

# Leadership of the development of new local strategic priorities

Best Value thematic work in West Dunbartonshire Council 2022-23

October 2023

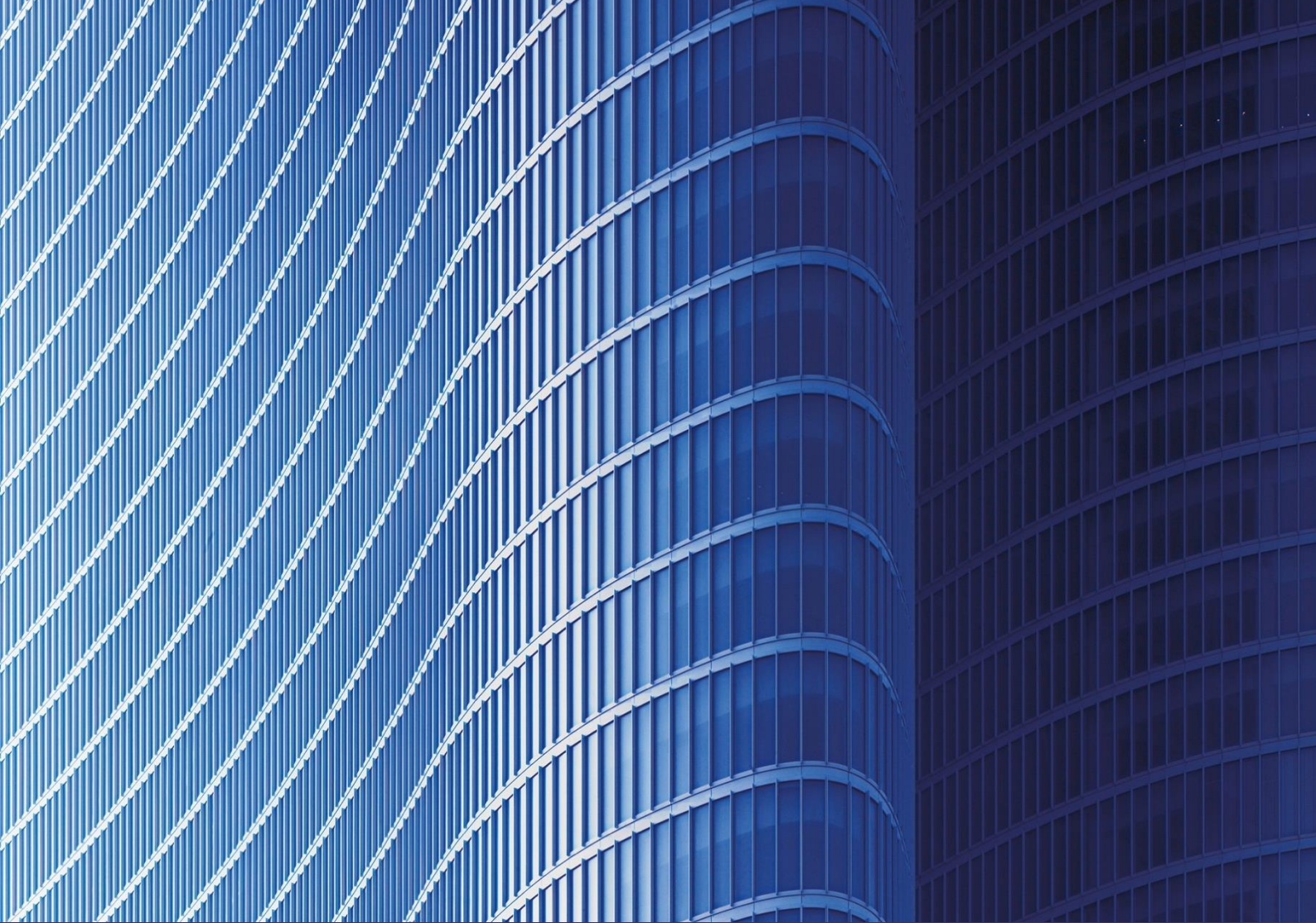
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Our reports are prepared in accordance with Terms of Appointment Letter from Audit Scotland dated 18 May 2022 through which the Accounts Commission has appointed us as external auditor of West Dunbartonshire Council (the council) for financial years 2022/23 to 2026/27. We undertake our audit in accordance with Part VII of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, as amended; and our responsibilities as set out within Audit Scotland's Code of Audit Practice 2021.

