

REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL – 13 JANUARY 2022

BEST VALUE ASSURANCE REPORT FOLLOW UP – PROGRESS WITH RECOMMENDATIONS – ACTION PLAN 2022/23

1 Executive Summary/Recommendations

1.1 Full Council is requested to note the 2020/21 Best Value Assurance Report Follow up – Progress with recommendations and approve the Best Value Action Plan 2022.

1.2 Recommendations

Full Council is recommended to:

- 1.2.1 Consider the 2020/21 Best Value Assurance Report Follow up – Progress with recommendations (attached to this report as Appendix 1);
- 1.2.2 Agree the Best Value action plan 2022; and
- 1.2.3 Agree that progress in terms of implementing the action plan will be reported to Full Council on a six-monthly basis, along with an update on ongoing best value activity.

2 Decision Making Route

- 2.1 On 22 October 2020 the Accounts Commission published the Best Value Assurance Report (the 2020 Report) for Aberdeenshire Council. The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 introduced a statutory framework for Best Value for local authorities. The Best Value duties set out in the Act are:
- To make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in performance (while maintaining an appropriate balance between quality and cost); and, in making those arrangements and securing that balance, to have regard to economy, efficiency, effectiveness, the equal opportunities requirement and to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development
 - To achieve break-even trading accounts, subject to mandatory disclosure
 - To observe proper accounting practices
 - To make arrangements for the reporting to the public of the outcome of the performance of functions
- 2.2 Audit Scotland revised the methodology used for auditing best value in 2015. This report provides an overview of the Account's Commissions key findings on the Council's compliance with the Best Value duty, as well as the scope and

process of the audit. Appendix 1 is the Best Value Assurance Report (BVAR) on Aberdeenshire Council which was considered by the Accounts Commission at its meeting held on 8 October 2020.

- 2.3 At its meeting on 19 November 2020, Full Council agreed the Best Value Action Plan. Progress on the action plan has been reported six-monthly on [29 April 2021](#) and [18 November 2021](#).

3 Discussion

- 3.1 The Best Value Assurance Report Follow Up (the “Follow Up Report”) was considered by Audit Committee at its meeting on [4 November 2021](#).
- 3.2 The Follow Up Report notes the significant progress made by the Council in responding to the recommendations in the 2020 Report and remarks on the solid foundation that this work provides. However, Audit Scotland cautions that it is important that momentum is not lost and that the new Council in May 2022 continues to build on these foundations and embed what has been achieved.
- 3.3 The Action Plan below has been developed with Services and builds on the recommendations and actions completed to date to wholly embed the improvements achieved and focuses on delivering priorities and improving services with a particular focus on the refinement of directorate and area plans, performance reporting and workforce planning.

Ref	Audit Scotland recommendation	What we will do	Start date	Who owns this?	Who is leading this?
BVF1	Refine and embed new arrangements to demonstrate and support a culture of continuous improvement	Implement the Continuous Improvement framework in the Performance Management Framework to ensure regular reporting of improvement measures in Directorate and Area Plans	March 2022	Chief Executive	Directors
BVF2	Formal reporting of agreed performance measures to commence and continue	Implement the corporate reporting schedule in the Performance Management Framework to ensure regular reporting of performance measures in Directorate and Area Plans	February 2022	Chief Executive	Directors Area Managers
BVF3	Implement new self-evaluation arrangements	A two-year corporate programme of self-evaluation will be developed and agreed	December 2021	Chief Executive	Directors Heads of Service Area Managers
BVF4	Implement new scrutiny arrangements	Promote awareness of the new scrutiny arrangements amongst Elected Members	April 2022	Chief Executive	Directors

