

ANGUS COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENTAL AND CONSUMER PROTECTION COMMITTEE-19 FEBRUARY 2002

TRADING STANDARDS-EXTERNAL AUDITING OF PERFORMANCE

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENTAL & CONSUMER PROTECTON

Abstract

This report advises the Committee of new external auditing requirements by Audit Scotland and the Department of Trade and Industry in respect of the performance of Angus Council's Trading Standards Service

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Committee note the content of this report for its interest.

2. BACKGROUND TO DTI NATIONAL PERFORMANCE STANDARD FRAMEWORK

The Department of Trade & Industry along with LACOTS (Local Authorities Co-ordinating Body on Food and Trading Standards) TSI (Trading Standards Institute) NWML (National Weights & Measures Laboratory) and OFT (Office of Fair Trading) supported by the Local Government Associations, have recently developed and published a National Performance Framework for Trading Standards Services.

This framework introduces new performance standards for Trading Standards activities and is aimed at ensuring such services throughout the UK are able to develop a modern service working towards national and local priorities in a coherent way.

The framework comes into effect on 1 April 2002

In essence, the framework aims to:-

- Provide clear priorities and core standards for a modern Trading Standards Service.
- Support the role of Trading Standards in the community and in contributing to key local authority priorities.
- Improve performance of Trading Standards by developing a system of measurement, and by sharing good practice and,
- Facilitate a more coherent and consistent approach to enforcement and service delivery.

The framework has 3 key elements, which are:-

1. A Service Delivery Plan
2. Auditable Standards of Performance
3. A mechanism for reporting to Government

The DTI intend that the Service Delivery Plans of each Authority will be completed on an annual basis, submitted to the Department in Westminster and that they be analysed centrally.

The first year's operation is likely to be experimental. The information return requested within the framework will eventually replace the annual statutory report to DTI which is presently required under Section 70 of the Weights & Measures Act 1985. The resultant analysis of results will be published.

There is also to be an element of self assessment in the scheme and a peer review process, although ultimately external audit is planned.

3. BACKGROUND TO AUDIT SCOTLAND PERFORMANCE REVIEW 2001/2002

Another initiative underway at the moment is an Audit Scotland Performance Audit of Trading Standards Services, which also contains elements of self assessment, peer review and external audit.

Indeed, the aforementioned DTI Performance Standard is borrowing elements of the Audit Scotland project, and both bodies are working together in the comprehensive assessment of the efficiency of Trading Standards Services.

The major element of the Audit Scotland project is self-assessment and comparison with other authorities of similar size. Elements of PMP (Performance Management Planning) are also incorporated, along with external audit and peer review.

Checklists covering normal service activities have been developed nationally to allow initial self-assessment of Business Advice, Investigation of offences, Programmed Inspections, Consumer Advice and Consumer Education/Information.

These completed checklists aim to show whether a Department is achieving minimum standards, good practice or better practice in a particular area of service delivery.

Departments which are not meeting minimum standards will be required to agree an action plan to raise the standard of that particular activity.

This project covers all Trading Standards Departments in Scotland, and a final report is due to be prepared by Audit Scotland for publication in August 2002.

4. CURRENT POSITION

Angus Council's Trading Standards Service will be taking steps to produce a plan for DTI for the year from 1 April 2002. This plan is to be submitted by no later than June 2002.

Thereafter, the other parts of the framework document will be acted upon.

The self assessment project for Audit Scotland has been completed and the results are in the hands of the External Auditor.

The next stage is to take part in the peer review process, where Angus Council will assist in the audit of the Highland Council Trading Standards Department. Aberdeenshire have been chosen to similarly take part in auditing Angus Council, and these visits will take place during February 2002.

In both cases, the external auditor will be in attendance to lead the process.

The first initiative to report will be that of Audit Scotland, as described above, and the Committee will be advised of the outcomes thereafter.

I would envisage feedback from the DTI Framework Standard to take longer, and it may be 2003/2004 before any meaningful information/result is available.

Work on the DTI initiative starts now and will involve changes to Service Planning and use of resources; and possibly also changes to priorities.

Angus Council's Consumer Protection Best Value Review, which is currently underway, will take cognizance of the requirements of both the Audit Scotland and the DTI performance frameworks.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct or immediate financial implications in respect of the contents of this report.

6. HUMAN RIGHTS

There are no Human Rights implications associated with this report.

7. CONCLUSION

Auditing by external agencies is very much a fact of life for our officers, but with Audit Scotland, DTI, The Food Standards Agency and Health & Safety Executive now all getting into the act, it does put a strain on human resources.

The fear amongst staff is that we shall spend so much time preparing various plans/documents, preparing for audits and undergoing audits that work out in the field will suffer.

8. CONSULTATION

The Chief Executive, Director of Finance and the Director of Law & Administration have been consulted on the contents of this report.

S R Heggie
Director of Environmental and Consumer Protection

NOTE: No background papers as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to any material extent in preparing this report.