Reports and letters prepared by appointed auditors and addressed to the council are prepared for the sole use of the council and made available to Audit Scotland, the Accounts Commission and the Controller of Audit. We take no responsibility to any member or officer in their individual capacity or to any other third party.

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# 1. Key messages

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## Overview of engagement

A summary of the judgements we have made for each section is detailed below:

### **How clear is the new council vision and its priorities?**

The council has a clear vision with three outward facing priorities and one inward looking. The council's strategic plan sets out objectives, measures of success and key commitments under each priority.

### **How effectively have the views of citizens and communities been reflected in the priorities and decisions taken by the council?**

The council knows it needs to work effectively with citizens and communities to achieve its strategic objectives. Community budgeting and participatory budgeting are two ways it is involving local people in decision making.

### **How effectively do the council priorities reflect the need to reduce inequalities and climate change?**

Actions to reduce inequalities and combat climate change underpin the council's priorities and objectives. One of its strategic priorities specifically covers environmental sustainability. The council is focussing on providing support to communities affected by the cost-of-living crisis.

### **How good are the delivery plans and is there alignment of financial, workforce, asset and digital plans with the council's priorities?**

The council's delivery plans, and workforce and digital strategies are aligned with its strategic plan. It can demonstrate 2023/24 budget decisions which reflected its strategic priorities. The council's financial strategy had not been updated since 2021. Officers have developed a new financial strategy, which is due to be submitted to Council in December 2023.

### **Overall, how effective has the leadership been (political and officer) in setting clear priorities and a sustainable approach to delivering them?**

Administration elected members and officers worked together to agree clear strategic priorities, objectives, and measures of success. The council needs to maintain effective leadership to continue to achieve its priorities and make the difficult decisions to respond to its challenging financial position.

## Other reporting

Where relevant to this thematic work, we have followed up Best Value Assurance Report and previous Annual Audit Report findings.



## 2. Scope of the audit

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When discussing the Local Government in Scotland Overview 2022, William Moyes, Chair of the Accounts Commission said: “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.”

This report concludes on the effectiveness of the council’s leadership of the development of the council’s strategic priorities, following the recent local government elections.

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 2020 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. <sup>1</sup>

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.

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.



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?

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.

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](#).



### 3. Council vision and priorities



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**The council has a clear vision with three outward facing priorities and one inward looking. The council's strategic plan sets out objectives, measures of success and key commitments under each priority.**

#### **Background**

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.

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 impacts of Covid-19. Following the council elections in May 2021, councils will have reviewed their priorities.

#### **Detailed reporting on Council vision and priorities**

**Has the council published a clear vision, with clear priorities for the council? Is it communicated to its citizens, staff and other partners?**

The council adopted its Strategic Plan 2022 - 2027 in October 2022. This sets a clear vision and key commitments for the council over the five-year period. It has three outward looking priorities:

- Our communities are resilient and thriving.
- Our environment promotes a greener future.
- Our economy is strong and flourishing.

It also has an inward facing priority; our council is inclusive and adaptable. This priority aims to ensure it is a transformational and modern council demonstrating Best Value. The strategic plan includes clear objectives and performance measures for each priority.

The council promoted the strategic plan to the public and its partners through its website, intranet and social media, as well as local and regional press. It also shared the plan with the Citizens Panel, a group of residents who have volunteered to give their views on local issues and priorities.

The strategic plan was considered by the council's senior manager network (over 200 of the council's managers) in a session to consider how services would contribute to the four priorities. The plan is included as part of employee training and induction programmes.

**Were the council's priorities developed with partners and aligned with their priorities?**

The council developed its strategic priorities with partners and communities. This started before the May 2022 elections with a review of all consultations, benchmarking, engagement with the Citizens Panel and telephone surveys leading to the development of a strategic needs assessment (SNA). The SNA incorporated local and national data, statistics, and published information from council services and partner organisations. The council also asked every chief officer for feedback on the SNA.

In August 2022 the council held a development day with elected members and council and West Dunbartonshire Health and Social Care Partnership chief officers to discuss the strategic plan. This involved breakout sessions in smaller groups to consider:

- Do we have the right priorities?
- Do we have the right objectives?
- Do we have the right measures?

The feedback from the session was reflected in the strategic plan.

The council consulted with residents on its strategic priorities and objectives through an online survey. The survey was also shared with community planning partners and the equalities forum. The council achieved reasonable engagement, with 268 responses received. The feedback showed most respondents agreed with the priorities and underlying objectives.

The council also consulted with staff, trade unions and its equalities group. The draft strategic plan was included on the agenda of the community planning partnership, Community Planning West Dunbartonshire (CPWD).

