

Leadership of the development of new local strategic priorities

Best Value thematic work in Scottish Borders Council 2022-23



Prepared by Audit Scotland
September 2023

Contents

Key messages	3
Scope of the audit	4
Council vision and priorities	6
Citizen and community engagement	10
Reducing inequalities and tackling climate change	12
Alignment of delivery plans	18
Leadership	21
Appendix 1	24

Key messages

- 1** Since the last BVAR in 2019, there has been a significant amount of change in the leadership of the Council at both officer and elected member level. However, the Council continues to demonstrate evidence of collaborative working between members of different political parties since the 2022 election. This is reflected in the development of the Council vision, following the election.
- 2** The Scottish Borders Council (the Council) plan outlines the Council's vision for 2033. Elected members have shaped that vision. The Council plan is refreshed annually and sets out actions to deliver that vision. The overall community plan for the area was last updated in 2018 and the Council acknowledges it needs to work with partners to update this plan. Further work is required to align the corporate plan to the budget setting process and to directorate delivery plans.
- 3** The Council has established a comprehensive induction programme to support elected members. It now needs to encourage the uptake of personal training and development plans for elected members. A period of stability in Council leadership will support moving forward with plans to deliver the vision for 2033. The Council needs to ensure its revised approach to people, and succession planning, is delivering the anticipated benefits and addressing the challenges of workforce planning.
- 4** The Council has elements of an effective performance framework but needs to ensure it can measure its performance against clearer outcome-based targets for the next ten years. The Council is coming to the end of its five-year transformation programme, Fit for 2024. While recognising the Council will continue to transform over the coming years, there is an opportunity for the Council to reflect on what improvements to service delivery and customer experience have been achieved through this programme.
- 5** The Council has made efforts to engage with citizens and communities over the new Council priorities but acknowledges it could do more to encourage participation in consultation. The revised corporate plan has a good focus on the building blocks of community engagement.
- 6** Inequalities and climate change are incorporated into the Council plan outcomes. The Council is establishing its monitoring arrangements to assess its risk and impact in both these areas.

Scope of the audit

1. The Accounts Commission has noted that councils are operating in a complex and increasingly volatile, unprecedented and unpredictable environment. Strong leadership from councils is needed now more than ever, with new and returning councillors being able and willing to make difficult decisions about where and how to spend highly pressurised resources.”
2. This report concludes on the effectiveness of Scottish Borders Council’s (the Council’s) leadership of the development of the Council’s strategic priorities, following the recent local government elections.
3. [The Accounts Commission’s Strategy \(2021-26\)](#) sets out its priorities to focus on inequalities, funding, communities and recovery. The [Code of Audit Practice](#) sets out the Best Value work required to report on these priorities.

Code of Audit Practice 2021 Best Value reporting requirements

Best Value reporting – extract from the Code

87. The Accounts Commission’s approach to Best Value involves reporting on individual local government bodies and thematically across the local government sector through performance reports:

- As part of their integrated wider-scope annual audit work appointed auditors use a risk-based approach to assess and report whether the audited body has made proper arrangements for securing Best Value and is complying with its community planning duties, including reporting progress against previous Best Value findings and recommendations.
- The Accounts Commission also requires the Controller of Audit to report to the Accounts Commission on each Council or Integration Joint Board (IJB) at least once over the five-year audit appointment on the body’s performance on its Best Value duty. This enables the Accounts Commission to make findings for improvement where appropriate.¹
- The Accounts Commission reports nationally on thematic aspects of local government bodies’ approaches to, and performance in, meeting their Best Value and community planning duties. Local government appointed auditors report locally on any such Best Value thematic work prescribed by the Accounts Commission.

4. This report covers the thematic aspect of the Best Value audit requirements. The Commission has directed auditors to report on the effectiveness of the leadership of the development of the Council’s strategic priorities.

¹ The Controller of Audit will report the first tranche of council BV reports to the Commission between October 2023 and August 2024 on Moray, Falkirk, Dundee City, Orkney Islands, South Ayrshire, Dumfries and Galloway, Clackmannanshire and West Dunbartonshire.



5. In carrying out the work auditors have considered the following questions:

- How clear is the new Council vision and its priorities?
- How effectively have the views of citizens and communities been reflected in the priorities and decisions taken by the Council?
- How effectively do the Council priorities reflect the need to reduce inequalities and climate change?
- How good are the delivery plans and is there alignment of financial, workforce, asset and digital plans with the Council's priorities?
- Overall, how effective has the leadership been (political and officer) in setting clear priorities and a sustainable approach to delivering them?

6. A [Best Value Assurance Report](#) (BVAR) on Scottish Borders Council was published in October 2019, containing seven improvement recommendations. The Council responded by identifying 40 improvement action points. The Council has been reporting progress against those actions to the Audit Committee, with the most recent report in March 2023 showing progress made against all 40 actions. The Council is ready to close off monitoring against the BVAR recommendations and consider improvement actions through its performance management framework.

