

Report

Report to:	Performance and Review Scrutiny Forum
Date of Meeting:	8 December 2020
Report by:	Executive Director (Finance and Corporate Resources)

Subject:	Dundee City Council and Aberdeenshire Council Best Value Assurance Reports (BVAR) Published by the Accounts Commission
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1. Purpose of Report

1.1. The purpose of the report is to:-

- ♦ provide an overview of the recent Best Value Assurance Reports (BVAR) reports published by the Accounts Commission

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1. The Forum is asked to approve the following recommendation(s):-

- (1) that the contents of the report be noted.

3. Background

- 3.1. South Lanarkshire Council was audited by Audit Scotland in October and November 2018, with the final report being published by the Accounts Commission on 28 March 2019.
- 3.2. South Lanarkshire Council considered the BVAR at its meeting on 26 June 2019. An action plan was presented to Council for approval, addressing each of the BVAR recommendations.
- 3.3. On 19 September 2019, the Forum agreed to consider summaries of BVAR reports as they are published by the Accounts Commission, in order to place the South Lanarkshire audit in context and keep members informed about noteworthy Best Value developments elsewhere.
- 3.4. This report summarises the key themes and recommendations from BVARs published since the last meeting of the Performance and Review Scrutiny Forum, namely:-
- ♦ Dundee City Council (published 29 September 2020)
 - ♦ Aberdeenshire Council (published 22 October 2020)

4. Summary of Key Messages and Recommendations

4.1. The key messages for Dundee City Council are:-

- ◆ The Council has demonstrated a steady pace of improvement since the last Best Value audit in 2010. The Council and its partners have a clear and ambitious vision for Dundee, with the City Plan and the Council Plan showing how they aim to improve life in the city. They understand that the key to this is addressing Dundee's high levels of poverty and inequality
- ◆ the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive provide effective leadership, and officers and councillors work well together. The Dundee Partnership has been successful in regenerating and reinvigorating the city centre through projects such as the Dundee Waterfront development, including the V&A Museum of Design Dundee and the new Dundee Railway Station. Progress is also being made in regenerating the wider city through projects such as the new Regional Performance Centre for Sport and the Michelin-Scotland Innovation Parc joint venture
- ◆ Council services are improving, and at a greater rate than its family group of peers. However, the Council recognises the pace of improvement needs to accelerate if some priorities are to be delivered, particularly its aspiration to reduce poverty and inequality
- ◆ the Council demonstrates a clear focus on continuous improvement across its activities. It uses self-assessment effectively to identify strengths and weaknesses and where improvement is required. However, regular performance reports for councillors, which include current performance data on all services, are still being developed
- ◆ the Council has innovative ideas and there is a large volume of improvement activity taking place. The Council needs to ensure that it has the capacity and skills to deliver its aspirations, and its improvements may need to be prioritised. Workforce plans need to be progressed for all services to help demonstrate this
- ◆ in 2019 the Dundee Drugs Commission made recommendations for a new approach to services which aim to reduce drug use and deaths, a significant longstanding challenge in the city
- ◆ financial management is effective with budgets focused on the Council's priorities. The Council has made good progress in financial planning with the approval of a long-term financial strategy in 2019
- ◆ delivery of the Council's Changing for the Future transformational change programme (C2022) will be critical to delivering future financial plans. A cumulative funding gap, prior to the COVID-19 impact, of £32 million is projected by the end of 2022/2023 with a longer-term funding gap of £78 million by 2029/2030.
- ◆ the Dundee Partnership has embraced the requirements of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. Eight Local Community Planning Partnerships deliver local projects to communities. Citizens' views informed how £1.2 million was spent on local projects in 2018/2019
- ◆ the Council's self-evaluation against Best Value characteristics, demonstrates a mature organisation that honestly appraises its own strengths and weaknesses and identifies where improvement is required

4.2 The key messages for Aberdeenshire Council are:-

- ◆ since the last Best Value report in 2013, the pace of change has been slow in some key aspects of best value. In particular, the Council has not used performance and benchmarking data effectively and its approach to self-evaluation has been inconsistent. Despite this, the Council's monthly reputation tracker regularly shows high public satisfaction with most services. Decisive political and managerial leadership is needed to increase the pace, depth and continuity of improvement needed to demonstrate best value

