

BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN UPDATE

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to provide members a further 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 and an update was provided to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee 16 March 2021. Audit Scotland's 2020/21 Annual Audit Report (December 2021) concludes that the Council has made good progress in addressing the recommendations and performance management arrangements remained effective during the COVID 19 pandemic.
- 1.3. The action plan has been reviewed to ensure key dates are appropriate to ensure pace and momentum into the work to address the recommendations that have been delayed due to the COVID 19 pandemic.
- 1.4. Members are asked to note the full update as set out within appendix 1.

BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN UPDATE

2.0 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to provide members a further 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 notes below an update against the themes of the Best Value Improvement Action Plan.
- 3.2 Member are also asked to 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 a second update on the plan.
- 4.2 As with the rest of the UK, the Council and partners remains in 'response' mode to the COVID 19 pandemic, nonetheless, as noted by Audit Scotland (December 2021), the Council has made good progress against the plan and a summary of themes can be found below.

- 4.3 Theme 1; Develop the transformation agenda, supported by an affordable and achievable medium to longer term financial strategy.
- 4.4 There is a commitment on the part of the Council to move toward developing multiyear savings proposals to facilitate longer term planning and this continues to be difficult where there is uncertainty over future years funding due to single year settlements.
- 4.5 The 2021/22 budget approach identified specific themes which officers led to identify savings options and this laid the foundations for future year savings. The thematic approach to budget setting was agreed for a second consecutive year and a timetable to progress this was agreed by the Council in June 2021. The themes are;
- Digital by Default – through greater digital working.
 - Amenity Services – through service transformation.
 - Fleet – through managing the Council's property portfolio
 - Transportation – through progressing the action plan
 - Modernising Education – through transforming the delivery of education
 - Energy – through reducing the Council's utility costs
- 4.6 A cross party Budget Working Group (BWG) with trade union representation was again established to assist in the savings identification process by providing a degree of scrutiny and make recommendations to either the Council or Policy and Resources Committee. The Policy and Resources Committee agreed recommendations by the BWG on 09 December 2021.
- 4.7 A revised Medium to Long Term Financial Strategy 2021-22 to 2030-31 was endorsed by the Policy and Resources Committee in August 2021. An update on the emerging Capital Investment Strategy was considered by the Policy and Resources Committee in October 2021 and agreed the high level principles of the emerging plan and note the final strategy will be submitted to the new Council in 2022.
- 4.8 Theme 2; Improve performance management reporting to provide a balanced picture of long term trends in performance against targets.
- 4.9 A review of the Council's performance management arrangements was completed and recommendations agreed by the Council September 2021 to simplify our existing performance framework and empower members to scrutinise performance, shape policy and improve outcomes through;

- A suite of Corporate Outcome Indicators reported to Strategic Committees.
- Pilot a more immersive method of assessment of performance via inquiries by Strategic Committees.
- Members review and consider priorities within the Local Government Benchmarking Framework.

- 4.10 The changes were developed after extensive engagement with all senior officers and Members. Regarding a new system, a procurement exercise was undertaken with no satisfactory outcome with regards to price. Further to positive learning from Aberdeen City Council's approach to building a 'self-serving' performance system, the Council's Executive Leadership Team agreed January 2022 in principle to the development of an in-house system using Microsoft 365 technology as part of a new and wider data initiative as set out in para 4.13 below.
- 4.11 The end date for the development of a new system has been revised to March 2023. The recommendations agreed by the Council as listed above will go ahead as planned with effect from the new financial year using our existing system until a new system is developed. This interim arrangement is considered acceptable, improved best value and will lead to a better outcome for the Council.
- 4.12 Theme 3; Increase the pace of transformational change to deliver the business outcomes. Much of this activity is reported under theme 1 with exception to the following actions.
- 4.13 Action BV3.3 within the action plan sets out an action to develop data analytics/business intelligence as a tool to inform transformation and improvement. This work was initially delayed due to the COVID 19 pandemic. In November 2021, the Executive Leadership Team learned from Aberdeen City Council on their journey to become empowered to make better decisions with data every day to improve outcomes for communities and stakeholders. This is a highly ambitious initiative to explore centralising some data from across various systems into a single 'data platform' using self-service tools. A 'data platform' is a standard generic name for the integrated set of technologies that collectively creates the data in an accessible format (i.e. dashboards).
- 4.14 The Council's Executive Leadership Team agreed January 2022 to request from ICT business case information to consider options for the development of our own in-house system using Microsoft 365 technology. The Executive