7. An improvement action plan is included at [Appendix 1](#) of this report. This sets out audit recommendations in key areas, and the Council's planned response including responsible officers and dates for implementation.

8. The coverage of the work is in line with the expectations for Council's arrangements for the seven Best Value themes in the [Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, Best Value Statutory Guidance 2020](#).

Council vision and priorities

The Council has established a vision for 2033 within its updated Council plan and members have shaped that vision. There is an annual refresh of the Council plan, which sets out actions to deliver that vision. The Council needs to establish how it will measure performance against clearer outcome-based targets.

9. A council focused on achieving Best Value in how it operates will be able to demonstrate that elected members and officers have a clear vision and priorities for their area.

10. The Local Government in Scotland Overview 2022 says that Scotland's councils have had a pivotal role in supporting and working with communities as they respond to the impact of Covid-19. Following the council elections in May 2022, councils will have reviewed their priorities.

11. The Council has an overall vision of what will be achieved by 2033. This vision is based on six outcomes ([Exhibit 1](#)). Five focus on improving the wellbeing of citizens in the area and making the region a more sustainable and better place to live, work and visit. The sixth outcome is about developing a Council that is as effective and efficient as it can be. The vision is rooted in the challenges of the area - the climate and nature emergencies, the cost-of-living crisis, demographic pressure and challenges around transport and digital connectivity.

12. Elected members have shaped the vision. It is based on the Administration Policy Plan, developed after the elections and approved in November 2022. The vision sits within the new Council plan, approved in February 2023. The Council plan sets out the actions to take place over 2023/24 to deliver that vision. The corporate plan includes clear actions against each of the six outcomes, with delivery dates from Q1 – Q4 of 2023/24. The Council has outlined an ambitious number of actions to deliver by April 2024. Annual updates of the Council plan will take place to review what has been achieved and refresh the actions.

13. The Council plan stresses the importance of local communities with a chapter devoted to actions for the five 'localities' of Berwickshire, Cheviot, Eildon, Teviot & Liddesdale and Tweeddale. These actions are aligned with the five outcome areas shown in [Exhibit 1](#). The Council acknowledges this is a work in progress and it will take time to embed locality planning within the Council's strategic planning framework.

Exhibit 1

The 2033 vision within the Council plan approved in February 2023

<p style="text-align: center;">Outcome 1 - Clean green future</p> <div style="background-color: #d9ead3; padding: 10px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p>Our 2033 Vision for the Scottish Borders</p> <p>We met the 75% target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions in 2030, and continue to transform the region and our organisation.</p> <p>Increasingly, we live and work in energy efficient homes and premises, powered by green energy sources.</p> <p>We walk, wheel and cycle to get around for the most part, use hydrogen buses and trains for longer journeys or, occasionally, electric vehicles.</p> <p>Nature is recovering in our settlements and across the region, while 'refuse, reuse, reduce, recycle' is the way we live now.</p> </div>	<p style="text-align: center;">Outcome 2 - Fulfilling our potential</p> <div style="background-color: #d9d2e9; padding: 10px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p>Our 2033 Vision for the Scottish Borders</p> <p>By 2033, everyone in the Scottish Borders will have the opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to realise their full potential, and the Borders will be a place where people grow and develop into high skilled, happy and healthy global citizens.</p> </div>
<p style="text-align: center;">Outcome 3 - Strong Inclusive Economy, Transport and Infrastructure</p> <div style="background-color: #f4cccc; padding: 10px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p>Our 2033 Vision for the Scottish Borders</p> <p>Built upon strong and effective physical and digital connections and infrastructure, the benefits of a productive and sustainable economy are widely shared, enabling us to fulfil our potential in the Scottish Borders and attract others to live, work, study and visit.</p> <p>With an increasingly higher skilled and higher paid workforce, the Scottish Borders is a place which has begun to fully harness the potential of its communities, attracting resources from beyond our region, using new technology, and growing the number of jobs found in renewable energy, healthcare, and our natural resources.</p> <p>Our region is well connected internally and with the world beyond, enabling employees to make positive choices to work in the Borders and enjoy the high quality of life here. The extension of the Borders Railway to Carlisle will create new opportunities, supported by an effective network of green powered buses, and a network of paths for walking, wheeling and cycling.</p> </div>	<p style="text-align: center;">Outcome 4 - Empowered vibrant communities</p> <div style="background-color: #cfe2f3; padding: 10px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p>Our 2033 Vision for the Scottish Borders</p> <p>Built on an established track-record of co-production, delivery, and strong partnerships, the Scottish Borders is a region of sustainable, well-designed healthy and happy places that reflect the experience and aspirations of our citizens and communities and meet their needs.</p> </div>

<p>Outcome 5 - Good health and wellbeing</p> <p>Our 2033 Vision for the Scottish Borders</p> <p>The people of the Scottish Borders have the opportunities and are supported to take control of their health and wellbeing, enjoying a high quality of life.</p> <p>This is enabled by seamless community-based services which are based on local need, with a focus on improving access, early intervention and prevention, reducing inequalities, supporting unpaid carers and the embrace of new technologies.</p> <p>Services are delivered by a highly valued and motivated workforce.</p>	<p>Outcome 6 - Working Together, Improving Lives</p> <p>Our 2033 Vision for the Scottish Borders</p> <p>A fully effective council which is an exemplar of excellent organisational and budgetary performance, and of how to harness the combined power of local communities, institutions and stakeholders in delivering a sustainable future and an economy that works for everyone.</p>
--	---

[Source: Scottish Borders Council](#)

The Council acknowledges it needs to work with partners to update the community plan.

