeps these matters under review and has recently implemented a range of operational and structural changes that have led to increased efficiency in the Commissioner's operations. During 2006-07 several performance improvements were achieved, including:

- the introduction of a detailed contact handling system;
- strengthening the method used to estimate assessor activity and associated costs;
- reviewing accommodation requirements to reduce costs and improve communication;
- publishing investigations and audits on the Office's website to reduce printing costs and allow greater access to publications;
- the introduction of an electronic filing system; and
- the development of a contingency plan for dealing with emergencies.

Shared services

In 2005-06, Audit Scotland issued a report on behalf of the SPCB which reviewed the opportunities for the Commissioner to share services with the other ombudsman and commissioner bodies in Scotland. Our review considered the Commissioner's response to the report, and what steps have been taken to address the recommendations raised.

Audit Scotland recommended that the ombudsman and commissioners should:

- continue to explore opportunities for sharing services and co-location;
- where appropriate, exploit opportunities that may emerge from the Scottish Executive's Efficient Government Initiative;
- further develop the role of the operational group that already exists to share expertise, experience and best practice across the ombudsman/commissioners. One of the key objectives of this group should be to minimise the extent to which office holders need to get involved in routine operational delivery issues, thereby allowing them to focus on their core functions; and
- use the proposed remuneration committee of the SPCB in an advisory capacity to support them in dealing with strategic staffing matters including pay and terms and conditions.

Our review found that the Commissioner's office continues to work closely with the other commissioners and ombudsman bodies, and has considered a shared service approach in some areas. We noted that staff from the Commissioner's office continue to meet regularly with their counterparts in the other ombudsman and commissioner bodies, to discuss operational issues. This has led to the sharing of good practice across a range of administrative matters.

The SPCB has not yet formalised its remuneration committee arrangements and the Commissioner has not, therefore, been able to explore how best to utilise this committee in the way envisaged by the Audit Scotland report.

Action Plan Point 4

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28 September 2007

Appendix A – Action Plan

No	Finding	Risk	Recommendation	Management Response	Implementation date
Financial Position					
1	The Commissioner's accounts record a small net deficit position in the balance sheet resulting mainly from a timing issue in relation to the receipt of cash funding from the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB).	Low	The Commissioner should plan to achieve a net surplus position for net assets on the balance sheet in future years.	Noted	
Governance					
2	There is a lack of clarification of the role of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body in the budget approval and authorisation process.	Medium	The Commissioner should seek formal guidance on the role of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body in the budgetary process. This will clarify roles and responsibilities in the budget process.	The Commissioner questions whether there is a need for formal guidance. The Public Appointments and Public Bodies etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 (the Act) states the position regarding funding in schedule 1 paragraph 11. The budgetary process, described in the agreement between SPCB, the Finance Committee and the Commissioner, is clear. Clarifying budget processes would not appear to be necessary or helpful in these circumstances.	N/A

Annex A – Action Plan

No	Finding	Risk	Recommendation	Management Response	Implementation date
3	The Commissioner has not received clarification with regard to her own personal liability in respect of the activities of her office.	Medium	<p>The Commissioner should continue to seek clarification from the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body on the extent of her personal liability.</p> <p>This will enable the Commissioner to have in place adequate governance arrangements to take account of the risks of her role</p>	The Commissioner has received written reassurance from the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB) that they will pay any expenses incurred in the exercise of her functions. A Memorandum of Understanding between the SPCB and the Commissioner outlines the process of accessing the contingency fund held by the SPCB, should unforeseen expenses occur. The Commissioner is investigating whether further clarification is required.	
Performance					
4	The SPCB has not yet formalised its Remuneration Committee arrangements and the Commissioner has not, therefore, been able to explore how best to utilise this Committee in the way envisaged by the Audit Scotland report.	Low	The Commissioner should keep under review how the proposed Remuneration Committee of the SPCB could be used in an advisory capacity to support her in dealing with strategic staffing matters including pay and terms and conditions.	Noted	

Appendix B - Communication of audit matters to those charged with governance

ISA 260 – Communication of audit matters to those charged with governance

Under ISA 260, we are required to consider matters of governance interest that arise from the audit of the financial statements and communicate them with those charged with governance. The areas considered are as follows:

- a) Relationships that may bear on the Grant Thornton’s independence and the integrity and objectivity of the audit engagement lead and audit staff;
- b) The overall approach to the audit including any limitations thereon, or any additional requirements;
- c) The selection of, or changes in, significant accounting policies and practices that have, or could have a material effect on the entity’s financial statements;
- d) The potential effect on the financial statements of any material risks and exposures, such as pending litigation, that are required to be disclosed in the financial statements;
- e) Audit adjustments, whether recorded or not by the entity that have, or could have a material impact on the entity’s financial statements; and
- f) Those uncorrected misstatements aggregated by the auditor during the audit that were determined by management to be immaterial both individually and in aggregate to the financial statements as a whole.

Key Findings

We have summarised our key audit findings in relation to the above areas in the table below:

Ref	Area	Key Messages
A	Independence	<p>We are able to confirm our independence and objectivity as auditors and note the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • we are independently appointed by Audit Scotland; • we comply with the Auditing Practices The Commissioner’s Ethical Standards; and • we have not performed any non Code of Audit Practice (the Code) or advisory work during the year.

Ref	Area	Key Messages
B	Approach to the audit	<p>Our approach to the audit was set out in our 2006-07 audit plan. We have planned our audit in accordance with International Auditing Standards and the Code. Other key factors to highlight include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> we consider the materiality of items in the financial statements both in determining the approach to audit them and in determining the impact of any errors; and we have been able to place appropriate reliance on the key accounting systems operating at the Commissioner for final accounts audit purposes only.
C	Accounting policies and practices	<p>We consider that the Commissioner has adopted appropriate accounting policies in the areas covered by our testing. Accounting policies adopted were in accordance with the Government Financial Reporting Manual (FRM).</p> <p>The Commissioner has considered and confirmed that her Office remains a going concern and is asked to confirm this through the Letter of Representation.</p>
D	Material risks and exposures	<p>The Commissioner has considered and confirmed that she has no material risks and exposures which should be reflected in the financial statements. The Commissioner is asked to confirm this in the Letter of Representation</p>
E	Audit adjustments and unadjusted errors	<p>We identified several minor disclosure amendments and reclassifications to improve the presentation of the accounts. The Commissioner has agreed to adjust the accounts.</p>

Accounting issues

Intangible fixed assets

Our initial review of the financial statements identified that there were no intangible fixed assets recorded in the balance sheet. A subsequent review by the Commissioner found software and other intangible fixed assets with a net book value of £1,000 recorded within the tangible fixed assets balance.

The Commissioner adjusted the draft financial statements to include intangible fixed assets.

There are no unadjusted differences within the financial statements.