Leadership Team also agreed to create an internal Data Advisory Group consisting of senior officers from across the organisation, the group will facilitate a corporate approach to harnessing our data to improve an evidence led approach to performance management, service design, budgets, policy development, strategies and other decisions that impacts on outcomes for our communities and stakeholders. The Head of Customer Support Services is the Senior Responsible Officer and will Chair the Data Advisory Group.

- 4.15 Regarding the implementation programme for modernising education services, a report on key findings of all 10 workstreams was considered by the Community Services Committee in June 2021 where it was agreed to;
- Progress with a programme of engagement with communities, staff, representative bodies and wider stakeholders on the school leadership model.
 - Bring a further report to the Committee in 2022.
- 4.16 Regarding the first bullet point above, an 'Empowering our Educators' community engagement and consultation exercise commenced November 21 running through to March 2022 to discuss and co-develop proposals.
- 4.17 The Council is on track to reduce the number of ICT applications in use by 10% by March 2023 with the implementation of MS 365 contributing to the reduction of standalone applications.
- 4.18 With regards to making full use of improved technology to transform service delivery and reduce burden on front line services, a number of related activities have been running in parallel. The Council's Heads of Services and Executive Leadership Team participated in related development sessions as follows;
- 4.18.1 Visioning for a Modern Council with the Chief Digital Officer of the Scottish Local Government Digital Office involving Heads of Service and the Executive Leadership Team to explore what a digital council can look like. Exploring new ways of working, the session looked at current best practice and emerging technology of tomorrow with regards to assets, citizens and employees.
- 4.18.2 Cyber Resilience with the Scottish Government's National Cyber Resilience Unit and the Scottish Local Government Digital Office. This session provided an overview of the evolution and threats from cyber-attacks whilst understanding what is required to prevent, mitigate and deal with attacks. The session is being followed up with a cyber-resilience exercise involving

Heads of Service and the Executive Leadership Team in March to assess the Councils preparation and identify areas for improvement.

- 4.19 The Executive Leadership Team is planning for Service Redesign during the period of the next Council and the Heads of Service and the Executive Leadership Team participated in an introductory session to the Scottish Approach to Service Design. Promoted by the Scottish Government, this approach aims to empower citizens to participate in the design of public services with an emphasis on the Council designing services with people instead of for people using an insights driven approach. Bespoke training has now been rolled out to targeted staff to support them when the time comes to redesign their service.
- 4.20 Another ambitious initiative is 'Our Modern Workspace' which is a corporate approach to review and rationalise our office requirements fit for a modern workspace in a post COVID hybrid working model. This emerged from a Council decision in February 2021 to deliver more than £400,000 by 2024 by reducing the number of operational offices and the associated costs from utilities, maintenance, cleaning, NDR and insurance. The benefits of this initiative are as follows;
- Reduced footprint of assets
 - Increased agile working for employees including home working
 - Modern 'hub office' environments with 'flexible desk' arrangements for hybrid working.
 - Digital First approach using technology for remote working and online collaboration.
 - Repurposing of surplus assets for alternative economic or community benefit.
 - Cash saving.
- 4.21 After the successful completion of engagement of employees and a review of our 6 main towns, the project will take forward the programme in phases over a 3 year period.
- 4.22 Theme 4; Assess the extent to which regeneration and economic development initiatives are delivering the vision and corporate outcomes.
- 4.23 For the review, appraisal and monitoring of regeneration and economic initiatives, the Council now has in place adoption of best practice as set out by the UK Government (i.e. Her Majesty's Treasury Green Book Guidance).
- 4.24 The Council's Executive Leadership Team reviewed the corporate approach to managing the Council's capital and regeneration projects and agreed to trial