14. Community planning partners should have an up-to-date community plan to coordinate the strategic vision of partner organisations within an area. The overall community plan for the Scottish Borders was last updated in 2018. There are links between the priorities in the community plan and the Council's corporate plan, through the following high-level themes: Our Economy, Skills and Learning, Our Health, Care & Wellbeing, Our Quality of Life, Our Place. However, the Council acknowledges it needs to work with partners to update this plan. There is an action within the Council plan to develop a new community plan with partners, by September 2023.

15. The Council consulted with partners as part of the refresh of the Council plan. It received a limited but positive response from two partners. South of Scotland Enterprise and Borders College provided responses, showing support for the corporate outcomes, whilst expressing the need for greater partnership working amongst organisations, especially relating to transport provision.

The Council has elements of an effective performance framework but needs to ensure it needs clearer outcome-based targets for the next ten years.

16. The 2019 BVAR made recommendations in relation to performance management and continuous improvement. Those were:

- Embed a culture of continuous improvement by implementing a corporate approach to self-evaluation and benchmarking.
- Ensure performance reports to members and the public are more comprehensive and balanced, and that they cover service performance and delivery of the Fit for 2024 programme.

17. The Council responded with four actions, including implementing a revised performance management framework. The Council now measures Performance in three ways - actions in the Council plan (milestones), performance indicators and comparison with others, example shown at [Exhibit 3](#). The Council was unable to meet its deadline for updating performance indicators for the revised corporate plan in March, as the plan was only agreed in February. The Council should identify clearer outcome-based targets for the next ten years, that will enable it to demonstrate how it is achieving outcomes such as ‘the Borders will be a place where people grow and develop into high skilled, happy and healthy global citizens’.

Citizen and community engagement

The Council has made efforts to engage with citizens and communities over the new Council priorities but acknowledges it could do more to encourage participation in consultation. The revised corporate plan has a good focus on the building blocks of community engagement.

18. Recovery from the pandemic will require councils to work alongside their local communities. Councils, with their community planning partners, have a responsibility to ensure that people and communities are able to be fully involved in the decisions that affect their everyday lives.

19. Early and meaningful engagement and effective collaboration with communities to identify and understand local needs, and in decisions that affect the planning and delivery of services should be a core part of determining a council's vision and priorities.

20. The 2019 BVAR found there were some aspects citizen and community engagement that required improvement. The BVAR contained the recommendation that the Council should improve how the Scottish Borders Community Planning Partnership involves communities and the third sector, through greater involvement in local decision-making and by accelerating implementation of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015.

21. The Council has made efforts to engage with its citizens and communities when developing the new corporate plan priorities. These began in summer 2022 and ran to January 2023.

Summer 2022

- Summer tour undertaken by the Council Leader and supported by senior officers.
- Place-making workshops scheduled across the region.
- Community conversations events and budget consultation process, which resulted in 866 responses.

January 2023

- Further public consultation using Citizen space, the Council's online survey and consultation hub, from 16-30 January. This was to determine whether residents were content with the draft vision. Although the Council

acknowledges a relatively low response rate, feedback indicated that people found the draft plan clear and understandable and agreed with the vision put forward.

22. The Council acknowledges it could do more to encourage participation in consultations about the vision and strategic priorities. It has put forward ideas on how it could achieve this, including extending consultation periods, raising the profile of feedback opportunities, and bringing forward the drafting of the 2024/25 Council plan update. The Council hopes this will support further engagement with communities, strengthen the resulting plan and ensure greater alignment with the Council's financial plans. As mentioned at paragraph [13.](#) the Council plan has a strong focus on its five localities and includes actions to take forward in 2023/24 aimed at empowering communities.

The Council has made progress against the previous recommendation to accelerate implementation of the community empowerment act and has clear actions in the 2023/24 corporate plan.

23. The 2019 BVAR report included the recommendation that the Council should accelerate implementation of the Community Empowerment Act. The Council took forward 11 actions in response. This includes the restart of the community conversations, paragraph [21.](#) as Covid-19 restrictions lifted. The Council also appointed nine engagement officers to develop community capacity building and place-making.

