



Audit Committee

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

ANNUAL REPORT 2015

June 2016

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Chairman's Statement

Secretary General,

It is my pleasure to present to you the 12th annual report of the Audit Committee of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade which records the Committee's activities during 2015. The financial parameters of the two votes which comprise the Department's expenditure programmes are as follows:

Revised Estimate (net)	Provisional Outturn (net)	Peak Year Outturn (net)	Expenditure Reduction from Peak Year	
2015 (€m)	2015 (€m)	2008 (€m)	€m	%
Vote 27 International Cooperation				
475	473	768	295	38
Vote 28 Foreign Affairs and Trade				
165	157	217	60	28

The Audit Committee met on six occasions during 2015. In addition, members of the Committee gave generously of their time between meetings in exercising oversight over the work programme of the Evaluation and Audit Unit of the Department. While the Committee's agenda during 2015 ranged across the diverse responsibilities of the Department, the main issues our work programme addressed during 2015 revolved around the broad themes of financial management and control, risk management, and fraud, all of which are dealt with in greater detail in the body of the annual report.

The Committee reviewed and revised its charter in 2015, in light of guidance issued by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. This provided the Committee with an opportunity to review and evaluate its operation. The revised Charter, set out in Appendix 1, does not propose any changes to the role and function of the Committee as it has operated in the Department. The main changes relate to codification and clarification of procedures for membership.

Given the appointment by the Department of a Chief Financial Officer (CFO) at Assistant Secretary level in 2014, a post promoted and welcomed by the Committee (as noted in last year's annual report) the Committee engaged extensively with the CFO in 2015. Three formal meetings were held with the CFO, and informal contact maintained with the Chairman as necessary. The Committee welcomed the increased focus on financial management the CFO has promoted in the Department, particularly at senior management level and on regional Mission visits.

One item discussed with the CFO of concern to the Committee related to plans to move aspects of the finance function to a shared services provision arrangement across the Civil Service, as part of a general public service reform initiative to encourage more use of shared services (similar issues arose in relation to elements of human resource management). Given the distinctive nature of financial management and human resource management in the Department, and its world-wide

spread across missions and aid programmes, the Committee expressed concern that any move to shared services should not lead to a diminution in existing levels of assurance and control.

The Committee continued to give attention to the issue of fraud. An update on instances of fraud is now a standing item at the start of all committee meetings, and the Committee examined the fraud register of the Department and made suggestions as to improvements in the reporting of fraud. One particular issue discussed during the year was the need for all sections and divisions in the Department to be reminded of the need for timely reporting of suspected cases of fraud to the Evaluation and Audit Unit. It is only through timely reporting that appropriate responses to fraud can be promoted and pursued.

With regard to ensuring sound systems and practice, the Committee welcomed the audit reports examined during the year. The Evaluation and Audit unit continue to select topics for audit using a risk-based audit planning process, an approach which is supported by the Committee.

With regard to the internal audit work plan and evaluation work plan, the Committee welcomed the planned activity, and continued to request that the unit ensure a rigorous assessment of the resource commitment associated with the main activities in the plans and provide some level of redundancy to allow for unplanned activities. The Committee note that delivery of the plans is predicated on resourcing levels available to the Evaluation and Audit Unit. Staffing challenges caused to the Unit by the departure of some senior management staff in 2014 continued to present challenges for the Unit in 2015 and the Committee urges the Department to prioritise the addressing of these staffing issues.

During the year, the Committee continued its practice of welcoming presentations and subsequent discussion with Departmental management on audit and control issues. For example a useful discussion took place with the Bilateral Cooperation Units on the management, monitoring and oversight of their work and that of the Department in its key partner countries and countries of secondary accreditation.

Risk management also continued to be a focus of strong interest for the Committee. The Committee noted an audit report reviewing risk management processes in the Department, and in particular the finding that while the risk management system is now considered appropriate, it requires a period of consolidation to become embedded in Departmental practice. The Committee would like to re-iterate its understanding that risk management is a challenging issue, and can only be successfully embedded when it is widely seen as of value and not simply as a process in and of itself.