Ref	Audit Scotland recommendation	What we will do	Start date	Who owns this?	Who is leading this?
		and officers through training, guidance and support and develop and agree scrutiny programmes with all Area and Policy Committees			Area Managers
BV5	Further development of medium- and longer-term workforce planning	<p>Continue to develop data driven workforce analysis and decision making. Services and HR working together to embed the culture of effective workforce planning.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Continue development of the Workforce Planning Power BI: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1 Phase 1 (FTE, absence, age profile, gender, turnover, absence reason) 1.2 Phase 2 (Diversity profile, recruitment) 1.3 Phase 3 (TBC) 2. Continue to develop regular WFP action plan reporting through Directorate plans and Pentana to Service and audit committees and Strategic Change Board and Trade Unions 	<p>Complete</p> <p>Summer 2022</p> <p>Spring 2023</p> <p>March 2022</p>		<p>Head of Legal & People</p> <p>All Heads of Service and Area Managers</p>

3.4 Corporate improvement actions are developed in response to specific identified requirements for example, through self-evaluation. The Action Plan sets out the Council response to the specific recommendations of Audit Scotland in the Follow Up Report. The resulting activity and improvements will come through assurance to communities and delivery on the ground; improvements and outcomes will be monitored and reported through Directorate and Area Plans.

4 Council Priorities, Implications and Risk

4.1 This report helps deliver all six of the Council's Strategic Priorities

Pillar	Priority
<i>Our People</i>	<i>Education</i> <i>Health & Wellbeing</i>
<i>Our Environment</i>	<i>Infrastructure</i> <i>Resilient Communities</i>
<i>Our Economy</i>	<i>Economy & Enterprise</i> <i>Estate Modernisation</i>

Underpinning the Priorities are a number of key principles. They are: right people, right places, right time; responsible finances; climate and sustainability; Community Planning Partnership Local Outcome Improvement Plans; human rights and public protection; tackling poverty and inequalities; digital infrastructure and economy.

This report helps deliver all the Council Priorities.

- 4.2 The table below shows whether risks and implications apply if the recommendations are agreed.

Subject	Yes	No	N/A
Financial		x	
Staffing		x	
Equalities and Fairer Duty Scotland			x
Children and Young People's Rights and Wellbeing			x
Climate Change and Sustainability			x
Health and Wellbeing			x
Town Centre First			x

- 4.3 There are no financial or staffing implications as a result of this report.
- 4.4 The screening section as part of Stage One of the Integrated Impact Assessment has not identified the requirement for any further detailed assessments to be undertaken because the report is to present the Best Value Assurance Report Follow Up to Full Council and there will be no differential impact as a result of the report on people with protected characteristics.
- 4.5 The following [Corporate Risks](#) have been identified as relevant to this matter:
- ACORP001 – budget pressures
 - ACORP002 – changes in government policy, legislation and regulation (including Education reforms and potential impact on integration of children' services; Brexit)

- ACORP004 – business and organisation change (including ensuring governance structures support change; managing the pace of change)
- ACORP006 – reputation management including social media
- ACORP007 – social risk (e.g. population changes, poverty and social inequality, demographic changes, crime and anti-social behaviour)

5 Scheme of Governance

- 5.1 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report and had no comments to make and are satisfied that the report complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation.
- 5.2 The Council is able to consider and take a decision on this item in terms of the general provisions conferred by the [List of Committee Powers in Part 2A](#) of the Scheme of Governance as it relates to the endorsement and approval of corporate plans which are not delegated to any of the Council's appointed Committees. Where substantive decisions are required in terms of the action plan these will be reported to the relevant Committee, or to Full Council where appropriate.

Ritchie Johnson, Director of Business Services

Report prepared by Fiona McCallum, Business Strategy Manager
Date 15 December 2021

List of Appendices –

Appendix 1: Aberdeenshire Council 2020/21 Best Value Assurance Report Follow Up
– Progress with Recommendations

Aberdeenshire Council

2020/21 Best Value Assurance Report Follow Up – Progress with recommendations



Prepared by Audit Scotland
November 2021

Contents

Key messages	3
Introduction	4
Priorities and outcomes	6
Performance management	10
Service improvement and transformation	12
Appendix 1	15

