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## **BEST VALUE ASSURANCE REPORT**

**Report by Chief Executive**

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### **SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL**

**19 December 2019**

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#### **1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report presents the findings of the 2019 Best Value Assurance audit of Scottish Borders Council for consideration.**
- 1.2 The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 introduced the statutory duty of Best Value. The Best Value Assurance audit of Scottish Borders Council in 2019 has been undertaken by Audit Scotland, with the Controller of Audit presenting the report to the Accounts Commission as part of the requirement to do so at least once during the five-year audit appointment.
- 1.3 The 2019 Scottish Borders Council Best Value Assurance Report (Appendix 1) provides a range of findings following an intensive process of scrutiny of the Council's Vision & Strategic Direction, Performance, Use of Resources, Partnership Working and Continuous Improvement.
- 1.4 Scottish Borders Council has welcomed the scrutiny of the 2019 Best Value Assurance audit, providing an opportunity to showcase our achievements and further strengthen our ongoing ambitious improvement programme with valuable external perspectives.
- 1.5 In response to the audit findings, senior officers have developed an Action Plan and this is included as Appendix 2.

#### **2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 I recommend that Council agrees:**
  - (a) To note the findings contained within the Scottish Borders Council Best Value Assurance Report dated October 2019 and which forms Appendix 1;**
  - (b) To accept the recommendations contained within the Best Value Assurance Report, Appendix 1;**
  - (c) To approve the Best Value Audit Action Plan (Appendix 2) and that implementation progress is reported as part of Fit for 2024 updates to Council;**

- (d) That the Audit & Scrutiny Committee undertakes regular monitoring of the implementation of the Action Plan;**

### **3 BEST VALUE ASSURANCE AUDIT**

- 3.1 The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 introduced the statutory duty of Best Value. The Best Value Assurance Audit of Scottish Borders Council in 2019 has been undertaken by Audit Scotland, with the Controller of Audit presenting the report to the Accounts Commission as part of the requirement to do so at least once during the five-year audit appointment. Best Value is also audited continuously through the annual audit of councils.
- 3.2 The 2019 Best Value Assurance Report is the first assurance report on Scottish Borders Council. The previous Best Value report was published in 2010.
- 3.3 Key areas of focus for the audit were:
- Vision and strategic direction
  - Performance
  - Use of resources
  - Partnership working
  - Continuous improvement
- 3.4 The audit approach included:
- Interviewing elected members, senior officers and council partners
  - Observing a range of council and committee meetings
  - Discussion with trade unions
  - Reviewing documents and analysing data
  - Meeting focus groups
- 3.5 Key elements of the Accounts Commission's Best Value Assurance Report (Appendix 1) can be found as follows:
- Findings are on page 5 of the Commission's report and key messages are on pages 8 & 9 of the Commission's report.
  - Parts 1 to 5 of the Commission's report provide an assessment of the key areas of focus for the audit.
  - Recommendations can be found on Page 51 of the Commission's report.
- 3.6 Elected members and senior officers met with the Accounts Commission on 18 November 2019.

### **4 REPORT FINDINGS**

- 4.1 The report highlights a number of SBC's achievements, including:
- (a) That the Council has steadily improved overall since the 2010 Best Value Audit.
  - (b) That Members and officers demonstrate a strong commitment to working together for the fulfilment of the Council's vision, while effective governance arrangements ensure the opportunity for challenge and scrutiny.
  - (c) That the Council has made good progress with its transformation agenda, recognised the need to increase pace of change and be more

innovative and began its challenging transformation programme, Fit for 2024.

- (d) That performance is good or improving in the key service areas of education and social work.
- (e) The report found that the council demonstrates effective financial planning and management, with a good track record of making savings.