a temporary post for a programme manager to work with project managers to lead on the development, coordination and delivery of a portfolio of projects which reflects the vision, values and strategic objectives of the Council and that contributes to the financial sustainability of the organisation. The post will be advertised internally to secure an existing employee on secondment. The post holder will report directly to the Executive Leadership Team.

- 4.25 Part of the justification for this temporary role is to support the Council during a period of unprecedented activity in relation to the availability of funding for economic interventions and regeneration. In addition to the £75m Rural Growth Deal which is well established, the Council will in 2022 bid for the UK Government's 'Levelling Up Fund' for a series of ambitious infrastructure projects. If successful, this will generate further significant activity in relation to full business case developments for individual components, procurement, implementation, monitoring and benefits assessments.
- 4.26 Theme 5; Work with communities and community groups to improve engagement.
- 4.27 Actions in relation to measuring satisfaction with communities (BV5.1 and 5.2) have commenced and are on track to be completed by the amended timescale off June 2022. As part of the performance excellence project, the project team is working with the Customer Engagement and Transformation Manager to develop a new corporate customer satisfaction survey.
- 4.28 An action to gather information from communities on what we are doing well is completed and is available on line [here](#). Nearly 1,000 responses were received and the report sets out in detail the feedback received which resulted in 18 actions being identified to further improve satisfaction with customer service.
- 4.29 On identifying priorities for better future engagement, The Executive Leadership Team (ELT) directed a review and agreed in January 2022 a new Community Engagement Guidance document that will be rolled out to employees. The ELT also agreed to establish a working group to further evolve the guidance into a clear framework to provide greater guidance, flowchart and tools for services to engage the community.
- 4.30 The Asset Transfer Group **put** in place a new process allowing communities to progress their proposal directly with officers whilst retaining the option to use the statutory process. A programme for training community groups including use of toolkits and practical experience for working with the Council was delivered by the Council's Community Development Team.

- 4.31 Theme 6; Work with elected members to improve the uptake of training provided; all actions are completed as follows.
- 4.32 A training and development framework was developed for Members and the programme for Members seminars has been adapted to incorporate webinars. This framework now records participation of Members CPD. Remote sessions has seen an increase in attendance levels to 64% (up from 53%) and PDP has been offered to all Members and information on online learning including masterclasses made available.
- 4.33 Theme 7; Improve engagement to ensure staff are bought into the Council's vision.
- 4.34 Employee communication was adapted in response to the COVID 19 pandemic with weekly communications from the Chief Executive, the introduction of podcasts and Wellbeing Wednesday resources all of which have been maintained. The new 'MyCouncilWorks' website providing unrestricted access for all employees to news, information, change and other useful information was highlighted as notable by Audit Scotland in its Annual Audit Report.
- 4.35 Progress; of the 36 actions set out within the improvement plan, 22 are marked as completed. Officers will bring back a further report in 12 months' time to provide an update on the remaining 14 actions that are ongoing.

5.0 CONCLUSION

- 5.1 Progress has been made across all the themes with many now substantially complete; further details can be viewed in appendix 1. Audit Scotland's 2020/21 Annual Audit Report (December 2021) concludes that the Council has made good progress in addressing the recommendations and performance management arrangements remained effective during the COVID 19 pandemic. Officers will return with a report in 12 months' time to provide an update on the remaining actions.

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. Climate Change; none.

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

6.7 Customer Service; none.

Pippa Milne

Chief Executive

22 February 2022

APPENDICES

Appendix 1; Best Value Improvement Action Plan v3