Key messages

- Significant work has been undertaken by the council in responding to recommendations made in the 2020 Best Value Assurance Report. The work undertaken to date provides a good foundation to go forward but it is important the momentum is not lost. The new arrangements need to be refined and embedded to enable a culture of continuous improvement to be demonstrated and supported.
- The council approved and set out a clearer intention of its priorities. While performance measures have been identified, there has been limited formal reporting of progress against priorities during the year. This needs to be promptly addressed to assist elected members in demonstrating progress. Plans to implement the recently agreed changes to the council's scrutiny and self-evaluation arrangements need to be swiftly progressed if the impact of the changes is to be assessed prior to the local government election in May 2022.
- The overall pace of change has been slower than intended by the council. On average, several actions are around three months later than planned. Undoubtedly, capacity has been a contributing factor for the delay with many staff continuing to be redeployed as a result of the pandemic.
- Delivery of the council's priorities involves services and areas working together with partners and communities. How these priorities will be achieved has been explained in a suite of directorate and area plans. The combined set of plans provides a reasonable framework to support improvement. A focus needs to be maintained however, on ensuring actions are SMART, are realistic rather than aspirational and that improvement actions are informed by forthcoming public scrutiny discussion of performance against priorities.
- The connections being refreshed between the council's senior leadership team, strategic change board, service transformation boards and collaboration board are encouraging in the development of a continuous improvement culture. This should provide a clearer structure to support elected members in the delivery of council priorities and their engagement in scrutiny and improvement activity.
- There has been a focus by elected members and officers on monitoring the progress of the corporate improvement plan. Now that a range of actions are nearing completion, the next steps need to be considered. There is more to do, directorate and area improvement plans need to be further developed, the pace of performance reporting needs to increase and workforce planning needs to consider the medium and longer term.
- Looking ahead to the election in May 2022, it is important that the new council builds on the foundations which are currently being put in place. While there may be some reprioritising of council aims, the time already invested in developing the underlying governance processes should not be lost. The council needs to embed what has been achieved, and focus on delivering priorities and improving services.

Introduction

Best Value Assurance Report

1. Aberdeenshire Council's Best Value Assurance Report (BVAR) was published by the Accounts Commission in October 2020. The Commission's findings highlighted that *'Aberdeenshire is an area that enjoys relatively good outcomes for its communities. Council services largely perform well with good customer satisfaction. While the council has foundations in place to improve, we are firmly of the view that it will only realise its full potential through increasing its pace of improvement by addressing some crucial aspects of Best Value in how it determines its priorities and plans desired outcomes'*.
2. The Commission encouraged the council to address the recommendations contained in the report and indicated that progress with these would be monitored through the annual audit process.

Council response to BVAR

3. Officers developed an Action Plan to address the recommendations contained in the BVAR and these were endorsed by the council in November 2020. The BVAR Action Plan has subsequently been incorporated into a wider corporate improvement plan. A timeline of the council's key actions in response to the BVAR is summarised in [Appendix 1](#).

Audit Approach

4. In considering the extent of follow up as part of the 2020/21 audit, we were guided by the level of intended progress set out in the council's corporate improvement plan but it was always our intention to split the audit work across two audit years.
5. With the passage of time, there was slippage in the council's delivery of the improvement plan. Alongside the impact of a second Covid19 lockdown, staff continued to be redeployed to support communities and in addition, the council assisted in the co-ordination of the vaccination programme. We also decided to delay our reporting on the 2020/21 audit by one committee cycle (approximately 6 weeks). [Exhibit 1](#) shows the recommendations with implementation dates and where these issues will be considered in the audit process.
6. In general, council related actions have been covered as part of the 2020/21 audit and those related to area and partnership working will feature as part of the 2021/22 audit. The key areas covered in this report are therefore council priorities and outcomes, performance management arrangements, self-evaluation and scrutiny.

