ARGYLL AND BUTE COUNCIL   **AUDIT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

CHIEF EXECUTIVE   **16 MARCH 2021**

BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN UPDATE

1.0   EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1.   The purpose of this report is to provide members an update on the Best Value Improvement Action Plan which emerged from the Accounts Commission findings on the Controller of Audits Statutory Report on the Council.

1.2.   The action plan was agreed by the Council in June 2020. Like the rest of the UK, the Council and partners remain in 'response' mode to the COVID 19 pandemic. The Council has made good progress against all the themes but in some cases actions have been adapted in the short term to reflect the current situation and some actions have been delayed.

1.3.   Given the changing nature of the public sector environment resulting from COVID 19 key dates will be reviewed further and a revised action plan submitted to the committee once the response phase has concluded.

1.4.   Members are also asked to consider and note the full update as set out within appendix 1.

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BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN UPDATE

2.0   INTRODUCTION

2.1   The purpose of this report is to provide members an update on the Best Value Improvement Action Plan which emerged from the Accounts Commission findings on the Controller of Audits Statutory Report on the Council.

3.0   RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1   The Audit and Scrutiny Committee consider and note the update against the themes of the Best Value Improvement Action Plan.

3.2   Member are also asked to consider and note the full update as set out within appendix 1.

4.0   DETAIL

4.1   In September 2020, the Audit and Scrutiny Committee considered the findings report and recommendations from the Accounts Commission Findings on the Controller of Audit Scotland's Statutory Report on the Council. The Committee also noted the action plan that was agreed by the Council in June 2020 and this report provides an update on those actions.

4.2   As with the rest of the UK, the Council and partners remain in 'response' mode to the COVID 19 pandemic, nonetheless, the Council has made good progress against all the themes as described below.

4.3   Theme 1; Develop the transformation agenda, supported by an affordable and achievable medium to longer term financial strategy. The original intention was for this work to focus on a three year service redesign programme, however the need to direct resource to focus on the COVID-19 response meant this was not possible in 2020 and greater focus was put on savings that could be delivered in 2021/22. The longer term view will be revisited once the required resource commitment to respond to COVID-19 has eased and there is greater capacity to think longer term.

4.4   As agreed at the Council's Business Continuity Committee Meeting 13 August 2020, the approach was revised to bringing forward proposals to balance the budget in 2021/22 split into the following three areas;

   i.   Review of non-controllable budgets.
   ii.   More detailed reviews on a themed basis for budgets that are classified as controllable (see Theme 3).
   iii. Identification of 2% efficiencies across all service areas.

4.5   A revised medium to longer term financial strategy has been reviewed by the Council's Strategic Management Team and will be presented to members at the Policy and Resources Committee meeting in May 2021 alongside the emerging Capital Investment Strategy.

4.6   Theme 2; Improve performance management reporting to provide a balanced picture of long term trends in performance against targets. The Council's Strategic Management Team agreed the Project Initiation Document in September 2020 and a project team was established with support from an external expert. Introductory workshops have been held with Chief Officers and Senior Officers and Members and the project entered a new phase of engagement with employees in February to commence the development of performance indicators. The development of new systems and performance reporting will commence at a later stage in the project.

4.7   Theme 3; Increase the pace of transformational change to deliver the business outcomes. Much of this activity has been put on hold due to the pandemic with exception to thematic areas of activity. As agreed at the Business Continuity Committee in August, the following themes were agreed with scrutiny provided by a cross party Budget Working Group;

   i.   Amenity Services Review
   ii.   Digital by Default
   iii. Fleet Review
   iv.   HROD Prioritisation Review
   v.   Property Review

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vi.   School and Public Transport

vii.   Economic Development Prioritisation Review

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4.8   Regarding the implementation programme of modernising education services, proposals were discussed with senior leadership June 2020 and an update on the programme was submitted to SMT in December 2020. Reports on the workstreams will be completed from March 2021 onwards. A Members Seminar was held 02 February 2021 on online learning.

4.9   Roads and Infrastructure Services are progressing number of initiatives including route optimisation and artificial intelligence with more of an E-Systems approach for asset management of the road network.