There is a clear link between the council's priorities and those of CPWD. The strategic plan shows how the council's priorities align with CPWD's priorities set out in the Local Outcome Improvement Plan 2017-27, with three overarching themes:

- Empowered
- Sustainability
- Wellbeing.

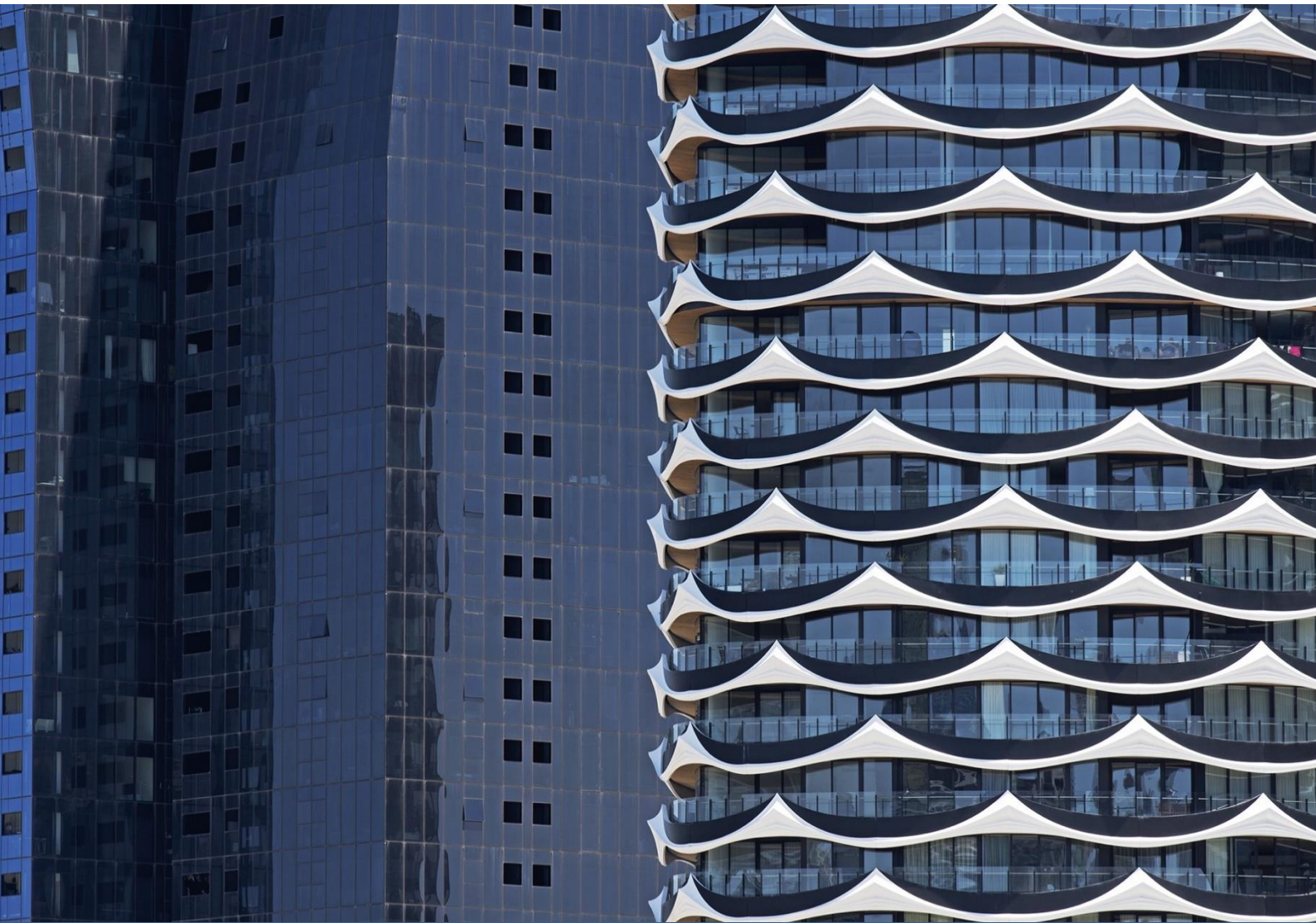
### **Has the council clearly set out what performance it wants to achieve in its priority areas?**

The council has described what success will look like for each of its objectives. The strategic plan also includes measures of success for each priority and sets out key commitments.

The strategic plan measures are based on improving key performance indicators over the five years of the plan. Services are responsible for setting targets for these measures in delivery plans and regularly monitoring and reporting progress.