Exhibit 1: BVAR recommendations, implementation dates and audit coverage

Recommendation	Planned implementation date (Nov 2020)	Actual/likely implementation date
Commentary included in this report		
Reviewing its priorities and outcomes and including SMART measures and targets so that progress can be easily demonstrated.	March 2021	May/June 2021
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.	April to November 2021	June 2021 Benchmarking due November 2021
Implementing an effective council-wide approach to self-evaluation including robust arrangements for monitoring agreed actions.	September 2021	New model approved September 2021
Reviewing the scrutiny arrangements to ensure that there is sufficient public scrutiny and that it effectively supports continuous improvement.	June 2021	September 2021
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.	September 2021	Directorate plans – May/June 2021 Dashboards – September 2021
Further commentary to be included in the 2020/21 annual audit report		
Concluding the remaining locality plans as soon as possible.	March 2021	June 2021
Planned coverage as part of the 2021/22 audit		
Improving the performance of key services including education attainment and housing relets.	March 2022	March 2022
Developing SMART criteria to measure 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.	April 2021	September 2021
Continuing to develop area performance reporting that is timely and relevant at that level.	April 2021	September 2021

Source: Audit Scotland

Priorities and outcomes

A revised Council Plan 2020-22 has been agreed

7. In recognition of the changed circumstances as a result of Covid-19, the council agreed to close down the Council Plan 2017-22 and associated priorities in July 2020 and develop new priorities for the council. A revised Council Plan 2020-22 was approved with almost unanimous cross-party support by the council in October 2020.

8. The plan is structured around three 'Pillars' and six 'Strategic Priorities' as shown in [Exhibit 2](#). Below the Strategic Priorities, the council has set 27 'Council Priorities' which are linked to one or more Strategic Priorities.

Exhibit 2 Council Plan 2020-22 - Pillars and Strategic Priorities



Source: Aberdeenshire Council

9. Underpinning the priorities are a number of key principles: right people, right places, right time; responsible finances; climate and sustainability; Community Planning Partnership Local Outcome Improvement Plans; human rights and public protection; tackling poverty and inequalities; digital infrastructure and economy.

10. The Council Plan has been informed by two significant pieces of research:

- Aberdeenshire Council 2020-21 Strategic Assessment
- a Community Impact Assessment (CIA) – this was undertaken in August 2020 to collect data from residents and groups in Aberdeenshire in relation to Scotland being in lockdown. A CIA is a routine element of the council's civil contingency arrangements, to be undertaken when a critical incident has occurred to better understand the community reaction and concerns, and therefore to assist in the decision making for next steps and recovery.

11. The Council Plan provides the strategic framework. The detailed actions to be undertaken to deliver the priorities are set out in directorate and area plans.

Directorate plans have been developed

12. Directorate plans have been developed to demonstrate how services will contribute to the delivery of the council's priorities. A standard template was provided which included a section on the strategic context explaining the link between the Council Plan and priorities, directorate plan and other plans impacting on services. Each plan also contains a comprehensive directorate profile, which may incorporate workforce plans (see further below).

13. A key element of the plans is the Directorate Improvement Action Plan 2021/22 which is intended to provide the link between the Council Priorities and the actions required to deliver the anticipated outcomes.

14. Significant work was undertaken to produce plans which were initially considered by policy committees in early 2021:

- Education & Children's Services (ECS) in January
- Business Services in February
- Infrastructure Services in March.

15. Good connections and explanations have been provided in directorate plans with council priorities and other plans. Also, there are effective links with resources e.g. workforce details and the medium term financial strategy. Reference has been made to area plans but with particular reference to Infrastructure Services, more could be said about community planning given its critical role in building and developing communities (tackling deprivation, equalities etc).

16. While detailed information was provided on existing services and challenges, more work was required to produce SMARTer improvement plans. Plans for ECS and Business Services were revised and approved in May and June 2021 respectively.

17. While revised plans are SMARTer, some outcomes require clarity e.g. 'improved multi agency working' (ECS), 'a more contemporary approach to the topic of income' (Business) or 'this action will contribute to improving the health and wellbeing of the people in Aberdeenshire' (Infrastructure). We also noted that plans currently include performance measures but not performance targets.

18. Service improvement plans can currently be a mix of actions, those where improvement in an area is clearly intended and others which appear to be business as normal activities ie timescale is given as 'ongoing' and there does not appear to be any specific planned improvement activity. It may be that improvement actions will be identified once performance measures are reported. There is perhaps a need to consider differently how a directorate demonstrates its contribution to council priorities where no improvement action is currently considered necessary.