4.10   The council moved rapidly to enable staff to work entirely online from the first lockdown in March 2020. All systems and telephony were up and running seamlessly and the agile working approach embedded over the years was an enormously important factor in this. The council moved rapidly from several hundred remote users to over 1200. The council was also material to supporting Scottish Government in the Connecting Scotland programme to deploy devices to households. The Customer Service Centre was rapidly adapted and reconfigured to accommodate the Caring for People helpline, putting training in place for partners in the community sector to enable them to support the process. The website and service centre were also reconfigured to enable business and personal grant requests, processing and payments to ensure that Scottish Government funding reached those people who needed it most. The business of the council continued to be transacted through the use of Skype for Business for all Council meetings, which supported full democratic engagement, including the participation of press and public. MS Teams Live Events is now being tested for future use and the potential broadcast of meetings. The Council also moved forward with its Digital by Default budget theme, first phase, to reduce travel, subsistence, printing and postage by operating the majority of its business online.

4.11   Theme 4; Assess the extent to which regeneration and economic development initiatives are delivering the vision and corporate outcomes. Resources have been identified across various teams (Programme and Project Management Services, Economic Development, Strategic Finance and the Procurement and Commissioning Team) to take this forward and this work is delayed due to the focus on the response to the pandemic. Officers have adopted HM Treasury 'Green Book' Guidance and templates as the standard process for options appraisal and benefits monitoring framework for major projects including the Rural Growth Deal.

4.12 Theme 5; Work with communities and community groups to improve engagement. The Covid pandemic has highlighted the commitment shown by the council to engage with and support communities with a wide range of support, focussed through the existing Customer Service Centre and working very closely with community planning colleagues and community groups and representatives. The Council is building on this experience to improve engagement overall and build skills. The budget consultation this year, for example, comprised a number of different engagement processes with communities and the public, enabling more targeted and service specific feedback on budget proposals than in the previous year.

4.13 The Asset Transfer Group assessed the options for making changes to and simplifying the process for communities whilst acknowledging our legal responsibilities. The Group have identified the potential to offer a non-statutory process allowing communities to progress their proposals directly with council officers, while retaining the option, and gaining and understanding of how to use the statutory process.

4.14 The Group are looking at ways to further promote this simpler and more streamlined method of progressing community interests in transfers, leases and licences of council assets. Once fully developed proposals will be reported to elected members and monitored through the Asset Transfer Group. The annual overview of asset transfer requests was reported to Policy and Resources Committee 15.10.20

4.15 Theme 6; Work with elected members to improve the uptake of training provided. A training and development framework has been developed for issue to members. The programme for Members seminars has been adapted to incorporate webinars.   Remote sessions has seen an increase in attendance levels to 64% (up from 53%).

4.16 Theme 7; Improve engagement to ensure staff are bought into the Council's vision. The Council has put in place measures to increase the amount of information available to employees to support them and inform them throughout Covid. More information is available through the website rather than on the Hub only. More support and guidance is available to managers on the importance of carrying out regular engagement with their teams to improve team engagement and build strong relations. Support and engagement on wellbeing has been a focus of attention to demonstrate the Council's 'Caring' values and has been an essential part of the Covid response. Employee engagement activity will be further developed in 2021.

5.0 CONCLUSION

5.1 Despite the Council remaining in 'response mode' to the COVID 19 pandemic as is the wider public sector, progress has been made across all the themes. When the Council is formally in 'recovery' mode and business has reached a sense of normality, key dates will be reviewed and a revised action plan submitted for the consideration of this committee.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Policy; none.

6.2 Financial; none.

6.3 Legal; the Council requires to comply with the statutory requirements.

6.4 HR; none

6.5 Fairer Scotland Duty: none

6.5.1 Equalities - protected characteristics; none

6.5.2 Socio-economic Duty; none

6.5.3 Islands; none

6.6. Risk; failure to comply with the requirements could result in action by the Accounts Commission.

6.7 Customer Service; none.

Pippa Milne

Chief Executive

19 February 2021

APPENDICES

Appendix 1; Best Value Improvement Action Plan