### **Improvement recommendations**

We have not identified any risks or weaknesses as part of this thematic review section.



## 4. Citizen and community engagement

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**The council knows it needs to work effectively with citizens and communities to achieve its strategic objectives. Community budgeting and participatory budgeting are two ways it is involving local people in decision making.**

### **Background**

Recovery from the pandemic will require councils to work alongside their local communities. There must be a focus on getting the services people need in place as pressures and stresses escalate and impact the day to day lives of individuals and 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.

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.

### **Detailed reporting on citizen and community engagement**

**Is community empowerment reflected in the high-level goals of the council and embedded in strategic plans?**

The council knows it needs to work effectively with citizens and communities to achieve its strategic objectives. The strategic plan sets out how the council will work in partnership with residents and create opportunities for citizens and communities to shape services.

The council developed its Community Empowerment Strategy and Action Plan with the community to provide a shared vision of empowerment. The council aims to improve community empowerment by understanding the barriers that prevent or delay it. It reports progress to the Community Empowerment Project Board, which is chaired by a chief officer.

## **To what extent is the organisation involving local people in decision making processes?**

The council is using community budgeting and participatory budgeting to involve local people in decision making.

Community budgeting is a method of allocating small grants to community groups and organisations. Groups can apply directly and decisions on which groups receive funding is made by local people through a voting process. The council's communities team works with local people to shape the community budgeting programme.

The latest phase of community budgeting (phase six) focused on opportunities for young people. It included young people in the development of the project through survey and focus group discussions. The council made £190,000 available to groups across West Dunbartonshire. It invited groups to make applications for funding of up to £5,000 to support activities taking place in local communities that benefit young people.

Participatory budgeting is a method of encouraging community participation and directing resources to communities where it is most needed. Scottish councils have a target to allocate 1% of annual budgets using participatory budgeting.

The council completed a participatory budgeting pilot, Your Communities: Your Choice. Residents were invited to focus groups and to become budget delegates for the process. Around 150 people attended these sessions. The pilot allowed people to generate ideas and vote on where £100,000 should be spent on initiatives to help maintain active, healthy lives. The council has identified actions and learning points for the next phase of the project.

The council's participatory budgeting steering group is developing a mainstreaming policy to:

- Ensure the council has a corporate approach to participatory budgeting.
- Embed a culture of community influenced service design.
- Raise awareness and promote cultural change across the organisation.
- Ensure the council continues to meet and, over time, exceeds the 1% participatory budgeting target.

## **Are councils learning from the innovative ways communities were involved in developing and delivering support during the pandemic and putting more flexible governance and decision-making structures in place now to provide more opportunities for more local participation in decision making?**

The council is considering how it can support more local participation in decision making.

The West Dunbartonshire Community Alliance was set up to ensure community representation on the CPWD Management Board. It was disbanded in 2022 due to lack of interest from residents. Since then, the council's communities team has been working to ensure the views of West Dunbartonshire's communities are represented in CPWD.

The council is developing a new approach to involving communities and citizens in CPWD, with the support of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), through online forums and in-person events.

The council is finding more flexible and innovative ways to involve communities in decision making. For example, Community Soup is an events-based programme to encourage community engagement by using a hot meal to bring people from the local area together.

### **Improvement recommendations**

We have not identified any risks or weaknesses as part of this thematic review section.



## 5. Reducing inequalities and tackling climate change

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**Actions to reduce inequalities and combat climate change underpin the council's priorities and objectives. One of its strategic priorities specifically covers environmental sustainability. The council is focussing on providing support to communities affected by the cost-of-living crisis.**

### Background

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.

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 supports those most affected and addresses inequalities.

Around two-thirds of councils 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.

### Detailed reporting on reducing inequalities and tackling climate change

**How clearly does the council and its community planning partners reflect its plans to reduce inequalities in its vision and strategic priorities?**

Chief officers and elected members are very aware of the high levels of inequality experienced by West Dunbartonshire citizens. Many of the council's strategic objectives focus on delivering improved outcomes for all residents. The council's plans for recovery and renewal after Covid-19 are also reflected in the strategic plan.

The council is supporting communities affected by the cost-of-living crisis. For example, through its cost-of-living fund. The council set up a £1 million fund in June 2022 and added a further £1 million in December 2022. It formed a cross-party member and officer Cost of Living Working Group to discuss and monitor progress and allocate funding. Programmes funded include gym memberships for 14 to 18 years olds, free swim access for under 18s, support to foodbanks and energy initiatives.