24. In addition to the actions taken, the Council plan includes a clear commitment to community empowerment. The vision statement includes the following, 'the most vital partnership of all is that partnership we have with you as a citizen of the Scottish Borders.' As shown in [Exhibit 1](#), Outcome 4 of the Council plan is to deliver 'Empowered, Vibrant Communities' and there are 12 actions to support this in 2023/24. These include:

- Support communities in the Borderland target towns of Eyemouth, Galashiels, Hawick and Jedburgh to form inclusive Town Teams and develop community-led plans and associated investment plans.
- Implement our Community Engagement Strategy.
- Support Area Partnerships to oversee Place Making in their localities and facilitate the development and delivery of community-led place plans.
- Community Choices: Offer communities a greater say in local spend of Council resources.

25. The actions above show the Council has strong intentions to involve local people in decision making processes and in co-producing services. This commitment to improving community empowerment is welcome. The Council needs to ensure its performance management arrangements captures the progress it makes against the actions within the corporate plan.

Reducing inequalities and tackling climate change

Inequalities and climate change are incorporated into revised Council plan outcomes. The Council is aware of the challenge around climate change, including the risk of flooding in certain localities. The Council is establishing its baseline and developing monitoring arrangements to assess impact.

26. Council priorities are expected to reflect the Best Value expectations that all activity should contribute to tackling poverty, reducing inequality and promoting fairness, respect and dignity for all citizens, alongside a focus on sustainable development, including climate change.

27. The Local Government in Scotland Overview 2022 report says that the impact of the pandemic and service disruption have been felt most strongly by those already experiencing inequality. Councils have worked hard and adapted to maintain service delivery but those most in need of support are still being affected. Councils must evaluate these impacts so that recovery and renewal support those most affected and addresses inequalities.

28. Over two-thirds of councils, including Scottish Borders, have formally declared a climate emergency, and COSLA's Blueprint for Local Government states that climate change is a 'greater threat than Covid'. The Scottish Government has recently published guidance on public sector leadership on the global climate emergency to help public bodies in leading climate action. Addressing the climate emergency and setting actions to achieve net zero will need to be a key element of councils' recovery and renewal from the pandemic.

29. Scottish Borders Council Plan 2023/24 and strategic vision for 2033 ([Exhibit 1](#)) have outcomes relevant to reducing inequalities and tackling climate change:

- Outcome 1 Clean Green Future: including, meeting the 70% target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing green transport and green energy use and nature recovering in settlements, paragraphs [38.](#) - [41.](#)
- Outcome 5 Good Health and Wellbeing. Including a focus on wellbeing and a high quality of life. Services are focused on improving access, early intervention and reducing inequalities.

Scottish Borders Council is implementing actions across its equalities mainstreaming report and anti-poverty plans. It has tailored its measurement framework to suit local needs.

30. Scottish Borders Council has published a progress report against its Equality Mainstreaming report 2022 – 2025. This includes Equality Outcomes Performance Data, Employment Data and Equality Impact Assessments. Relevant reports are available on the Council's [Equality and diversity/Fairer Scotland Duty webpages](#).

31. Integrated Impact Assessments (IIA) provide a framework to enable councils to comply with their statutory obligations around fairness and equality. The Council publishes IIAs on its website, in line with good practice on transparency and public awareness. By September, the Council had already published 18 separate IIAs for 2023, although some cover the same initiative at different stages e.g., Children and Young People Services Plan. Other examples include IIAs for changes to high schools and council specific guidance for staff.

32. The Fairer Scotland Duty requires councils to consider how they can reduce inequalities of outcome caused by socio-economic disadvantage. In June 2023, Scottish Borders Council took two relevant progress reports. These were a report against the Council's '2021 anti-poverty strategy' and a 'Local child poverty progress report and action plan'.

33. The Anti-Poverty Strategy is structured around the 'pockets, prospects, places' measurement framework adopted by the Scottish Government Child Poverty Strategy. The Council has added 'people', 'partnerships', and 'pathways' to this framework and set out 11 outcomes. The strategy is overseen by an Anti-Poverty Members Reference Group, formed of seven elected members on a non-political basis and, where possible, ensuring a gender and geographic balance.

34. The June 2023 progress report is well structured and includes a mix of quantitative data and updates against actions. Highlights include:

- Pockets – increase in the use of the money worries app that signposts the public to areas of support. Use of the community foodhub.
- Prospects – an awareness of the baseline, that Scottish Borders has significantly lower attainment in comparison to Scotland, with figures exacerbated within areas of deprivation. The regional pay gap between Scottish Borders and Scotland has improved since 2020.
- Places - In the Scottish Borders, the number of homeless applications has remained steady since 2011/12 as a result of a proactive approach to prevention through the delivery of the Housing Options approach. Fifty percent of young people and children aged 5-21 years have applied for the Young Persons' (Under 22s) Free Bus Travel Scheme.

- People – Outlining progress with the four Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal towns (Eyemouth, Galashiels, Jedburgh, Hawick) where work is underway to develop a place plan.
- Partnerships – listing the collaborative networks focused on reducing inequality - Cost of Living Strategic and Operational Group, Financial Inclusion Practitioners Group and the Food Conversations Group.
- Pathways – outlining how the pathways to support people to move from dependence to independence are developing.