19. Plans cover the period 2020-22 being the remaining period of the current council before the election in May 2022. In many cases, actions will not be complete at that stage. Where possible, it is important for communities that work to deliver improved outcomes continues from one council to the next. The time invested in establishing the new planning processes now need space to become embedded in order that the intended improvements can be delivered.

An approach to workforce planning has been developed but more work is required on medium and longer term issues

20. Directorates have the choice to prepare either standalone workforce plans or integrate these within existing directorate plans. In practice, all have opted to incorporate workforce planning within directorate plans. There are three elements – a narrative description of current and future service; workforce profile covering elements such as resourcing spend, turnover, absence, age, gender, etc; and the actions required.

21. Workforce plans included within directorate plans provide good detail on staff numbers and age profiles but lacked detail on future need. Similar themes, such as digital skills, wellbeing and succession planning have been considered across plans but more work is required to set out how these matters will be addressed. In general, the workforce sections provide a good 'position statement' and support the current (short term) directorate plan but more thinking is required on future challenges in the medium and longer term and the necessary steps which will be required to get there.

All six areas have agreed area plans

22. We intend to review the development of area plans as part of the 2021/22 audit. For now, we have noted that area plans were agreed by each of the six area committees in May 2021. Our initial review confirmed that actions are linked to specific wards and have an appropriate performance measure along with responsible officer and timeframe. Plans however appear to contain everything that is happening in the area, rather than concentrating on key actions. There is scope to focus more clearly on the priorities for the area.

The Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP) has been updated

23. The BVAR identified partnership working as a strength in Aberdeenshire. The council is an active contributor to the community planning partnership and enjoys good relationships with partners. Through our routine engagement with the council, we are aware of a range of recent rich activity in this area including:

- In June 2021, the structure and governance of the Aberdeenshire Alcohol and Drugs Partnership (ADO) was reviewed following the appointment of a new chair and in September 2021, the Community Planning Partnership (CPP) Board agreed to remove the drugs and alcohol priority from the LOIP, in recognition that the ADP is overseen by the IJB.
- A three year review of the LOIP undertaken in 2020 extended the previous priority definition of 'reducing child poverty' to a wider definition of 'reducing poverty' recognising the wider impact on families and

households. In addition, a new priority was added to the LOIP – health and wellbeing which covers healthy eating and mental health.

- Co-ordination hubs have been set up in Banff and Buchan and Buchan areas to bring together partners to develop, implement and monitor projects. A ‘North Collaborative Approach’ has been developed for the three towns for which locality plans have been prepared.
- A review of the structure and working approach of the CPP was undertaken and reported to the board in June 2021. This confirmed general support for the current structure but indicated a need to ‘sharpen up on the performance framework’ to demonstrate and acknowledge the impacts being made more clearly.
- A performance management framework was duly approved by the CPP Board in September 2021. Alongside Aberdeenshire’s LOIP 2020/21 Annual Report, the CPP published a summary report and ‘Performance at a Glance’ which includes a number of performance indicators and other performance information in graphical format. This covers the ‘Reducing Poverty’ and ‘Connected & Cohesive Communities’ priorities and acknowledges that performance information for ‘Health & Wellbeing’ is to be developed.

24. As part of the 2021/22 audit, we plan to review partnership working and determine the progress made in setting and communicating clearer outcomes for communities. Early indications are that the LOIP annual and summary reports provide a good sense of the work undertaken during the year and the impact on communities. We also noted that local community plans for all six local community planning groups have been extended and will now run to 2022.

The Banff and Macduff locality plan was agreed

25. The Aberdeenshire CPP identified three areas where a locality plan was required. Plans had already been produced in respect of Peterhead and Fraserburgh, but the third, in respect of Banff and Macduff, had still be produced at the date of the BVAR.

26. The Banff and Macduff Locality Plan was approved by the Community Planning Partnership Board in June 2021. The plan was developed with reference to the Strategic Needs Assessment, Place Standard Analysis and Community Impact Assessments.