The council also created a £565,000 fund, in the 2023/24 budget, to provide financial assistance to its most disadvantaged tenants.

The council launched a cost-of-living capital fund in October 2022. This supports council and community organisations with capital costs for cost-of-living projects. The council made £1 million available initially and has awarded funding to a range of local groups.

Chief officers and elected members see regeneration as key to providing better opportunities for citizens and communities. This is captured in the "Our economy is strong and flourishing" strategic priority. It is working with partners on regeneration projects, including development of the former Exxon site as part of the Glasgow City Region City Deal.



## **Does the council have an agreed action plan aimed at tackling inequality, poverty and addressing fairness issues identified in local communities?**

The council's strategic plan and delivery plans set out actions to tackle inequality and poverty in West Dunbartonshire. This includes commitments to support young people and create employment opportunities for disadvantaged people.

The council has committed to addressing child poverty. It has documented the challenges, its aspirations, and the activities to achieve this in the Local Child Poverty Annual Report. The report sets out the progress the council has made.

The West Dunbartonshire Local Employability Partnership brings partners together to ensure a joint approach to supporting local employability. Employability is defined as the processes that enable people:

- to progress towards and get into employment
- to stay in employment
- to progress in the workplace.

The group includes representatives from the council, NHS, central government, local college, and voluntary organisations. It provides progress reports to the council. The outcomes of the partnership's work are reported in its Local Employability Operating Plan.

## **Does the council use equality impact assessments and Fairer Scotland assessments to inform its strategic decisions? Is the council identifying a need to implement human rights based approaches in its design and delivery of services?**

The council's Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) incorporate the Fairer Scotland duty and consider human rights implications. Officers are required to complete EIAs before recommending decisions which affect the community and equality groups. EIAs are included as an appendix to council and committee reports which require a decision.

Annual equalities training, which includes human rights, is mandatory for senior officers. The council also provides EIA training throughout the year.

The council's Equality and Diversity Working Group, which includes elected members and officers, meets quarterly. The group's work includes:

- considering new legislation and service impact
- reviewing initiatives or projects to advance equalities
- monitoring the council's progress against equalities outcomes.

## **How clearly does the council reflect sustainability of the environment, and in particular climate change, in its vision and priorities?**

One of the council's new strategic priorities covers environmental sustainability, "Our environment promotes a greener future". Under this priority, the council has a specific objective on its response to climate change, "Our resources are used in an environmentally sustainable way".

The council's environmental outcomes include reducing CO2 emissions in the local area by working with residents and businesses. It also aims to ensure the economy and infrastructure of the area are low carbon and environmentally friendly.

The council has developed a Climate Change Strategy which is its route map to net zero emissions. This outlines the council's plans for reducing its environmental impact over five years from 2021/22 and beyond. It also has a Climate Change Action Plan setting out actions it will take now and in the longer term to mitigate climate change and adjust to its impact. This includes overarching and service specific actions.

## **Improvement recommendations**

We have not identified any risks or weaknesses as part of this thematic review section.



## 6. Alignment of delivery plans

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**The council's delivery plans, and workforce and digital strategies are aligned with its strategic plan. It can demonstrate 2023/24 budget decisions which reflected its strategic priorities. The council's financial strategy had not been updated since 2021. Officers have developed a new financial strategy, which is due to be submitted to Council in December 2023.**

### Background

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.

### Detailed reporting on alignment of delivery plans

**Are the council priorities clearly reflected in service plans? Do service plans demonstrate how the council will improve in its service priority areas?**

The council's delivery plans set out how it will achieve its strategic priorities. Each service has a delivery plan with:

- actions to be taken by the service to support the strategic plan
- work to address performance challenges
- service priorities identified in the planning process.

The delivery plans include action plans aligned to the council's strategic priorities and objectives. These have performance indicators and annual targets to measure improvement.

**Is there evidence that the council has effectively aligned its 2023/24 budget to its new priorities?**

The council's 2023/24 budget reflected its strategic priorities. There is evidence of budget decisions that support the council's four priorities. The council also made revenue and capital budget available to reduce inequalities, for example by supporting the cost-of-living funds and providing financial assistance to disadvantaged tenants.

**Can the council demonstrate how engagement with its citizens and communities have influenced its budget decisions?**

The council undertook Citizens Panel and telephone surveys during 2022 and reported the results in advance of the budget decisions taken in March 2023. It is not clear how this directly influenced budget decisions. However, as noted previously, residents were consulted on the council's strategic plan and the 2023/24 budget reflected these strategic priorities.