As part of strengthening the understanding of the Committee of the various aspects of Departmental work, and of raising the profile of the work of the Committee across the Department, the Committee gave some attention in 2015 to planning visits of the Committee to see the operation of the diverse elements of the Department. A visit to Belfast took place in October by some members of the Committee, with a particular focus on the work of the Reconciliation and Anti Sectarianism Fund. A visit to the London Embassy was scheduled for early 2016. The Committee view these visits as being of significant benefit in gaining a better understanding of the work of the Department and of the control environment.

Members of the Audit Committee are extremely grateful for the support which it has received unstintingly from management and staff at all levels throughout the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade who continue to deliver service of the highest quality. I would particularly like to thank Tom Hennessy, as head of unit, and Anne Barry and Liam Foley who provide a high-quality, valued secretariat to the Audit Committee. They are ably supported by colleagues, whose professionalism and commitment is exemplary.

A summary of all the recommendations arising from the annual report is outlined in Appendix 2.

Richard Boyle

Chairman

Audit Committee

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

June 2016.

2. Membership of the Audit Committee

Members of the Audit Committee are drawn from outside the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. They are appointed by the Secretary General of the Department.

During 2015, the members of the Committee were:

Dr. Richard Boyle, Chairman of the Audit Committee from July 2013, is Head of Research, Publishing and Corporate Relations, Institute of Public Administration (Appointed as a Committee member in January 2008).

Mr Donal Corcoran is a Chartered Management Accountant and retired management consultant (Appointed as a Committee member in July 2010).

Mr. Aidan Eames is a Solicitor in private practice (Appointed as a Committee member in July 2010).

Mr. Jim Gillespie is a Chartered Accountant and a former partner in EY (formerly Ernst & Young), (Appointed as a Committee member in July 2011).

Ms. Emer Daly is a Chartered Accountant and company director (Appointed as a Committee member in March 2012).

Mr. Jim O'Brien is a retired civil servant, having last worked at Second Secretary General level in the Department of Finance (Appointed as a Committee member in July 2014).

3. Role of the Audit Committee

The Audit Committee is formally appointed by, and advises, the Secretary General of the Department, who is the Accounting Officer for Votes 27 (International Cooperation) and 28 (Foreign Affairs and Trade). As appropriate, it will advise the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Minister of State for the Diaspora and Overseas Development.

The Audit Committee is part of the governance framework, appointed to provide independent advice to the Accounting Officer regarding the suitability and robustness of the organisation's internal control systems and procedures, and is responsible to him/her for its performance in this regard.

The Audit Committee has an advisory role with no executive functions, responsibilities or powers and has no role in approving evaluation and audit reports. It does not have any responsibility or involvement in the review and approval (on behalf of management) of annual financial statements for the Department's Votes.

The Committee will provide an independent appraisal of the audit and evaluation arrangements, with a view to strengthening internal controls, fraud and risk management, as well as enhancing the effective operation of the audit and evaluation function within the Department. In particular, the Committee will undertake to:

- Review the Department's evaluation and audit strategy and the annual work programmes arising from this.
- Review the implementation of these programmes.
- Review the resources available for this purpose.
- Examine reviews of the internal control systems.
- Examine reviews of the risk management systems.
- Examine reviews of the fraud control systems.

The Audit Committee meets with representatives of the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) at least once a year. While the Committee has a good working relationship with the Office of the C&AG, these meetings essentially involve the sharing of information and views. The Audit Committee has no direct involvement in the annual audit of the financial statements for the Department's Votes conducted by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The Audit Committee refers to guidance provided by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to ensure compliance on the role of Audit Committees in central government.

The Charter of the Audit Committee (see Appendix 1), which was revised in 2015, sets out its role and terms of reference.