27. Three key outcomes were identified and priorities and actions to support these have been developed. The plan provides a good sense of how the wider community and partner plans ‘fit’ into the locality plan. There is a separate action plan for each of the three outcomes which set out the relevant priorities, clear actions as to what is to be done and a description of how this will be achieved. What is lacking however, is a better understanding of how the impact of this work will be measured and success demonstrated.

28. We also noted that an updated locality action plan for Fraserburgh was published in July 2021. We intend to review these plans further and comment on the council’s contribution in our 2020/21 Annual Audit Report.

Performance management

A performance management framework has been developed but reporting against targets has not yet commenced

29. A performance management framework was approved by the council in June 2021. The framework was developed following consultation with the Improvement Service, the council's senior leadership team (SLT) and elected members and sets out a corporate approach to managing performance across the council.

30. We reviewed the framework and found that it covers monitoring of targets and indicators but does not extend to wider performance management activities such as scrutiny and self-evaluation. An 'Embedding Continuous Improvement Framework' was also agreed by SLT in June 2021.

31. As part of our review of directorate improvement plans earlier, we found that plans included an assessment of local government benchmarking data which highlighted areas of good and poor performance. There were no meaningful links however between the areas of poorer performance and the directorate improvement action plans. The council has not yet commenced its formal six monthly performance reporting to committees, this was due to commence in September but will now commence from November 2021. It may be the council's intention that once the performance measures identified in the directorate plans are compared against targets, actions will be agreed in respect of poorer performance. Directorate plans include performance measures but do not currently set out desired targets.

32. With the transition between council plans, there has been limited performance reporting to elected members in respect of council priorities for financial year 2020/21:

- Education and Children's Services - a mid-year performance report in October 2020, concluding reporting against the previous council plan
- Infrastructure Services - a performance report for quarter 4 2020/21 in June 2021
- Business Services - in advance of the formal performance reporting cycle commencing in November 2021, an initial report on directorate performance measures against targets in September 2021
- Area committees – we are not aware of 2020/21 performance information being reported.

33. The council's approach to using the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) as a means of supporting continuous improvement data has been mixed. A review of LGBF indicators included in the Business Services

update includes proposed actions against each indicator but it is not always clear how this links to the directorate plan. The LGBF indicators included in the Infrastructure Service performance report simply report the position with the indicators while the ECS directorate plan includes some discussion of benchmarking of attainment rates but not the wider LGBF categories, e.g. child social work. Whilst there is reporting of LGBF and other benchmarking data at the moment, it is unclear how this is used to identify areas for improvement.

34. In future, it is intended that there will be a number of different data sources, not just LGBF, available to services so that they can make decisions about where they need to target resources to support improvement. We understand that service transformation boards (see paras 40 and 50) will in future focus on key actions to drive improvements.

Self-evaluation

35. 'How Good is our Council' has been the council's self-evaluation tool since 2012. In response to the BVAR recommendations and following consultation with the Improvement Service, the council has agreed to adopt the Public Service Improvement Framework (PSIF). This model is already widely used across the local government sector.

36. PSIF is a checklist-based model covering service planning, staff, partnerships and resources, processes and services, leadership, and results.

37. This model was recently endorsed by the Audit Committee in September 2021 and implementation plans are currently being developed including training for officers and elected members. We will monitor the impact of the new framework over the coming year.

Scrutiny

38. In the BVAR, we recommended that scrutiny arrangements be reviewed to ensure effective public scrutiny and to support continuous improvement. Creating space to review decisions, and where appropriate, agreeing further improvement action is an essential element of committee business

39. In recent years, the audit committee has successfully initiated a number of referrals and while this involves engagement with policy committees, the latter, with a few exceptions, are not however initiating their own reviews.

40. The council has undertaken a review of its scrutiny arrangements which was concluded in September 2021. While it is content with the underlying processes, it has opted to change the language used and in future will refer to improvement activities rather than scrutiny activities. Reporting templates will also make it clearer to elected members what is expected from them e.g. a decision or scrutiny. More focus will be placed on services to identify and monitor improvements and report back to elected members. In order to co-ordinate this activity, service transformation boards have been refreshed and in turn, these will be overseen by the Strategic Change Board.

