

News release on behalf of the Accounts Commission

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The Highland Council must focus on delivering its ambitions for the region

An ambitious plan to improve transport, roads and buildings, as well as a greater shift to using digital to deliver services, has the potential to transform the Highland Council's services over the next 20 years.

Delivering its capital programme could prove challenging. Borrowing costs are high compared to the Scottish average. Councillors and senior officers need to be confident these plans are affordable.

In its latest report on the Highland Council, the Accounts Commission says the council has worked hard to close recent budget gaps. But its reliance on reserves and other flexible financial approaches in recent years isn't sustainable. The council's recent budget recognises this and only proposes the use of earmarked reserves for 2025/26.

Now the council needs to focus on delivery of its new plans and strategies to address its transformation ambitions and meet demand pressures, especially in areas like adult social care. With some services now improving at a slower rate than other councils, the council needs to use data and insight to ensure plans deliver on the promised improvements. This includes having a workforce with the necessary digital skills and capacity to deliver on the council's ambitions.

Jo Armstrong, Chair of the Accounts Commission said:

"The Highland Council is benefitting from a culture of transformation, and we're pleased to see progress since we last reported in 2020. Now challenges to making savings lie ahead – its vital that the council's workforce, digital and IT strategies are developed, embedded and monitored.

"The pace at which some services are improving is now slower compared to other councils. Using robust data, the council needs to keep things moving forward and look for new ways to improve. Communities and staff must continue to be an integral part of the conversation to determine the future of council priorities and services."

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Notes to Editor:

1. The Accounts Commission [last reported on the Highland Council in 2020](#).

2. All reports by the Accounts Commission and Auditor General published since 2000 are available at www.audit.scot

- The Accounts Commission is the public spending watchdog for local government. It holds councils and various joint boards and committees in Scotland to account and help them improve. It

operates impartially and independently of councils and of the Scottish Government, and meets and reports in public.

- Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. It provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission for Scotland.

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