35. Also in June 2023, Scottish Borders Council took a progress report against the 'Local child poverty progress report and action plan'. [Exhibit 2](#) shows highlights of the progress for 2022/23.

Exhibit 2

Progress against actions and measures in the local child poverty action plan

Employability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A total of 215 young people volunteered through Live Borders' Active Schools programme. Tweeddale Youth Action employed 1 young person and supported 5 young people to gain recruitment within local employers. SBHA recruited 4 Modern Apprentices.
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equity and Excellence Leads were placed in large SBC Early Learning Childcare (ELC) with progress made in narrowing developmental gaps, assisting to make positive attainment by the end of P1. ASN youths have been supported with ILF transition funding applications, accessing qualifications both national and local and launching Youth Enterprise Scotland YES teams programme in August 2022 to provide qualification SVQ 3 and access to social innovation and enterprise.
Information and advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SOSE has financially supported 5 organisations whose activities indirectly or directly addressed child poverty. Across the organisations, funding support has also enabled the creation of 267 jobs and safeguarded 323 jobs across the Scottish Borders. CAB utilised 'Our Money Talk Team' Project, funded by Scottish Government. This provided customers with advice on rights and responsibilities, what is available locally and how to access services.
Housing and energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SBHA provided 115 tenants with a payment from the Fuel Debt Fund to clear their fuel debt (£150,000 in total payments made), an average of £1,300 per household. 17 Warm and Well Hubs were established across the Scottish Borders, funded by SBC's Cost of Living support package of £1.2million.
Health and wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over 4170 visits were made by children and young people to Live Borders activities. This provided coordinated access to food, childcare, sports, leisure, and cultural activities during the holidays.
Digital exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SBHA's Digital Champions network continues to support the 224 households who received a device via Connecting Scotland. Live Borders received 225 referrals for digital devices. Of the 225 referrals, 77 households included children. A total of 100 chromebooks and 106 ipads were distributed through the Connecting the Borders programme.
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> £60,000 was allocated to support the setting up, continuation or provision of a free breakfast club across the Scottish Borders. 19 Schools were successful in their application for funding along with 1 community-based group. BHA has provided £25,000 to local foodbank and larders from the National

	<p>Lottery Community Anchor fund, accessed through the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over £5,000 worth of supermarket gift cards have been distributed by SBC to local foodbanks and fareshare providers as well as to prominent groups within communities that are supporting individuals with the cost-of-living crisis.
Financial inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A £1.2m cost of living support package was made available in August 2022 and has been used to help families in a variety of ways, including, funding a warm clothing payment of £100 to children in receipt of free school meals/clothing grant/home schooling, which benefitted 2,695 children. Midwives and Health Visitors continued to be proactive in referring expectant and new mothers for benefits checks. In 2022-23 there were 500 referrals resulting in an uplift in benefits of £1.2million.
Money worries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BHA supported £5,200 gains from Scottish Child payments and £674,825 total benefit gains for 2022/23.

Source: [Scottish Borders Council](#)

The Council is aware of the challenge around climate change and is working with external experts on its baseline and approach. The Council reports performance according to Scottish Government requirements and against its corporate plan vision.

36. The Scottish Government has recently published guidance on public sector leadership on the global climate emergency to help public bodies in leading climate action. Addressing the climate emergency and setting actions to achieve net zero will need to be a key element of councils' recovery and renewal from the pandemic.

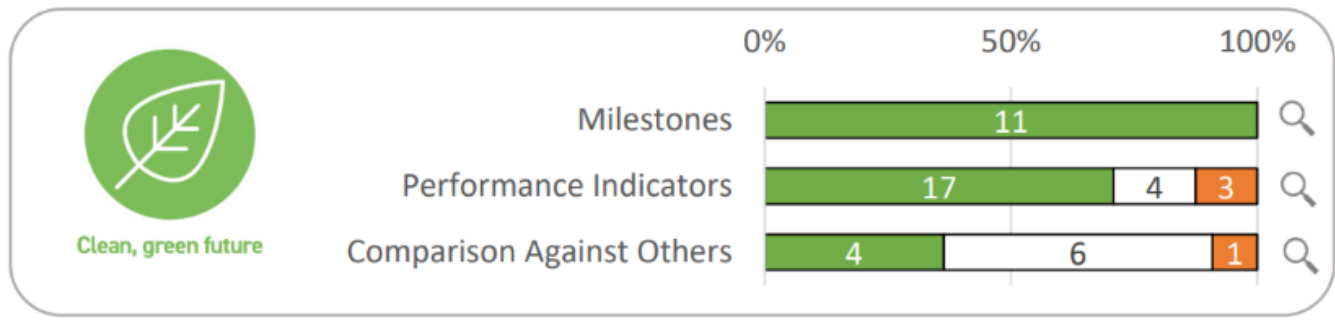
37. The Climate Change Act 2019 committed Scotland to Net Zero by 2045. The Public Bodies Climate Change Reporting Duties place a legal requirement on public bodies to set target dates for zero direct emissions and indirect emission reductions. They must also report on how spending and resources will contribute to these targets, and report on the body's contribution to Scotland's Climate Change Adaptation Programme.