41. We welcome these developments and encourage prompt implementation of the associated actions.

Service improvement and transformation

Responding to Covid

42. Working with partners through the Grampian Local Resilience Partnership, the council, in April 2020, set up the Grampian Coronavirus Assistance Hub which included a new website and a telephone helpline to manage and co-ordinate community assistance in one place for the whole of Grampian.

43. Over 3,000 volunteers and community groups registered with the hub and were available to provide support in their local communities. Calls into the hub from individuals seeking help were logged and a local volunteer was allocated to assist. On lockdown, the council closed its culture and sports facilities, and diverted the Live Life Aberdeenshire workforce to support the assistance hub, health and social care services and the wider community.

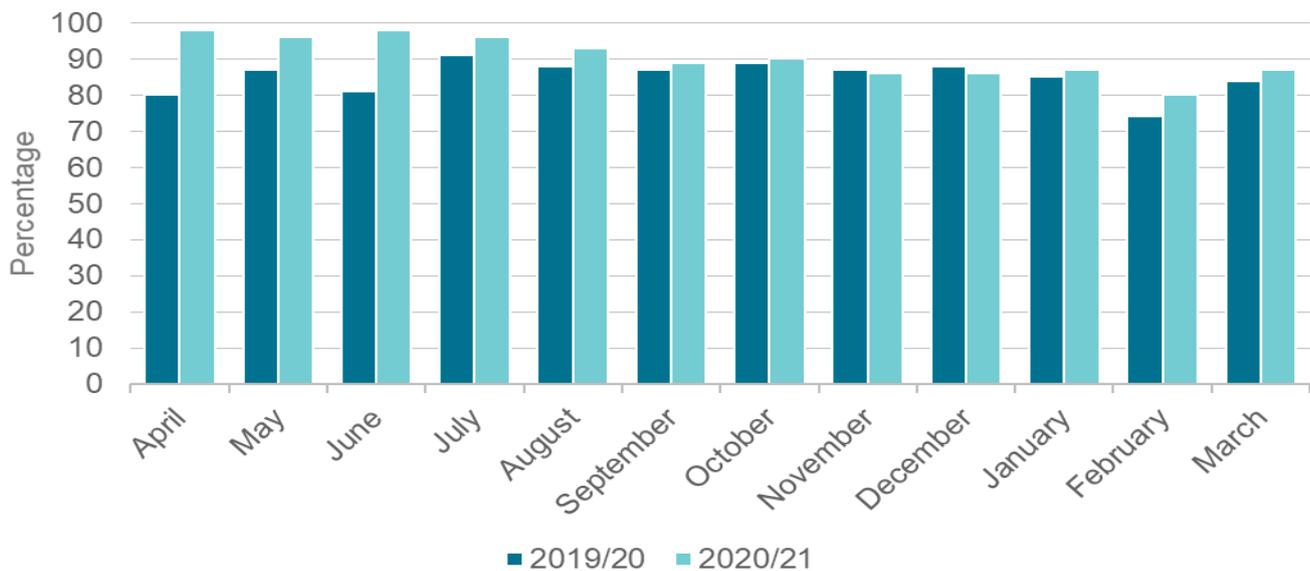
44. The introduction of a strict lockdown in March 2020 had a significant impact on service delivery which required prompt action from the council and adaption by services, for example:

- With schools closed, the council developed alternative curriculum delivery models mainly through online remote learning delivered via Office 365 through GLOW. Childcare provision for key workers was provided in one hub per cluster, seven days per week from 07:30 until 18:45.
- Staff from a number of services including Live Life Aberdeenshire supported the Grampian Assistance Hub, covered shifts in the childcare hubs and the call centre. Others were also redeployed to the Health and Social Care Partnership.
- Only urgent housing repairs were carried out with improvement works postponed.
- Waste services continued to provide a full kerbside waste collection although this required some redeployment of staff to maintain service provision.

45. The council continued to obtain feedback on satisfaction levels throughout 2020/21 via its Reputation Tracker. [Exhibit 3](#) shows that satisfaction levels increased significantly during the initial period of lockdown between April and June 2020, before falling back later in the year but remaining slightly above pre-Covid levels.