4.2 The report also highlighted a number of areas for improvement, including:

- (a) The need to do more to demonstrate Best Value on some matters including embedding and sustaining a culture of continuous improvement by implementing a corporate approach to self-evaluation and benchmarking.
- (b) Providing more support for elected members through training plans.
- (c) The need for more comprehensive and clearer performance reporting.
- (d) Alongside improved communication, the requirement to do more to understand and act on staff views.
- (e) Improved partnership working with NHS Borders through the integration joint board.
- (f) Finalising and implementing locality plans and implementing a performance management framework to measure progress against these and the community plan.

## **5 BEST VALUE AUDIT ACTION PLAN**

5.1 Scottish Borders Council has welcomed the scrutiny of the 2019 Best Value Assurance Audit. In response to the findings, senior officers in conjunction with the Corporate Management Team have developed the 'Best Value Audit Action Plan' (Appendix 2). Actions include:

- (a) Embedding a culture of continuous improvement, including the incorporation of self-evaluation and benchmarking data into the annual planning process;
- (b) Improved partnership working with NHS Borders including a joint approach to transformation and evaluation, and the exploration of opportunities for co-location and shared services;
- (c) Improved involvement of communities and the third sector, through the Community Planning Partnership, including a review of how best to develop community capacity, and a review of the operation of the local Area Partnerships;
- (d) Enhanced staff engagement through Fit for 2024, Corporate Management Team meetings around the region, and undertaking a structured staff survey;
- (e) Updated people planning, including aligning with the Corporate Plan and Fit for 2024 principles;
- (f) Additional training and development support for Members;

- (g) Improved performance reporting including greater use of benchmarking information;
- 5.2 In addition to ongoing monitoring by Corporate Management Team, it is planned that a regular report will be provided to Audit and Scrutiny Committee to ensure robust governance of improvement delivery.
- 5.3 The council already has an ambitious and progressive agenda for improvement through its Fit for 2024 programme and this will be reviewed to ensure that key recommendations from the audit have been appropriately incorporated.
- 5.4 Improvement work is already underway in a number of areas:
- (a) Plans are already in course to introduce a more cohesive suite of corporate performance reporting during 2019/20, providing an improved basis from which to better scrutinise the performance of services.
  - (b) Proposals for improvements to staff engagement will be presented to Council as part of the Fit for 2024 Programme update.

## **6 IMPLICATIONS**

### **6.1 Financial**

There are no identified costs attached to any of the recommendations contained in this report. However, the Action Plan requires a focus on continuous improvement within the context of challenging financial decisions.

### **6.2 Risk and Mitigations**

- (a) The Best Value Audit, like all audits, can highlight potential areas of risk. The actions contained within the subsequent Action Plan will not only address concerns highlighted in the Audit but will also serve to mitigate risks previously identified in the Corporate risk register, the IJB risk register and those of supporting transformational programmes, such as Fit for 24.
- (b) Regular scrutiny of improvement work by the Corporate Management Team and Council Committees, together with regular reporting and scrutiny of the Fit for 2024 programme, will provide appropriate governance to ensure that the Action Plan is implemented.

### **6.3 Equalities**

It is anticipated that improvements arising from actions outlined in Appendix 2 will have no adverse equality/diversity implications. Any actions resulting in a significant change to SBC policy will be impact assessed.

### **6.4 Acting Sustainably**

There are no significant economic, social or environmental effects arising from the proposals contained in this report.

## 6.5 Carbon Management

There are no significant effects on carbon emissions arising from the proposals contained in this report.

## 6.6 Rural Proofing

This report does not relate to new or amended policy or strategy and as a result rural proofing is not an applicable consideration.

## 6.7 Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation

There are no changes to be made to either the Scheme of Administration or the Scheme of Delegation as a result of the proposals contained in this report.

## 7 CONSULTATION

- 7.1 The Chief Financial Officer, the Monitoring Officer, the Chief Legal Officer, the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Service Director HR, the Clerk to the Council and Corporate Communications have been consulted and any comments received have been incorporated into the final report.

### Approved by

**Tracey Logan**  
**Chief Executive**

**Signature .....**

### Author(s)

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### Background Papers:

### Previous Minute Reference:

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