4. Observations and Recommendations of the Audit Committee

a. Financial Management

The Audit Committee met with the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) three times in 2015; April, June and November. The CFO outlined his plans to the Committee and made reference to some significant issues. The Committee noted the following key areas of work; there are presentations, reviews and discussions of financial and budgetary reports at Management Board Meetings on a regular basis; Regional Mission visits take place with the Secretary General which include a focus on financial management; the CFO briefed the Committee on the planned migration of aspects of the finance function (payroll and travel claims) and other areas to shared services (central government) which is happening in 2016.

b. Audit Review

During the year the Audit Committee received and discussed reports of audits and reviews undertaken by the Evaluation and Audit Unit (E & A Unit) as part of its audit work programme. The Evaluation and Audit Unit selects topics for audit/review using a risk-based audit planning process, and presents its audit plan to the Audit Committee for review and agreement each year. A total of seven reports were issued during 2015. The Audit Committee has identified the following most significant reports for comment here:

i. Audit of Payroll

The audit focused entirely on the payroll processed at HQ and excluded payrolls executed at Missions for locally based staff. The Finance Division has responsibility for processing the payroll with Human resources providing the various instructions. The expenditure covered by the audit is approximately €76m per annum.

The audit concluded that the systems and controls in place within the Department in relation to Payroll provide a good level of assurance. The audit identified that there are some areas for improvement in the Department's internal control systems in relation to Payroll. The findings, effects and recommendations covered areas which management have accepted and have been addressed. The Committee further noted that the recommendations are framed with the move to shared services in mind which is due to take place in June 2016.

ii. Report of assessment of systems of internal control and risk management - Uganda

The purpose of the review was to assess the systems of internal control in operation at the Embassy in Kampala. The assessment team concluded that they were satisfied that the management systems currently in place at the Embassy are good, appropriate to the current programme and are consistently understood and applied. The main findings were:

- The management and staffing structure is now well established with clearer definition of roles.

- The internal control environment is good and risk management systems are in line with head-quarters policy but require some further refinement at programme component and partner level.
- The design of any future programmes should be informed by a thorough risk analysis before decisions are taken regarding appropriate areas to support, modalities and partners.

iii. Audit of Consular Services

The scope of the audit addressed the consular services provided by the Department namely Foreign Birth Registrations (FBR), marriages abroad / Certificat de Coutume and authentication of documents.

The audit concluded that the system of internal controls was good. A number of recommendations were made to strengthen systems, including:

- Optimising the use of the capability of the Náisiún system to manage resource allocation and workflow.
- Introduction of an online card payment to be taken at the time of application to improve efficiency.
- Consideration of the medium term resourcing of the delivery of these consular services, in particular the processing of FBR applications, in order to avoid backlogs.
- These recommendations have been accepted are being and are being addressed by the Department.

c. Review of Risk Management Processes in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

The purpose of the review is to express an opinion on the adequacy of the Department's risk management process, identify any areas of weakness and provide recommendations on future development.

The key findings are summarised as follows:

- In the period since the (previous) 2011 assessment, the Department has invested considerable resources in developing its risk management processes. The overall system is considered strong.
- Structures in place for risk management are appropriate to the Department and risk management is now a central part of the Department's management processes.
- While the system is considered strong and appropriate it now requires a period whereby it becomes embedded across the Department.

Risk management is separately addressed in section e. below.

Other audit reports received by the Audit Committee in 2015:

- Report of Audit Visit to South Africa and Zimbabwe.

- Emigrants Support Programme Audit of Partners, West Coast USA.
- Audit of Systems at the Consulate General, San Francisco.

d. Evaluation Review

Evaluation activity during 2015 had a broad focus across the Department. This was evidenced by the work undertaken on the Focused Policy Assessment of the US Bilateral Mission Network, the Evaluation Needs Assessment, and the evaluations of a number of Irish Aid's bilateral country programmes. The Evaluation and Audit Unit also actively engaged with the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service. These activities are discussed in greater detail below:

i. Focused Policy Assessment of the US Bilateral Mission Network

This Review commenced in 2015 and is being undertaken as one of two topics selected under the Government's Value for Money and Policy Review Initiative for the period 2015-17. The purpose of the Review is to provide an evidence based assessment of the work of the seven bilateral Missions that comprise Ireland's Mission Network in the United States of America. In addition to helping provide accountability to the Irish public in general, this assessment will serve to inform decisions in relation to future resource allocations and improved value-for-money.