Exhibit 3

Percentage of residents agreeing with statement 'I am satisfied with the services provided by Aberdeenshire Council'



Source: Aberdeenshire Council Reputation Tracker

46. A Covid-19 Recovery Reference Group (RRG) was established to oversee the transition out of the response phase of the pandemic. A Recovery Strategy was approved in July 2020 setting out how the council intended to lead and tackle an extended period of living with Covid19 and recovery from the pandemic emergency. As restrictions began to ease from summer 2020, an Adaptive Service Board (ASB) was established to determine the extent and form to which services could be reinstated. These arrangements were disbanded at the end of 2020 as it was felt the RRG and ASB had served their purpose. While services were being delivered differently taking budgets, available staff and restrictions into consideration, no service had been identified for closure.

47. SLT agreed in April 2021 to introduce a collaboration board which supports a range of tasks and activities under the direction of SLT, including consideration and development of the medium term financial strategy and budget, improvement, and change.

Strategic Leadership Team

48. Since the council agreed the Best Value action plan and more recently, the corporate improvement plan, SLT has played a pivotal role in monitoring progress. Now that a range of actions are nearing completion, the next steps need to be considered. There is more to do both in terms of refining what has already been achieved but also in moving to the next level, assessing the council's impact and developing an improvement agenda.

49. The corporate improvement plan also includes a comprehensive action plan arising from the annual self-evaluation of the council's governance arrangements. It is useful that these significant plans have been amalgamated and are regularly monitored by SLT and the audit committee.

50. The introduction of the collaboration board, and the refresh of the strategic change board and service transformation boards are timely. The combination of these alongside SLT's oversight role provide the building blocks to be able to demonstrate the existence of a sound framework to support improvement with good connections across its different elements.

Rationalisation of the estate continues

51. The council's programme of estate rationalisation was highlighted as good practice in the BVAR. We have therefore taken the opportunity to provide an update on developments within this report.

52. The council had previously implemented the workSMART programme. This introduced options to enable staff to work more flexibly when required, supported by digital technology and the roll out of Office 365. The technology in place and the ability to work flexibly helped the council to easily transition to remote working during the Covid19 pandemic.

53. Plans for the council's offices were reaffirmed by elected members in April 2021 and involve:

- a new office site with a family centre in Ellon
- refurbishment and extension of Inverurie Town Hall to include office space
- refurbishment of Woodhill House with a view to sharing the site with other public sector partners.

54. In line with the government's Covid19 recovery recommendations, the council has consulted with staff to identify future working intentions and a 'hybrid' model combining home and office-based working is considered to be the most likely.

55. The council is also progressing its wider estates modernisation programme. Directorates have been asked to review the estate controlled by them and to align usage with directorate and service plans. This project is also considering the potential to share any assets with other public sector partners and there is also an 'asset challenge' from the Property service to stimulate conversations around what is needed rather than because 'it's always been there'. This review is scheduled for completion by the end of 2021.

Appendix 1

Timeline of key actions in response to BVAR

Date	Action
07/10/20	Council Plan 2020-22 approved
22/10/20	BVAR published by Accounts Commission
19/11/20	BVAR and Action plan presented to council. Council acknowledged findings of report, agreed the action plan and agreed to receive six monthly updates
10/12/20	Audit Committee noted the BVAR and agreed that the BV Action Plan be included in the Corporate Improvement Plan, which is to be reported to Audit Committee quarterly
Jan – Mar 21	First drafts of Directorate Plans approved
04/02/21	Corporate Improvement Plan (which includes BV action plan) presented to Audit Committee. Agreed to receive quarterly updates
29/04/21	First six monthly update on BV Action Plan was noted by council
May 21	Area Plans approved by all six Area Committees
May/June 21	First quarterly update on Corporate Improvement Plan was presented to audit committee and policy committees
09/06/21	Banff and Macduff Locality Plan approved by Community Planning Partnership Board
12/05/21	Performance Management Framework approved by SLT
30/06/21	Embedding Continuous Improvement Strategy approved by SLT

Source: Audit Scotland

Aberdeenshire Council

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