

Correspondence

Annual report 2015/16

Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000 under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. We help the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission check that organisations spending public money use it properly, efficiently and effectively.

Contents

Summary	4
Introduction	4
Key messages.....	5
Correspondence in 2015/16.....	6
The volume of correspondence has remained consistent this year.....	6
We performed well in relation to target response times	9
We have made significant improvements to service delivery during 2015/16.....	11
Further improvements to service delivery will continue during 2016/17	12

Summary

Introduction

1. Audit Scotland handles a wide range of correspondence from members of the public, elected representatives and organisations. Correspondence is addressed to Audit Scotland, the Accounts Commission or the Auditor General for Scotland.
2. We have no statutory duty to investigate issues of concern or respond to correspondence, but we do so under our [Code of Audit Practice](#). As a public sector organisation, we understand that people will raise issues of concern or general enquiries with us. The Code says that the key factor in determining whether we examine an issue of concern is the relevance of the issue to Audit Scotland's role and functions. Audit Scotland and appointed auditors use their professional and technical knowledge in determining how we deal each issue of concern raised.
3. Audit Scotland's correspondence team responds to issues of concern, objections to local authority accounts, whistleblowing disclosures, and audit enquiries. Auditors appointed by the Accounts Commission also have specific duties to consider formal objections to the accounts of local government bodies raised by members of the public. Audit Scotland, the Accounts Commission, the Auditor General and the firms they appoint are prescribed persons under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 (the Act).
4. This report sets out the volume of correspondence we received during 2015/16, which sector it relates to and our performance in meeting target response times. It also provides an update on progress in implementing the recommendations arising from our 2014/15 Correspondence Review. Freedom of Information (Fol) requests, complaints about Audit Scotland and data access requests are managed by the Corporate Governance Manager, and are not covered in this report.

Key messages

- Performance against our target response times has improved significantly since 2014/15. During 2015/16, we acknowledged 90 per cent of cases within the target of five working days and in 87 per cent of cases issued a final response within the target of 30 working days. In 2014/15, our performance against these two targets was 61 per cent and 58 per cent respectively.
- We have successfully implemented a number of improvements arising from our 2014/15 review of the correspondence function. These include the introduction of:
 - a suite of formal policies and procedures for dealing with correspondence
 - a re-designed correspondence area within the new Audit Scotland website
 - an automated response for all email enquiries.
- The volume of correspondence remains high, with over 340 cases of correspondence dealt with in 2015/16. 181 cases were new issues of concern or whistleblowing disclosures.
- Issues raised through correspondence are becoming more complex in nature and there are increasing expectations from the correspondents. Our responses are increasingly being shared more widely by email, social media or in the press.
- We are continuing to improve how we deal with correspondence. During 2016/17, we will develop our arrangements for making best use of the management information available from our correspondence database to inform our wider audit work.

Correspondence in 2015/16

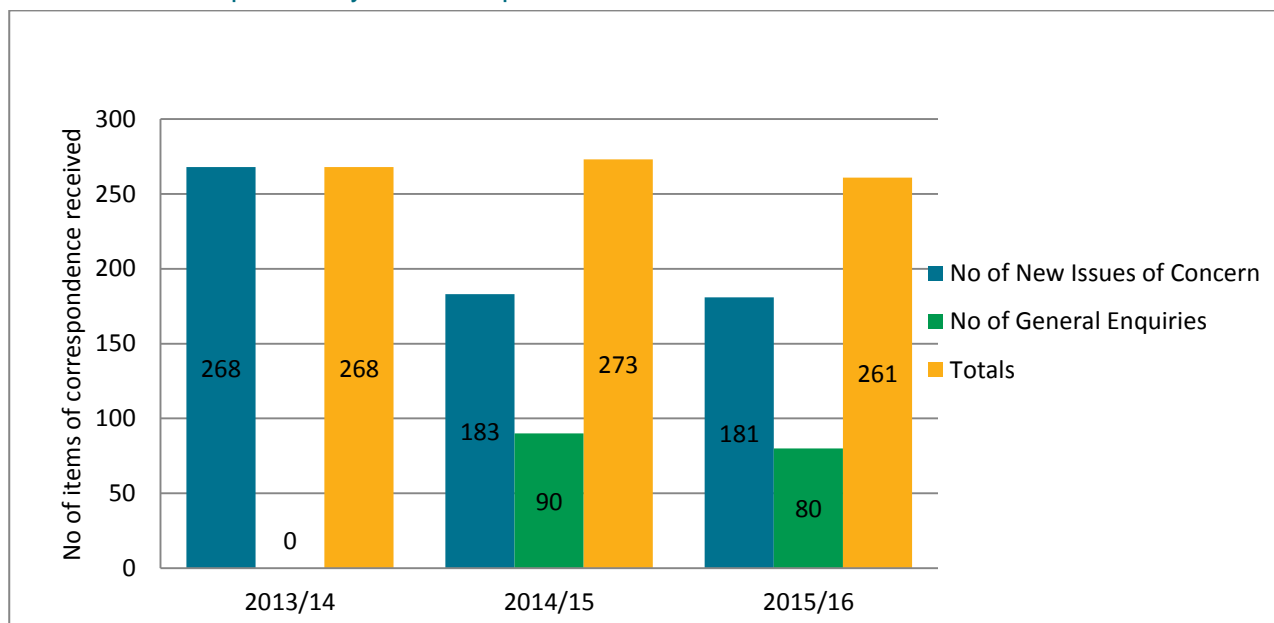
The volume of correspondence has remained consistent this year