38. Scottish Borders Council declared a climate emergency in September 2020, which was followed up with the development of a Climate Change Route Map in June 2021. The Council identified priority actions to deliver on the Route Map and the Council approved those in March 2022. The path to net zero was underlined in the Council plan for 2023/24. Outcome 1 in the Council plan is a 'Clean, green future,' see paragraph [29](#).

39. The Council takes forward its vision for 'Clean, green future' in the actions for its six localities. Flooding and coastal erosion is a risk for Scottish Borders Council and there are actions on flood management in Berwickshire, Eildon, Teviot and Liddesdale and Tweeddale. The action being taken within Scottish Borders on flooding was mentioned in the Account Commission's recent report '[Scotland's Councils' approach to addressing climate change](#)'. Nature-based flood-management solutions, including natural flood defences have been put in place to manage the impact of extreme weather on the River Tweed.

40. The Council is working with external bodies to clarify its approach to the challenges of climate change. It is working with South of Scotland Enterprise to establish carbon baselines for the Council as an organisation, but also for the wider Scottish Borders area. The Council has also been working with the Edinburgh Climate Change Institute on their action plan.

41. In line with other authorities, the Council submitted its [annual climate change report](#) to the Scottish Government in November 2022. It also has a [web-site page](#) laying out progress to date, however this is not measured against a baseline or targets. The Council does report quarterly and annually against Outcome 1 of its corporate plan - the performance report for 2022/2023 was presented to Council committee in June 2023. [Exhibit 3](#) shows some highlights of performance against Outcome 1.

Exhibit 3**Highlights of annual performance for outcome 1, 'Clean, green future' for 2022/23**

Please see page 3 of the annual performance report for descriptions of colours against performance. In general, green is positive performance, amber denotes where further focus is required.

- Milestones: All Milestones set out for being achieved this year have been met. This has included positive progress on:
 - Increasing numbers of allotments.
 - Extreme weather assessments of critical infrastructure.
 - Creation of plans to improve sustainability of local energy systems.
- Performance Indicators:
 - The recycling rate of household waste continues to be high and increasing, and less than half a percent of waste is going to landfill. This positive position is due to the closure of the Council's landfill in 2019, and a new contract that extracts as much recyclates as possible from the waste before it is treated in an energy from waste plant.
 - Electricity and Gas consumption has not decreased and has seen some increases from last year. This is due to colder weather conditions, and increased ventilation requirements due to Covid.
- Comparison with others:
 - Our household recycling rate is higher than authorities similar to us and Scotland's average.
 - We are similar to the Scottish average for our carbon emissions and although we are lower than authorities similar to us, we have a long way to go to achieve Net Zero by 2045.

Source: Scottish Borders Council

Alignment of delivery plans

42. Making the best use of public resources is at the heart of delivering Best Value. With clear plans and strategies in place, and with sound governance and strong leadership, a council will be well placed to ensure that all of its resources are deployed to achieve its strategic priorities, meet the needs of its communities and deliver continuous improvement.

43. In our [Local Government Overview Report 2023](#), we acknowledged that budget constraints and increasing cost pressures are putting councils' finances under severe strain. An increasing proportion of funding is ringfenced or directed for national policy initiatives. While this is important to help deliver national priorities, it makes it challenging for councils to make decisions about how funds can be used at a local level, to meet local need. Increasingly difficult choices about spending priorities and service provision are having to be made. Delivering services differently should be focused on improving performance and outcomes in ways that are innovative, affordable, and sustainable.

The Council acknowledges further work is required to align the corporate plan to the budget setting process and to directorate delivery plans.

44. The Council acknowledges linking the overall vision expressed in the corporate plan to the budget and five-year financial plan, is a work in progress. The Council is also aware that departmental delivery plans need to be aligned to the overall vision for the Scottish Borders. The recent changes at senior officer level and Council directorate structure provides an opportunity to update directorate delivery plans. Work is underway to align the overarching corporate plans to directorate and financial plans.

Recruitment and retention are acknowledged as risk areas. The Council is implementing a departmental approach to workforce and succession planning. Updating its strategic people plan will be an important step to help address workforce challenges.

45. Staffing capacity was noted as an issue within the 2019 BVAR. The BVAR stated workforce management has developed slowly and planning the future workforce remains a key issue. Staffing capacity and filling vacancies is still noted as a significant risk for the Council within its risk reporting mechanisms.

46. The Council responded to the BVAR with four actions. This includes ensuring each department has a five-year people plan which aligns with the corporate plan and Fit for 2024 principles. A pilot of the new format of people plans took place within the E&I service. By March 2023, all services had started the new cycle with digital format people and succession plans.

47. The Council is currently updating its Strategic People Plan, 2016-21, due for completion in October/November 2023, after work is completed on the Council's future operating model. Updating the Strategic People Plan is an important step. This will help support workforce planning to reflect the Council's new directorates, following the changes in senior leadership structure, paragraph [57](#).