The council has consulted more widely on its 2024/25 budget through an online survey on its website, with findings presented to Council in October 2023.

## **Does the council have a medium term and / or long-term plan that effectively demonstrates that financial resources are allocated to deliver its new priorities?**

The council has not updated its long-term financial strategy since October 2021. It decided not to refresh the strategy in 2022 due to officers implementing a new approach to setting the budget and uncertainty over future funding levels. The council instead extended financial planning assumptions to cover a five-year period to ensure elected members remained informed of its longer-term financial position.

Officers present four financial updates a year to Council meetings. These provide an update on the financial challenges facing the council and estimated revenue budget gaps under best case, worst case and mid-range scenarios. Scenarios are based on assumptions that are updated by officers on an ongoing basis.

The council faces a very challenging financial position. It is forecasting cumulative budget gaps in the mid-range scenario, as reported to Council in October 2023, of:

- £17.3 million in 2024/25
- £24.0 million in 2025/26
- £32.0 million in 2026/27
- £40.1 million in 2027/28
- £48.7 million in 2028/29.

The council has updated its long-term financial strategy which will be presented to Council for approval in December 2023. This will use the same methodology as the financial updates to forecast future budget gaps. The council should use its financial strategy to demonstrate how it will ensure its finances are sustainable.

## **Do the council's annual and longer-term capital plans include projects that are aligned to the asset plans to support improved services? Is the extent of 'slippage' on key projects a concern?**

The council is working to improve management of the ten-year capital plan. This includes reducing capital commitments and strengthening the process for assessing new capital projects. The council's Strategic Asset Management Group reviews new capital projects to assess affordability and ensure they align with the council's strategic priorities.

Officers are in the process of reviewing capital reporting arrangements to ensure clearer reporting on the progress of projects and reduce the resource required to prepare reports. The new arrangements are to be implemented on 1 April 2024 to ensure they are established for the next financial year.

It will take time for these actions to have an impact. The council reported an underspend of £70 million against its £132 million capital budget for 2022/23.

## **Does the council have an asset strategy and plans in place that demonstrate that it has the right assets to support delivery of services in line with its priorities?**

The council is reviewing how it can make best use of assets to support delivery of its strategic priorities. This is captured in several plans and strategies covering:

- corporate assets
- property assets

- the learning estate
- asset disposals.

The council is working to consolidate its estate, for example by creating learning campuses to provide services to young people in the area in a central location. It officially opened the Renton Campus in September 2022. This includes a primary school, early learning, additional support needs base and childcare centre.

### **Are workforce plans in place, across the council, that demonstrate that it has the staff in place with the skills required to deliver services in line with its priorities?**

The council's People First Strategy 2022-2027 sets out how its people will support delivery of the strategic plan. It combines the council's strategies for:

- Wellbeing
- Workforce planning
- Employee engagement
- Learning and development
- Digital transformation.

The strategy is based on the employee life cycle and focuses on a different stage each year. The first year covers attraction, on-boarding and recruitment.

The council implemented an updated workforce planning strategy and framework in February 2023. This aims to ensure council services have:

- The right shape
- The right skill set
- The right number of employees
- People in the right location
- People at the right time and within budget.

It includes a toolkit for managers to support effective workforce planning.

In recent years, the council's challenging financial position and ageing workforce has affected capacity. The council has earmarked funds to support a programme of controlled early retirement and severance, which is further reducing staff numbers. It has found recruitment into some roles to be challenging and is looking at different approaches. For example, through graduate, school leaver and modern apprenticeship programmes.

Services are also responsible for workforce planning and this forms part of their delivery plans. Services report headcount and absence levels in delivery plans but do not routinely identify resource gaps.

The council has developed an approach to identifying skills and capacity gaps. It is using an internally developed workforce planning console to monitor employee data. This provides managers with real time management information. Going forward, the console will incorporate data that will help officers to identify resource gaps and capture these in workforce plans.

## **Does the council have a digital strategy and plans in place that demonstrate how digital infrastructure and innovation supports delivery of services in line with its priorities?**

The council recognises that digital transformation will help it deliver services more effectively. It has recently reviewed and updated its digital strategy. The council is aiming to use technology better to support service delivery and provide employees with the technology needed to do their jobs effectively. It is considering how innovation and automation can improve service delivery.

Fit for Future is the council's approach to service innovation. Subject matter experts are brought into a service to review it, make recommendations, and identify savings. Seven Fit for Future reviews have been carried out across seven service areas. The review team reports findings back to the service using infographics and show and tell presentations. The reviews have helped services to identify budget savings options.

The council has started to automate some services. For example, it is using bots to administer transactional processes including parts of payroll and the early stages of the recruitment process.

The Scottish Local Government Digital Office carried out a digital maturity assessment of the council in 2022. This found that the council had continued to perform well since its last assessment in 2019. The council's digital agenda and expectations and understanding of digital had increased which resulted in a higher digital maturity assessment score.

### **Improvement recommendations**

We have not identified any risks or weaknesses as part of this thematic review section.

## Best Value Assurance Report findings for alignment of delivery plans

We have followed up on Best Value Assurance Report findings, see the table below for the progress the council has made during 2022/23.

Original finding as reported by previous auditor	Management response and implementation timeframe	Work undertaken and judgements made in 2022/23	Conclusions reached
<p><b>2018 Best Value Assurance Report</b></p> <p><b>Capital plan slippage</b></p> <p>To reduce the level of slippage on the capital plan, the council should review its project management processes.</p>	<p>Management Response: (West Dunbartonshire Council Best Value Assurance Improvement Plan – July 2018):</p> <p>Carry out review of current practice against good practice guide and identification of improvement actions.</p> <p>Analysis of drivers of slippage in capital projects (previous five years) to identify common issues and improvement actions.</p> <p>Update project management framework and supporting policies/ guidance.</p> <p>Put in place review programme for project management framework.</p> <p>Implementation timescale: January 2019</p>	<p><b>Progress against the recommendation</b></p> <p>We discussed progress with council officers and reviewed supporting documentation.</p> <p>The council has improved the management of its capital plan by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reviewing the ten-year capital plan to reduce capital commitments.</li> <li>• Strengthening the process to assess future bids for additions to the capital programme.</li> <li>• Regular reporting to council and service committees through budgetary control reports.</li> </ul> <p>Officers planned to review capital reporting arrangements in 2023/24 to ensure clearer reporting on the progress of projects and reduce the resource required to prepare reports.</p> <p>It will take time for these actions to have an impact. The council reported an underspend of £70 million against its £132 million capital budget for 2022/23.</p>	<p><b>Conclusions</b></p> <p>The council continues to report significant slippage on the capital plan. In response, it has improved management of its capital plan and is reviewing capital reporting arrangements.</p>



Original finding as reported by previous auditor	Management response and implementation timeframe	Work undertaken and judgements made in 2022/23	Conclusions reached
<p><b>2018 Best Value Assurance Report</b></p> <p><b>Staff absence</b></p> <p>Some staff are finding the pace of change challenging and staff absence remains an issue. The council is taking positive steps to try and address this and should continue to explore opportunities for improvement.</p>	<p>Management Response (West Dunbartonshire Council Best Value Assurance Improvement Plan – July 2018):</p> <p>Implement action plans supporting employee wellbeing strategy with focus specifically on physical and mental health.</p> <p>Additional functionality to be added to workforce management system to enable more effective reporting/ management of sickness absence.</p> <p>Target team specific change support/ training on a project by project basis.</p> <p>Introduce routine scrutiny of attendance management process compliance through workforce management system reports.</p> <p>Lean process improvement approach embedded in wider strategic improvement framework.</p> <p>Implementation timescale: October 2019</p>	<p>The council has taken a range of actions to support staff and reduce absence. This includes forming groups and networks to improve employee wellbeing.</p> <p>Employee wellbeing is part of the council's People First Strategy. The council is working to ensure its people have regular open and honest conversations with managers about wellbeing and can proactively access help and support for their mental and physical health.</p> <p>It will take time for the impact of this work to be reflected in sickness absence data.</p> <p>The 2022/23 Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) data shows that sickness absence days per employee have increased to 6.4 days for teachers and 15.3 days for other local government employees. The council's position against other councils has declined to 12<sup>th</sup> for teachers and 27<sup>th</sup> for other local government employees.</p> <p>The council's own performance data shows that there has been a small improvement in full time equivalent days lost per employee for all staff (14 full time equivalent average days lost in 2022/23 compared to 14.55 average days in 2021/22).</p>	<p><b>Conclusions</b></p> <p>The council has taken action to support staff and reduce absence. It has a longer-term plan to improve employee wellbeing over the next five years.</p> <p>It will take time for this work to have an impact and the latest LGBF data shows that the council's sickness absence rates have increased and its performance relative to other Scottish councils has declined.</p>



## 7. Leadership

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**Administration elected members and officers worked together to agree clear strategic priorities, objectives, and measures of success. The council needs to maintain effective leadership to continue to achieve its priorities and make the difficult decisions to respond to its challenging financial position.**

### Background

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.