- ◆ there are positive working relationships between officers and members and political decision-making is consensual. Council priorities are, however, vague and not sufficiently focused, and the Council has been slow to develop a performance framework. The Council reviewed its scheme of governance and implemented new scrutiny arrangements. After a slow start, scrutiny has improved but more challenge is required from elected members to drive improvement.
- ◆ over the past five years, there has been some improvement in the Council's performance against national benchmarking indicators. The Council performs above the Scottish average for pupils gaining five or more awards at Level 5, but educational attainment is poor for more disadvantaged pupils. Management of void housing is also an area of poor performance
- ◆ a more strategic approach to workforce planning is required to assist the Council in addressing the challenges it faces including an ageing workforce and supply shortages in areas such as teaching and social care. Although the pace of improvement has recently increased with the development of a workforce strategy, this is high level and lacks detail on how the Council plans to develop a workforce capable of meeting existing and changing demands
- ◆ area working is fundamental to the way the Council operates and it is embedded within its culture. Six area committees run alongside the four policy committees providing a vital connection with local communities, community planning groups and the community asset transfer process
- ◆ the Council regularly engages with communities on a range of significant matters, but there is less evidence to demonstrate the active involvement of communities in decision-making. There is a complicated landscape of local-level plans with inconsistent timescales for delivery. This makes it difficult for the Community Planning Partnership to demonstrate whether outcomes for local communities are improving
- ◆ partnership working is a strength at the Council. It works well with partners on the Regional Economic Group, City Region Deal, and Health and Social Care Partnership. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, partners promptly established the Grampian Coronavirus Assistance Hub which effectively coordinated the volunteer response to support the vulnerable in the community
- ◆ the Council has had a relatively stable financial position but the rising cumulative funding gap has been exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic. Stronger leadership is required from elected members to establish fewer, clearer priorities, focus on what is most important and increase its pace in delivering more ambitious outcomes for its communities

4.3 The recommendations for Dundee City Council are that:-

- ◆ consideration should be given to extending the support provided, to non-elected committee members
- ◆ regular performance reports need to be presented to members which include performance data for the current year, covering all services
- ◆ workforce plans need to be developed for all services to demonstrate that staff have the capacity and skills to deliver the council's priorities
- ◆ a strategic asset management plan, is to be developed, aligned to the financial and strategic service delivery plans
- ◆ a standardised business case template should be developed and completed for all capital projects including detailed options appraisal, whole life costing, and consideration of funding implications
- ◆ the Dundee Partnership needs to set out how it will measure the impact of its action plan to reduce inequality and poverty

- ◆ communication to citizens on the rationale for policy decisions should be reviewed
- ◆ prioritisation of improvement plans should be considered to focus on actions that will deliver the greatest impact for service users

4.4 The recommendations for Aberdeenshire Council are that the Council should take decisive action to establish a consistent approach to continuous improvement across all its services and drive positive change for its communities by:-

- ◆ reviewing its priorities and outcomes and including SMART measures and targets so that progress can be clearly demonstrated
- ◆ improving its approach to performance management by streamlining existing practices across services and supporting a culture of continuous improvement, including the use of benchmarking targets and family grouping data to provide elected members with a more rounded picture of the council's relative performance across services
- ◆ implementing an effective council-wide approach to self-evaluation including robust arrangements for monitoring agreed actions
- ◆ reviewing the scrutiny arrangements to ensure there is sufficient public scrutiny and that it effectively supports continuous improvement
- ◆ improving the performance of key services including educational attainment and housing relets
- ◆ continuing to develop its corporate approach to workforce planning by setting out the numbers and skills of staff required in the medium and longer term and concluding service-level plans by March 2021 as intended
- ◆ developing SMART criteria to assess the impact working in partnership has on improving outcomes, and consider whether the wide array of local plans is deliverable and demonstrates the best use of resources
- ◆ concluding the remaining locality plans as soon as possible
- ◆ continuing to develop area performance reporting that is timely and relevant at that level

5. Next Steps and Recommendations

5.1. All BVAR reports and recommendations are available on the Audit Scotland website.

5.2. Further reports will be brought to the Forum as these BVARs are published, to keep Members informed on Best Value themes, topics and developments elsewhere in Scotland.

6. Employee Implications

6.1. There are no employee implications.

7. Financial Implications

7.1. There are no financial implications.

8. Climate Change, Sustainability and Environmental Implications

8.1. There are no implications for climate change, sustainability or the environment in terms of the information contained in this report.

9. Other Implications

9.1. There are no risk implications as a result of this report.

10. Equality Impact Assessment and Consultation Arrangements

- 10.1. This report does not introduce a new policy, function or strategy or recommend a change to an existing policy, function or strategy and, therefore, no impact assessment is required.
- 10.2. There was no requirement to undertake any consultation in terms of the information contained in the report.

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Executive Director (Finance and Corporate Resources)

4 November 2020

Link(s) to Council Values/Ambitions/Objectives

- ◆ Achieve results through leadership, good governance and organisational effectiveness

Previous References

- ◆ None

List of Background Papers

- ◆ Dundee City Council BVAR published by the Accounts Commission on 29 September 2020
- ◆ Aberdeenshire Council BVAR published by the Accounts Commission on 22 October 2020

Contact for Further Information

If you would like to inspect the background papers or want further information, please contact:-

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