48. The Council has adopted a training matrix system for staff. This is a tool that evaluates current skills, training requirements and tracks the delivery of training. It can also support corporate workforce planning by giving a Council wide view of the skills and qualifications necessary to meet current and future business needs.

49. The Council has had some success in growing its own workforce. Scottish Borders has had difficulty in recruiting to social work posts and introduced an approach to growing its own social workers. This has resulted in 11 posts been filled through that scheme. The Council reviewed its position to recruiting teachers in 2022/23 and changed its approach to offer permanent positions, rather than temporary posts, where it was able to do so.

The Council is coming to the end of its five-year transformation programme Fit for 2024. The Council needs to demonstrate what improvements to service delivery have been achieved through this programme.

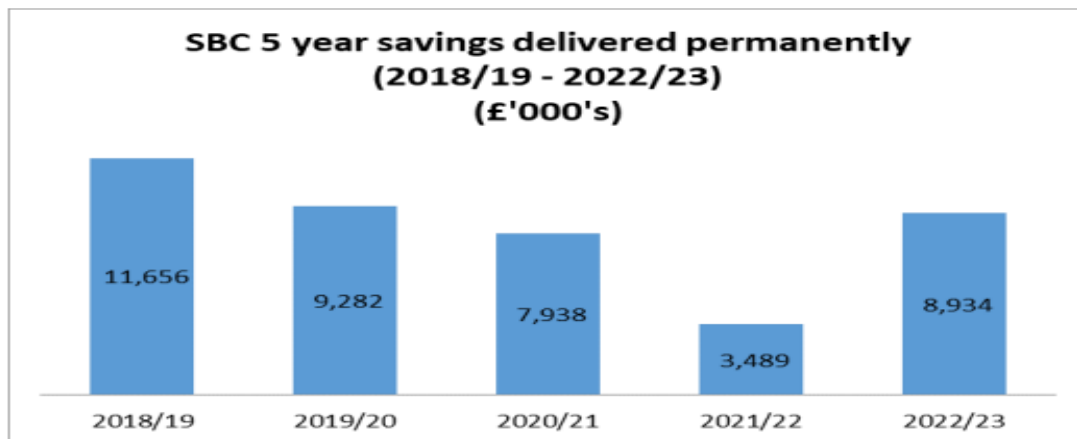
50. The Council is coming to the end of its five-year transformation programme 'Fit for 2024'. In reality, the five-year plan has been impacted by the need to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crises. The Council has managed to deliver financial stability over the course of this time.

51. Fit for 2024 has included a partnership with digital partner CGI to deliver on the approved Digital Strategy to make the Borders a 'smart rural region', an aim of Fit for 2024. The Council committed £34m of investment into digital infrastructure, including servers and WiFi access. A strand of this programme has involved enabling front line staff. Mobile devices have been provided to social workers, to support them in the recording of their work with clients, with the aim of freeing staff time from administration so more hours can be given to supporting clients.

52. The Council has reported the savings it has delivered in the financial outturn report for 2022/23 as seen in [Exhibit 4](#). The Council has achieved £8.9m of savings in 2022/23. As the Council nears the end of its five-year transformation programme it needs to set out the improvements to customer experience and service delivery that have also been achieved through this programme.

Exhibit 4: Delivery of savings

£8.9m of savings were delivered in 2022/23.



Source: Scottish Borders Council

Leadership

There has been a significant amount of change in the leadership of Scottish Borders Council since the last BVAR. There are examples of effective cross-party working and elected members have shaped the Council priorities. A period of stability in Council leadership will support moving forward with plans to deliver the vision for 2033.

53. Effective leadership from councillors, chief executives and senior officers, is key to councils achieving their objectives and providing clear strategic direction. The complex local government environment means collaborative leadership, working with partners, communities and citizens to improve outcomes is more important than ever.

54. Leaders need to be skilled in effective strategic thinking, decision-making and collaborative working and able to learn lessons from new ways of working. Councillors and officers must be clear on their roles in setting the vision and planning for its delivery.

55. Leaders should demonstrate behaviours and working relationships that foster a culture of cooperation, and a commitment to continuous improvement and innovation. Good conduct and behaviours when working together are crucial. Working relationships between members and between members and officers should be constructive and productive. Councillors should show a commitment to agreed council priorities and work together to achieve them.

56. The 2019 BVAR identified the following key messages:

- members and officers demonstrate a strong commitment to working together for the fulfilment of the vision, while effective governance arrangements ensure opportunity for challenge and scrutiny.
- In 2017, the Council saw many new elected members and offered a coordinated approach to induction. It now needs to support elected members through individual training plans.