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.

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.

### Detailed reporting on leadership

**Is there effective collaborative working between members and with members and officers towards the achievement of the priorities?**

The council's Chief Executive, appointed in June 2022, and Council Leader have a good working relationship and meet regularly. The Chief Executive, Leader and chief officers have weekly meetings covering areas including the council's finances, emerging issues and communications. They also have monthly or bi-monthly meetings focused on performance and transformation.

Officers and administration elected members worked together to develop a strategic plan with clear priorities, objectives, and measures of success. The council has established budget working groups to ensure budget decisions and savings are agreed early and in line with the council's priorities. Meetings involve the Leader, Deputy Leader, Chief Executive and chief officers. These start in August and continue until the budget is agreed by Council.

The cost-of-living working group is another example of elected members (including opposition councillors) and officers collaborating to make decisions that benefit the community.

The council's elected member led service committees are responsible for monitoring the progress of service delivery plans and scrutinising performance. Officers report progress to service committees twice a year.

Elected members and officers need to continue working effectively for the council to achieve its strategic priorities and address its challenging financial position.

**Have any issues been identified with the capacity and skills of senior officers that could impact on the ability of the council to deliver its objectives?**

The number of chief officers reduced by 0.5 full time equivalent in 2023. The Chief Executive reviewed the organisational structure at chief officer level. Following this review, the council agreed a new organisational structure with the remaining senior officers all taking on additional responsibilities. There is a risk that the new structure could impact on the capacity of the leadership team with chief officers having a wide range of duties.

The council is using its new structure to ensure services are better aligned. It hopes this will create efficiencies and increase chief officer capacity by encouraging services to work more closely together. The council should continue to review the capacity of its leadership team to deliver its strategic priorities and objectives (see Appendix 1, action 1).

The council has a new senior leadership programme in place and coaching is offered to all senior leaders when they are appointed.

### **Have any issues been identified with the skills of elected members that could impact on their ability to scrutinise and make decisions that contribute to the council delivering its objectives?**

The council put in place an induction programme for new and returning councillors. It has continued to offer training as regular seminars covering key issues facing the council. The council also offers elected members support to prepare personal development plans and access to learning tools.

Elected members demonstrate a good level of scrutiny and challenge at council and audit committee meetings.

### **Improvement recommendations**

Any improvement recommendations that have been identified as part of our work on the council's leadership have been reflected in the action plan at Appendix 1, action plan reference numbers have been included in the wording above.



# Appendices

1: Improvement Action plan

## Appendix 1 – Improvement Action plan

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Level 1</b>	The identified risk and/or significant deficiency is critical to the business processes or the achievement of business strategic objectives. There is potential for financial loss, damage to reputation or loss of information. The recommendation should be taken into consideration by management immediately.
<b>Level 2</b>	The identified risk and/or significant deficiency may impact on individual objectives or business processes. The audited body should implement the recommendation to strengthen internal controls or enhance business efficiency. The recommendations should be actioned in the near future.
<b>Level 3</b>	The identified risk and/or significant deficiency is an area for improvement or less significant. In our view, the audited body should action the recommendation, but management do not need to prioritise.

The table overleaf details the issues/risks that we have identified as part of this thematic review and our recommendations to the council to address.

Issue/risk	Rating	Recommendation	Agreed management action/ timing
<p><b>1. Leadership capacity</b></p> <p>The number of chief officers reduced by 0.5 full time equivalent in 2023. The Chief Executive reviewed the organisational structure at chief officer level. Following this review, the council agreed a new organisational structure with the remaining senior officers all taking on additional responsibilities.</p> <p><b>Risk</b> – Senior officers do not have the capacity to support the council to achieve its priorities.</p>	Level 2	The council should review whether its leadership team has sufficient capacity to deliver its strategic priorities and objectives.	<p><b>Management’s response</b></p> <p>The Chief Executive carried out an extensive review in June 2023 prior to the revised structure being presented to Committee. This included consultation with all Chief Officers and the Council administration. The review considered capacity, revised workloads and which services would work best within the same Chief Officer area to enable the council to achieve its strategic objectives. As with any senior structure it will be kept under review however it is considered premature to undertake a more formal review until the structure has been in place for sufficient time to test the new arrangements. Accordingly we agree that a review is appropriate in the timescale indicated.</p> <p><b>Responsible officer</b></p> <p>Chief Executive</p> <p><b>Implementation date</b></p> <p>September 2024</p>

## Leadership of the development of the council's strategic priorities

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