5. In 2015/16, we dealt with 343 cases of correspondence, of which 80 were general enquiries and 181 were new issues of concern. We carried forward 58 cases from 2014/15 and reopened 24 cases in 2015/16.
6. Out of the 181 new cases received, 136 (75%) cases related to public bodies audited by Audit Scotland and 45 (25%) were for public bodies audited by one of the firms appointed by the Accounts Commission and Auditor General. Our correspondence team works with the appointed auditor concerned in scoping the level of work, resource and time required to review these issues of concern. We continue to work in partnership with the appointed auditor until we are able to provide the appropriate final response.
7. Over the last three years, there has been little change to the volume of correspondence we receive ([Exhibit 1](#)). However, there have been inconsistencies in how the data has been recorded over this period. For example, cases which we now count separately as re-opened were previously logged as new cases.

Exhibit 1

Volume of correspondence received, 2013/14 to 2015/16

The information below includes new cases and general enquiries. It does not include cases carried forward from the previous year or re-opened cases.



Source: Audit Scotland

8. General enquiries include queries about our work, requests for national report data, and questions about legislation and the roles of public bodies. The figures in the rest of this report

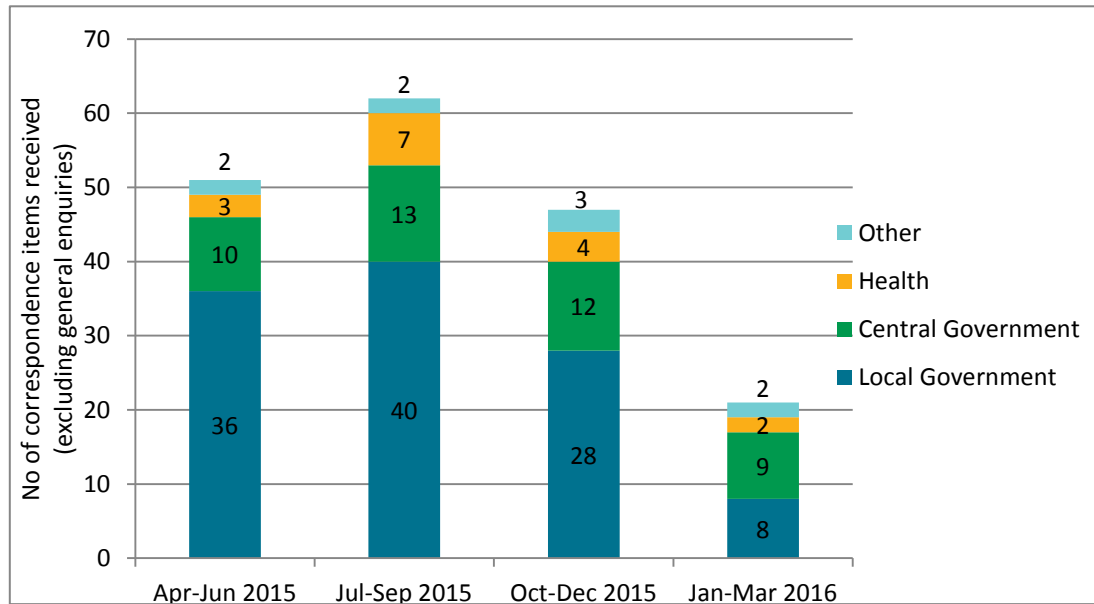
exclude general enquiries, carried forward and re-opened cases and only consider new issues of concern.

9. Quarter 2 was the busiest quarter of 2015/16 ([Exhibit 2](#)).

Exhibit 2

Correspondence received by quarter (new cases), 2015/16

Over the past year, we received the majority of correspondence (excluding general enquiries, carried forward and reopened cases) in the second quarter.

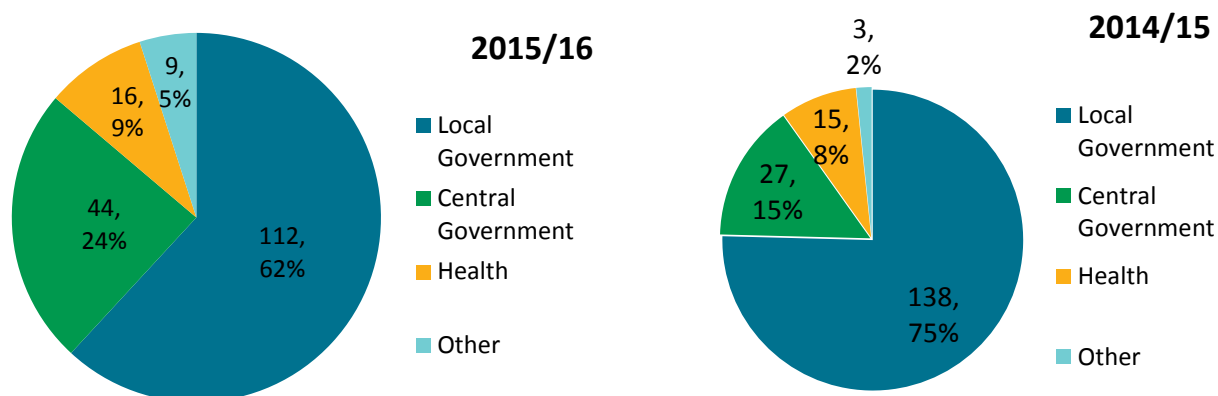


Source: Audit Scotland (n=181)

10. Levels of correspondence tend to increase when relatively high numbers of correspondents raise the same issue. For example, we received seven cases about the Marischal Square development for Aberdeen City Council ([see paragraph 12](#)).
11. In 2015/16, 62 per cent of cases related to local government (75% in 2014/15), 24 per cent to central government (15% in 2014/15), and 16 per cent to health bodies (8% in 2014/15) ([Exhibit 3](#)).
12. We received correspondence on 28 councils, with six accounting for 52 of the 112 council-related cases:
- Argyll and Bute (10 cases, of which four were about the Castle Toward community buy-out)
 - Aberdeen City (9 cases, of which seven were about the Marischal Square development)
 - City of Edinburgh (9 cases)
 - Glasgow City (9 cases)
 - Scottish Borders (8 cases)
 - Highland (7 cases).

Exhibit 3**Correspondence received by sector (new issues of concern), 2015/16**

Out of the 181 cases of correspondence (excluding general enquiries, carried forward cases and reopened cases) received in 2015/16, two-thirds related to local government (a decrease from 2014/15) and one quarter related to central government (an increase from 2014/15).



Source: Audit Scotland (n=181)

13. The rise in central government cases between 2014/15 and 2015/16 includes:
 - Scottish Government (11 cases, including 3 relating to T in the Park and 4 relating to the Common Agricultural Policy)
 - Crown Office (4 cases relating to effective use of public money)
 - Colleges (4 cases relating to severance packages)
 - Scottish Criminal Review Commission (3 cases relating to governance arrangements).
14. Our improved [website](#) area went live in November 2015 and provides clear guidance to our stakeholders about the type of issues of concern we can deal with and, where we cannot help, redirects correspondents to the appropriate body to deal with their concern. Our [correspondence policy](#) and [flowchart](#) are also available to view on our website. These improvements may explain the decrease in the number of cases of correspondence received in the last quarter of 2015/16.
15. Correspondents usually contact us by email, with 67 per cent of 2015/16 correspondence received by email and 23 per cent by letter.
16. Members of the public were the main source of correspondence (116 cases, 64%), then MSPs (19 cases, 10%) and councillors (5 cases, 3%). In 2014/15, there were 24 cases from councillors, and 13 cases from MSPs. Elected representatives raised a range of issues, some cases brought to them by their constituents.
17. Employees accounted for 19 cases (10%), an eight per cent increase on previous year. Seven of these cases came to us under the Public Interest Disclosure Act (PIDA). We take our responsibilities under PIDA very seriously. Whistleblowing cases tend to be more complex and therefore more time-consuming so we will continue to monitor this trend closely.

18. The amount of time spent dealing with an item of correspondence is affected by a number of factors, including:
 - the increasing complexity of cases, which can often involve more than one organisation. For example, the cluster of complaints about the Lennoxtown Initiative involved NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde, East Dunbartonshire Council and Scottish Enterprise
 - correspondents have greater expectations of how Audit Scotland (on behalf of the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General) can deal with issues of concern raised with us. For example, correspondents may expect us to be able to overturn council decisions or become involved in a personal grievance
 - correspondents are making more use of technology and the internet to share their concerns and our responses. This can generate additional correspondence for us.
19. In 2015/16, the most significant piece of work resulting from correspondence was a review of the Lennoxtown Initiative involving 19 correspondents and which formed five cases (three of which were carried forward from 2014/15). The communication with each of the correspondents, for example frequently requesting additional information and clarification on our audit work, took up considerable time and resources throughout the year. We published our [final report](#) on 22 November 2015 and 5,698 people downloaded the report from our website in the first two weeks. The costs associated with this work for the auditors amounted to £29,500. Since publication, we have received five Freedom of Information requests.
20. Our work from correspondence continues to generate media interest. During 2015/16, the correspondence cases that generated the most media interest related to the Lennoxtown Initiative Review, Marischal Square development in Aberdeen and the funding of T in the Park.
21. We reviewed one complaint against an appointed auditor which generated 40 individual pieces of correspondence for one case which took up considerable resources.
22. We continue to receive correspondence on a wide variety of issues not within our remit to consider, for example, planning decisions or complaints about council services.

We performed well in relation to target response times

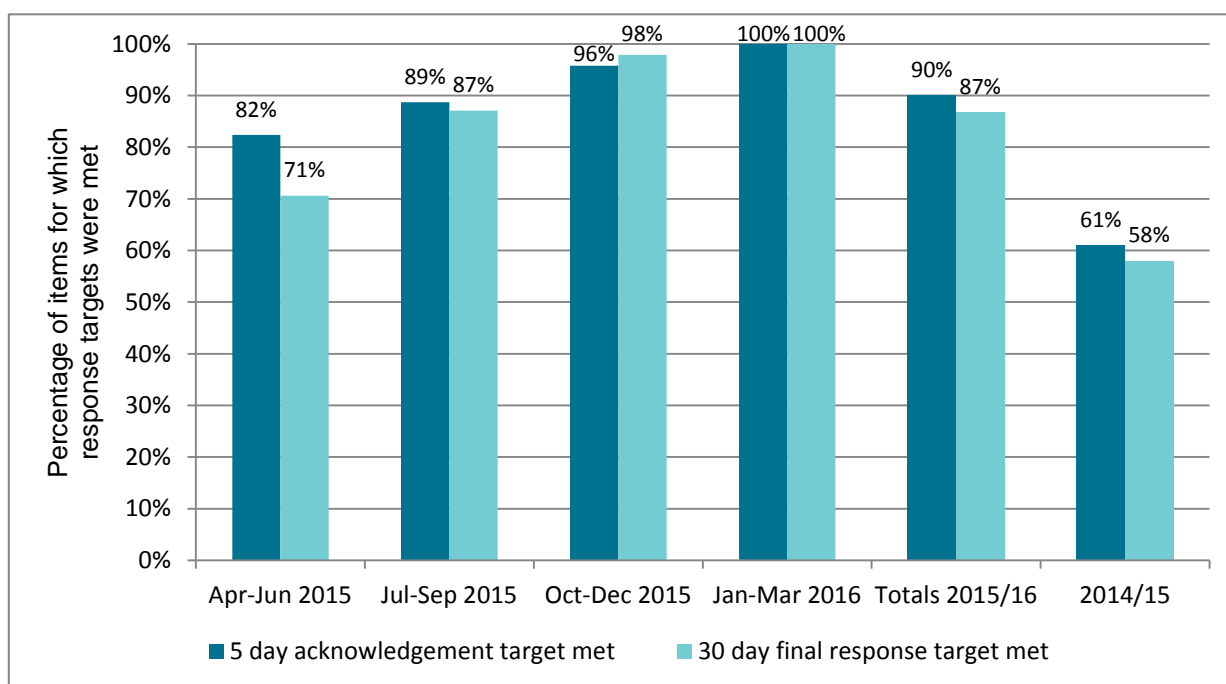
23. We have two key performance targets relating to response times. We aim to acknowledge receipt of correspondence within five working days, and to provide a final response within 30 working days.
24. During 2015/16, we acknowledged 90 per cent of the recorded correspondence cases within five working days, and 87 per cent received a final response within 30 working days. This is a significant improvement on our performance in 2014/15 which was 61 and 58 per cent respectively ([Exhibit 4](#)).
25. At the start of December 2015, we started issuing automatic responses to all emails sent to our correspondence email address. This helps ensure our acknowledgement targets are not missed, particularly over holiday periods.

26. The development of our policy and improvements to our website have also enabled us to provide a more consistent and uniform approach when dealing with correspondence. It has led to quicker initial assessment and decisions on what is and is not within our remit to consider.

Exhibit 4

Performance in relation to target response times, 2014/15

We acknowledged 90 per cent of the recorded correspondence cases within the target five working days, and 87 per cent received a substantive response within our 30 working days target. This compares favourably with our performance in 2014/15.



27.

Source: Audit Scotland

28. Our Corporate Governance Manager deals with any complaints from correspondents about how we handled their correspondence. During 2015/16, we received four such complaints which is a decrease in the 11 we received during 2014/15. Two of these complaints were dealt with under the Stage 1 process and two under the Stage 2 process. Under our Stage 2 process, one complaint was upheld and one was partially upheld. All of the complaints relate to cases which we carried forward at the start of the year and where we had not issued a timely final response.
29. The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) notified us that it received a complaint in connection with how we handled our review of the Lennoxtown Initiative. The SPSO did not uphold the complaint.

We have made significant improvements to service delivery during 2015/16

30. During 2015/16, we made good progress in implementing the recommendations arising from the 2014/15 Correspondence Review. As stated earlier, this has helped us achieve considerable improvements to our target response times.
31. Our key achievements during 2015/16 include:
 - The development and launch (in November 2015) of a re-designed correspondence area within the new Audit Scotland website, providing a clearer statement about our role and remit in relation to the different types of correspondence we deal with. Key features include the:
 - introduction of an [on-line form](#) that can be used for both whistleblowing disclosures and issues of concern
 - development of a ['useful guide for correspondents'](#) - around how to raise an issue of concern about a public body, and contact information about the role and remit of other public bodies in Scotland.
 - The introduction of automated acknowledgements for emails at the beginning of December 2015.
 - The development of new internal ishare site for correspondence. In line with Data Protection guidance, the site includes a restricted area where all correspondence cases are held and this is only accessible to the correspondence and corporate governance teams. The new site is helping us improve our links between correspondence, wider audit intelligence, complaints and FOI systems. Colleagues are also now able to access our suite of new policies and procedures and understand more about our role and remit in relation to correspondence.
 - A renewed focus on training and development. Members of the correspondence team have all completed additional FOI, Whistleblowing and Data Protection training. The knowledge gained from the training has helped us to improve our responses to correspondents and develop our suite of new policies.
 - Further improvements to our correspondence database were developed which now allows us to:
 - meet regulatory reporting requirements for whistleblowing disclosures
 - identify the appropriate record retention date for each case
 - record the number and percentage of cases which are reopened to help identify trends and make improvements.
32. In November 2015, a new Correspondence Manager joined the team. Working along side the other team member this has provided greater consistency and stability to service delivery.

Further improvements to service delivery will continue during 2016/17

33. We plan to make further improvements to the way we deal with correspondence during 2016/17. These include:
- making best use of management information held on our new database to inform our wider audit work
 - the introduction of a new two-day target response time for all acknowledgements
 - an engagement programme with the private firms in advance of the new audit appointments commencing later in the year
 - the development of subject briefings for our website covering issues which correspondents regularly write to us about such as common good, procurement and options appraisal
 - designing and implementing a feedback facility for correspondents within the website
 - additional training to staff dealing with correspondence to further help improve the consistency of language in our responses, ensuring we use plain English, and deliver clear, concise messages
 - developing networks with other bodies involved in complaints handling such as the SPSO and Public Concern at Work.