57. There have been several changes in the Council since the 2019 BVAR report. Three Chief Executives have been in post since 2019. In January 2023 the current Chief Executive was appointed to the post, having been acting Chief Executive since June 2022. The Council has been steadily reorganising its senior leadership, moving from a model of two Executive Directors with supporting senior officers to the current model of Chief Executive and eight Directors. The post of Executive Director, Leading Stakeholder & External Relationships was removed in 2021, with functions reorganised within the Council and the post of Director of Corporate Governance was established in

2023. A period of stability in Council leadership will support moving forward with plans to deliver the vision for 2033.

The Council continues to demonstrate evidence of collaborative working between members of different political parties since the 2022 election.

58. The 2019 BVAR commented on the impact of many new members following the local council elections. There has also been a number of newly elected members joining the Council, following the elections in 2022. Twenty elected members were re-elected, and 14 newly elected members joined the Council. The Council administration continues to be led by the largest elected party, the Scottish Conservative and Unionists, as it has been since the 2017 election.

59. The Council has an Executive Committee with 17 members, half of all Council elected members. This operates as the overall strategic committee for the Council and has cross-party membership. Since October 2022, the Executive committee comprises of 10 Scottish Conservative and Unionist, 3 SNP, 3 Independent and 1 Scottish Liberal Democrat. The Executive Committee takes the following regular reports:

- revenue and capital spend
- quarterly and annual performance reports and
- updates on the Strategic Housing Investment Plan.

60. Council members worked collaboratively to set the Council budget for 2023/24. A cross party budget working group was established as a mechanism to support this. This was a good experience for the Council as it facilitated robust and frank early discussions that enabled scenarios and options to be worked through.

The Council has established a comprehensive induction programme to support elected members. It now needs to progress plans to put personal training and development plans in place for elected members.

61. The Council has put in place a comprehensive induction programme for all elected members, following the 2022 elections. The programme involved three phases, from May to Sep 2022. It covered both broad outcome areas - 'Clean, green, future' and 'Working together, improving lives' - and specific Council functions, such as licencing. The Council keeps a log of attendance at its training and induction events. The Council also understands the importance of ongoing training and awareness raising and will schedule a briefing session when the need arises.

62. The 2019 BVAR included the recommendation that the Council needs to support members' continuing professional development by tailoring training to meet their individual needs. The Council responded to this by deciding to use the Improvement Service elected member CPD to enable them to evaluate their continuing professional development needs. As at March 2023, five elected

members had taken up that offer. The Council should encourage uptake of personal development plans for elected members. Having personal development plans tailored to elected members' individual needs would allow the impact of all induction and training events to be evaluated.

Appendix 1

Improvement Action plan

Issue/risk	Recommendation	Agreed management action/timing
1. Refresh of the community plan.	Scottish Borders Council should ensure it prioritises progressing the refresh of the community plan according to milestones set on the Council plan.	The Community Plan will be fully refreshed during 2023. Director, Resilient Communities, Jenni Craig September 2023
2. Ensure its performance management framework includes clearer outcome based targets for the next ten years, so it can demonstrate progress against outcomes.	Scottish Borders Council should ensure its performance management framework captures progress against the Council plan. This should include actions being met according to target milestone and progress against the six Council outcomes.	A revised performance management framework will be developed to report performance against Council Plan strategic outcome to the Executive Committee on a quarterly Basis. Director People, Performance and Change, Clair Hepburn September 2023
3. Transformation, innovation and service improvement.	Report on improvements to service delivery and customer experience that have been achieved through Fit for 2024. Set out how innovation and transformation will be taken forward over the next 5 years.	Reporting of Transformation Outcomes and improvements will be developed during 2023. The Council will develop a new target Operating model to deliver improvements in service delivery, performance and ensure the Council is resourced to deliver its strategic priorities. Chief Executive March 2024
4. Elected member leadership.	Scottish Borders Council should encourage uptake of personal development plans	A new policy on elected member training and development, tailored to the

for elected members. These should be flexible to individual needs and be able to show that training is meeting needs.

Scottish Borders Council should continue to support opportunities for cross-party working and promote the benefits that brings.

needs of individuals by through a training survey will be agreed and implemented for all members.

Chief Executive, David Robertson

October 2023

5. Senior officer leadership.

Scottish Borders Council should review the senior management structure after a period of stability to determine how the changes at directorate level are supporting delivery of the Council vision.

Position will be reviewed and reported to Council as part of work on developing a new Operating Model for the Council

Chief Executive, David Robertson

December 2023

6. Planning for the workforce.

Scottish Borders Council should prioritise improvement activity on planning for the workforce and addressing vacancies and hard to fill posts.

People planning will be fully aligned with service and financial planning as part of the budget process for financial year 204/25.

Director People Performance and Change, Clair Hepburn

February 2024

Leadership of the development of new local strategic priorities

Best Value thematic work in Scottish Borders Council 2022-23

Audit Scotland's published material is available for download on the website in a number of formats. For information on our accessibility principles, please visit:

www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/accessibility

For the latest news follow us on social media or [subscribe to our email alerts.](#)



Audit Scotland, 4th Floor, 102 West Port, Edinburgh EH3 9DN
Phone: 0131 625 1500 Email: info@audit-scotland.gov.uk
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk