

Mrs Janet Davies AM

Chair of the Audit Committee

National Assembly for Wales

3 March 2004

Cardiff Bay

Cardiff

CF99 1NA

PROGRAMME OF VALUE FOR MONEY EXAMINATIONS FOR 2004-05

At the Audit Committee's meeting on 12 February, members asked for information concerning the timing of individual studies in my final programme of value for money examinations for 2004-05. I am pleased to attach a table that sets out our current expectations of when we plan to make a substantive start on these examinations.

As shown in this table, the value for money examinations are scheduled to commence across the year, so as to facilitate a steady flow of material for consideration by the Audit Committee later in 2004-05 and the following year. Of course, the length of time taken to complete these examinations may vary, depending, for instance, upon the scope of the examination and the number of audited bodies involved. And, of course, unforeseen complexities may arise during fieldwork. However, in general, most of my studies take between six and twelve months to complete from initial planning through to publication.

Members will appreciate that the plans as set out in the attached table may need to be flexed to accommodate any unplanned topical work that I decide to introduce into the programme of value for money work. Such work may be undertaken in response to the Committee's concerns and interests, such as that undertaken last year on late payments to farmers, and the disposal of the Mid Wales Hospital. It is clearly important to retain the flexibility to respond to these concerns, and to broader developments in the audit field. However, given finite resources, undertaking such work will inevitably have the effect of displacing planned work usually, of course, deferring it while keeping it in the programme.

The timing of studies, in terms of both fieldwork and publication, also needs to be sensitive to the activity and timing of key executive decisions by officials within the Assembly and its related public bodies. The value of audit scrutiny is to provide independent assurance to the Assembly, and in particular the Audit Committee, that executive decisions by officials have been made with regard to securing best value. Clearly it is important that my audit work does not cut across with the executive decision making process or, indeed, with any related legal proceedings.

At its February meeting, members were particularly concerned about the timing of my examination of the gardens at Middleton. My staff within the National Audit Office Wales are currently in consultation with Assembly officials about the best timing of that examination. Clearly, here, my aim will be to undertake this examination at a time when those responsible for managing this project and the related documents are readily available, but not so premature that the timing of my work might prejudice the outcome of executive decisions about the future of the gardens.

I hope that this note is helpful in explaining some of the factors involved in planning my programme of work that is due to start in the coming financial year.

JOHN BOURN

Programme of value for money examinations for 2004-05: study start times by quarter

<i>April - June 2004</i>	Middleton: The National Botanic Garden	Managing the performance of trunk road agents	
<i>July - Sept 2004</i>	Arts Council—follow-up	Managing staff sickness absence in further education	
<i>Oct - Dec 2004</i>	Merlin: the Assembly's new IT and business improvement programme	Ambulatory care and day surgery	
<i>Jan - March 2005</i>	NHS Clinical Waste	Sickness absence management in the Assembly	Tir Gofal (Countryside Council for Wales)