ii. Evaluation Needs Assessment

The Evaluation and Audit Unit (EAU) conducted an Evaluation Needs Assessment to identify opportunities for evaluation and to inform the development of its evaluation strategic plan for the period 2016 – 2019. This plan is due for completion in mid-2016.

iii. Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service

The Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) is an integrated cross-government service to enhance the role of economics and value for money analysis in public policy making. The Evaluation and Audit Unit is the designated IGEES unit in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The Unit is represented on the management board of IGEES and a graduate economist from the service has been seconded to EAU. This has facilitated a very positive and productive reciprocal exchange of ideas and experiences.

iv. Irish Aid Country Programme Evaluations

Country programme evaluations focus on assessing the appropriateness and effectiveness of the programme's strategic choices and associated partnerships. In addition to providing lessons to what was achieved (or otherwise), country programme evaluations are an important way of providing accountability to both the Irish public and to the host country. Very importantly, country programme evaluations help inform future strategic decision-making and are ordinarily carried out towards the end of each country programme cycle which typically covers a period of 4-5 years of implementation.

In 2015 evaluations of Irish Aid country programmes in Uganda and Malawi were completed. At the time of writing, Uganda had been presented to the Committee and the Malawi report was being scheduled for presentation.

v. Irish Aid Uganda Country Programme Evaluation

The Uganda Country Strategy was completed in 2015 and covered the years 2010 -2014 and expenditure of €115 million. The evaluation concluded that the Country Strategy design reflected the priorities of beneficiaries, the Government of Uganda and Irish Aid, and also outlined a more streamlined approach, with clearer linkages between financial investment and policy dialogue, and greater focus on chronic poverty and vulnerability. However, the evaluation also considered that the programme was overambitious, did not sufficiently respond to a changing environment, and was not sufficiently prioritised.

The fraud in the Office of the Prime Minister, and the subsequent changes, resulted in a Country Programme Evaluation (CSP) that consisted of two very different phases. These changes impacted on the effectiveness and likely sustainability of some programmes in the second phase. Challenges in the second phase arose because of uncertainty about the medium-term continuity of the Irish Aid programme, short planning periods and more elaborate internal processes. At an external level, the programme was affected by a reducing coherence among donors.

The evaluation concluded that, overall, Irish Aid has contributed to some very important inroads into reducing poverty and promoting asset creation, expanding access to social services (including in terms of justice) and generating greater awareness around gender and gender-based violence.

e. Risk Management

The Committee noted continued improvement in embedding risk management systems across the Department – including revisions to the risk management policy covering the application of ratings in particular. Risk management training was given to members of the Department's Management Board and to the Risk Management Committee members.

The Committee also noted that all Divisions of the Department are represented on the Risk Management Committee, which meets regularly and that there have been notable improvements to systems for recognition of high level risks. This involves the inclusion of risk recognition and mitigation as part of annual business plans.

The Chief Risk Officer is kept informed of significant risk issues and changes and risk is a regular item on the agenda at Management Board meetings.

f. Fraud

The Committee continued to review the fraud register during 2015. The members made a number of recommendations on revision of the format and presentation of the register which allowed for prioritisation of the more recent issues and also set down markers for the removal of issues as soon as appropriate actions were taken.

The Committee requested that all Sections and Divisions in the Department be reminded of the importance of the timely reporting of suspected fraud cases to the Evaluation and Audit Unit for further reporting and appropriate action.

The Committee are satisfied that fraud issues are receiving appropriate attention and that there are good processes in place to manage and close off on fraud issues in a proper manner. In particular significant issues presented to them during 2015 seem properly investigated and reported on.

g. Key Specific Areas of work

The following is a summary of other areas of work in which the Committee engaged during 2015:

i. The Reconciliation and Anti Sectarianism Fund

The Audit Committee received an overview of the operations of this fund. The fund has a budget of €2.7m per annum and its purpose is to awards grants to organisations (mainly small community groups) working to address sectarianism and to further peace and reconciliation on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and Britain. The presentation included information on the size and volume of applications to the Fund and on the decision making and oversight processes in place by the Department. The Audit Committee were satisfied with the systems as presented by the Division.

ii. Audit Committee Visit to Belfast 14th October 2015

The Chairman and two members, accompanied by Department officials, visited Belfast in October 2015. The group met with the Department's Joint Secretary of the Belfast, British-Irish Inter-government Secretariat, Ruairi de Burca. The visit provided a valuable opportunity for the Audit Committee to gain an understanding of the context in which the Department and the Joint Secretariat is engaged in Northern Ireland, the challenges being addressed and the programmes being implemented.

From an Audit Committee perspective, while the visit was not a detailed survey of the systems and procedures for spending and accountability of funds, the issues discussed and information as presented did not give rise to any concerns about the way in which the funding from the Reconciliation and Anti Sectarianism Fund is spent or being used. Indeed, the Committee were reassured and impressed by the people they met and the answers provided to their questions. Their overall impression was that the funds being provided are really appreciated, are carefully managed and are put to good use in meeting the objectives of the Fund.

Other notable comments:

- The organisations visited were working hard to deal with the usual challenges that are present in any poor and disadvantaged communities.
- The organisations met with were very conscious of the need for appropriate systems and procedures in relation to the funding being provided.
- Governance arrangements sometimes differ among the various organisations, with some having a Board and others a management committee.

iii. Emigrants Support Programme

The Department's Emigrant Support Programme (ESP), provides funding to non-profit organisations and projects to support Irish communities abroad and to facilitate the development of more strategic links between Ireland and the global Irish. In September 2015 the Audit Committee received an overview of the operations of this programme from the Irish Abroad and Global Irish Network Unit of the Department (part of the Ireland United Kingdom and Americas Division).

The discussion with the Committee covered the governance systems for approving grants and the monetary levels of approval; the advantages of having the dual function of the Emigrant Support Programme and the Global Irish Network within the same division in the Department with clear beneficial inter-linkages.

The Committee recommended that while there is an automated applications system in place which does generate efficiencies, that consideration be given to the purchase of an 'off the shelf' system for improved grant management. They further recommended that consideration be given to the payment of grants in Euros and that only in exceptional circumstances should grants be paid in GBP and USD. This would reduce exchange rate risks for the Department. They also asked that consideration be given to dividing larger grants into more than one tranche per year, if practical and possible for better cash management.

iv. Passport Office

The Audit Committee met with members of the senior management team of the Passport Office in November 2015.

The team advised the Committee that the service of providing passports continued to be delivered to a high standard despite challenges such as office moves. Reference was also made to the establishment and operation of a Passport Reform Group who are overseeing the implementation of recommendations from the report of the External Review carried out in 2013.

The introduction of the Passport Card in October 2015 was welcomed by the Committee as an important advancement in the passport service. Reference was made to the importance of maintaining the integrity of the passport system with the enhancement of anti-fraud measures. In particular the increase in internal capacity to meet increasing demand for passports as noted. Also noted was the increased cooperation between national agencies and in particular the Department of Social Protection with regard to national identification

systems and processes. The Committee highlighted the need for awareness of the systems in use by other departments regarding national identification, particularly if reliance is to be placed on them.

Appendix 1 - Audit Committee Charter (Revised 2015)

PURPOSE AND AUTHORITY

The Audit Committee of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (the Department) is formally appointed by, and advises, the Secretary General of the Department, who is the Accounting Officer for Votes 27 (International Cooperation) and 28 (Foreign Affairs and Trade). As appropriate, it will advise the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Minister of State for Trade and Development.

The Audit Committee is part of the governance framework, appointed to provide independent advice to the Accounting Officer regarding the suitability and robustness of the organisation's internal control systems and procedures, and is responsible to him/her for its performance in this regard.

The Audit Committee has an advisory role with no executive functions, responsibilities or powers and has no role in approving evaluation and audit reports.

MEMBERSHIP

The Committee will have a Chairperson and at least four ordinary members, all of whom will be drawn from outside the Department (the quorum for meetings will be three members).

The Accounting Officer will appoint members and the chairperson. The Chairperson of the Committee shall have right of access to the Accounting Officer.

At least two members of the Committee will be qualified accountants. The Committee membership will also ideally include at least one person with experience at a senior level of the civil or public service and some members with professional experience in the area of development cooperation and the evaluation of aid programmes. Additional experience may be co-opted on a consultancy basis.

The role requirements will be clearly communicated to potential members at the outset including time commitments and an indication of frequency of meetings.

Members may serve up to three years, with the option to extend by up to three years.

All members will be obliged to disclose any conflicts of interest. Where a conflict of interest arises in the course of the work of the Audit Committee, the member will bring this to the attention of the chairperson and, where necessary, leave the room for the duration of the discussion and not take part in any decisions relating to the discussion. A note to this effect will be included in the minutes of the meeting.

MEETINGS

To facilitate regular engagement with the organisation, the Audit Committee will meet at least quarterly, with the authority to convene additional meetings as circumstances require.

The Audit Committee may invite members of management, the Evaluation and Audit Unit, or others to attend meetings and provide information, as necessary.

On at least an annual basis, the Committee will meet with the Comptroller and Auditor General, or his/her nominee, with regard to external audit, to ensure cooperation, and avoid duplication and potential gaps in audit coverage.

Meeting agendas will be prepared and provided in advance to members, along with appropriate briefing materials.

Minutes will be prepared and circulated to the Accounting Officer and to the Management Advisory Committee.

Appropriate records of the work of the Audit Committee will be maintained.

FUNCTIONS

The Committee will provide an independent appraisal of the audit and evaluation arrangements, with a view to strengthening internal controls, fraud and risk management, as well as enhancing the effective operation of the audit and evaluation function within the Department. In particular, the Committee will undertake to:

- review the Department's evaluation and audit strategy and the annual work programmes arising from this
- review the implementation of these programmes
- review the resources available for this purpose
- examine reviews of the internal control systems
- examine reviews of the risk management systems
- examine reviews of the fraud control systems

In carrying out these functions the Committee will be cognisant of any existing guidelines.

ANNUAL REPORT

The Committee will provide an annual report to the Accounting Officer. This report will outline the work of the Committee during the year and include observations and recommendations of the Committee.

The Audit Committee will follow up on any recommendations from the Accounting Officer arising from this report, or in the course of other interactions.

PROTECTED DISCLOSURES

The Audit Committee will refer any protected disclosures made to them to the Head of Evaluation and Audit who will comply with organisational policy regarding receipt and investigation of protected disclosures, in line with existing guidelines.

Audit Committee of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

24th February 2016

Appendix 2 - Summary of Recommendations

Resources

When filling future vacancies in the Evaluation and Audit Unit, and in the interests of avoiding delays, the Committee recommends that panels be developed of suitable, interested, available candidates, which would ensure the correct skills match for the Unit.

Grant Management

In order to mitigate currency exchange risk, the Committee suggested that consideration be given by management of the Emigrants Support Programme to the payment of grants in Euros and that only in exceptional circumstances should other widely used currencies such as GBP and USD be used.

With regard to the Emigrants Support Programme, the Audit Committee recommended that consideration be given to dividing larger grants into more than one tranche per year where practical and not already the case.

The Committee requested that in the interests of expediting the implementation of an automated grants management system that the Knowledge Management Group consider the benefits of purchasing an 'off the shelf' package in the short term and arrange for minimal modifications according to sections' needs at implementation stage if necessary.

Passports

The Committee recommended that, where reliance is placed on the systems of other Departments, such as Department of Social Protection, to verify the identity of applicants, the Department should have access to audit or similar independent means of establishing the reliability of these systems and processes.

Risk Management

A recommendation from the Committee was that consideration be given to an automated system for capturing and scoring of risks and mitigations thereby allowing for ease in reporting and available management information.