

Best Value thematic work 2022/23

# Dumfries and Galloway Council

Leadership in the development of the council's  
strategic priorities



 AUDIT SCOTLAND

Prepared by Audit Scotland

June 2023

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# Key messages

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- 1** The council's leadership have been effective in setting out a clear vision and priorities in the Council Plan 2023-28.
- 2** The council engaged effectively with citizens, communities and staff when developing its vision and priorities. The council has a strong track record in community engagement and working with local communities is part of the culture of the council.
- 3** There is effective collaborative working between members and with members and officers. There is an annual delivery statement that sets out actions to deliver the Council Plan 2023-28 strategic outcomes. Service business plans are now key to demonstrating how the council will deliver its priorities, these are due to be presented to service committees in August 2023.
- 4** The council has agreed a three-year budget covering the period 2023/24 - 2025/26 as part of its ongoing development of a medium-term financial strategy. While the council has a strong track-record in developing and delivering savings to ensure balanced budgets, initial work shows that the delivery of further financial savings to balance future budgets is a significant challenge. The council's financial plans are aligned to the Council Plan 2023-28. However, the council will need to prioritise its use of resources to deliver its priorities and difficult decisions on how services are delivered will need to be taken. Workforce plans need to be updated to demonstrate how the workforce will support delivery of these priorities.
- 5** Elected members have agreed a cross party, programme of service change to support future financial sustainability and prioritisation of services. The council now need to demonstrate their ability to deliver on the council's priorities and improve outcomes for its citizens. Leadership recognise that an innovative approach needs to be taken when considering how services will be delivered in the future. It is key that the planned performance reporting framework is now progressed to monitor service performance and delivery of its priorities.
- 6** The council's leadership demonstrate a collective commitment to Best Value, through self-evaluation and support for continuous improvement. However, the discussion of benchmarking information with members, could help to learn from others and prioritise improvement actions more effectively. The

council has made good progress in addressing the recommendations in the 2018 [Best Value Assurance Report](#).

- 7** Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) data is used by officers but is not discussed with elected members to show how the council compares to others and how lessons could be learned. The high-level data shows overall, indicators have improved over time but at a slower rate than councils across Scotland. The 2022/23 Annual Audit Report will reflect on the council's reported assessment of its performance against its priorities.
- 8** The council is working with its community planning partners to reduce inequalities through delivery of the Local Outcomes Improvement Plan. The Council Plan 2023-28 is based upon a core set of principles that include addressing both inequalities and the climate emergency.
- 9** The Council Plan 2023-28 is silent on whether the council it is still working towards its 2019 target of achieving net zero carbon emissions in Dumfries and Galloway by 2025.
- 10** The council's improvement actions from this review are included at [Appendix 1](#) of this report. It sets out the council's response to audit recommendations made. Progress will be reported through Annual Audit Reports.

# Scope of the audit

1. When discussing the Local government in Scotland Overview 2022, the Accounts Commission 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 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 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

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.



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. This report reflects upon and includes an update on the areas covered by recommendations in the [Dumfries and Galloway Council Best Value Assurance Report](#) (BVAR) published in November 2018.

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](#).

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# Council vision and priorities

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**The Council Plan 2023-28 sets out clearly the council's priorities and was developed in consultation with citizens, community planning partners and staff**

**9.** A council focussed on achieving Best Value will be able to demonstrate that elected members and officers have a clear vision and priorities for their area. The council's website page on strategies, plans and policies includes the latest Council Plan 2023-28.

**10.** From 20 December 2022 to 31 January 2023, the council consulted with citizens, community planning partners and staff on the draft Council Plan 2023-28 prior to its approval by the Council on 28 February 2023. Members were also presented with documents showing a communication activity overview with community councils, council news subscribers, social media, council website, staff focus groups and posters in customer facing facilities. They received an overview of consultation responses and the changes made to the draft Council Plan as a result of feedback received. The changes made reflected the feedback that the principles required greater prominence and climate change needed to be referenced earlier within the plan. Greater emphasis was put on explaining sustainable travel and the role it can play in the climate crisis.

**11.** Three staff focus groups were held in January 2023 with representatives from all services attending to provide feedback on the draft Council Plan. The Council Plan 2023-28 is focussed on four themes:

- Economy
- Travel, connectivity and infrastructure
- Education and learning
- Health and wellbeing.


**12.** Each theme includes a set of strategic outcomes and there are a total of twenty-three strategic outcomes across the four themes. These themes will guide council decisions and how it delivers services as it operates in line with a core set of principles. The principles are how the council will deliver the strategic outcomes in the Council Plan and these are:

- Safeguard our future – by addressing the climate emergency and protecting the region's natural capital.

- Support our citizens – by putting customers at the heart of services, addressing inequalities, supporting the most vulnerable and in need and offering digital services.
- Support our communities – by empowering communities and individuals, focusing on local and place, working in partnership and investing to enable change.
- Be a responsive Council – by communicating openly, maintaining sustainable finances, being organised to deliver, maintaining high standards and making best use of resources.

13. The contents of the Council Plan 2023-28 as described above are summarised in [Exhibit 1](#) .

## Exhibit 1 Summary of Council Plan 2023-28



# Council Plan on a Page





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**VISION:** Our ambition is to be a **successful region**, with a **growing economy**, based on **fairness, opportunity and quality public services**, where all citizens prosper. Working in partnership, with **connected, healthy and sustainable communities**.

The region will be **the natural place to live, work, visit and invest**.





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### Principles

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|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Safeguard our future</b> </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address the climate emergency</li> <li>• Protect our natural capital</li> </ul> | <p><b>Support our citizens</b> </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Put customers at the heart of services</li> <li>• Support the most vulnerable and in need</li> <li>• Address inequalities</li> <li>• Offer digital services</li> </ul> | <p><b>Support our communities</b> </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empowering communities and individuals</li> <li>• Work in partnership</li> <li>• Focus on local and place</li> <li>• Invest to enable change</li> </ul> | <p><b>Be a responsive Council</b> </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate openly</li> <li>• Maintain high standards</li> <li>• Maintain sustainable finances</li> <li>• Make best use of resources</li> <li>• Be organised to deliver</li> </ul> |
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### Themes and Strategic Outcomes

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Economy</b> </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a diversified and growing local economy that benefits all</li> <li>• Our workforce and their skills base are growing</li> <li>• Rural communities and places are vibrant and thriving</li> <li>• Enhancing the region's natural capital benefits local communities and businesses</li> <li>• Businesses are supported to start and grow</li> <li>• Investment in the region benefits communities and the local economy</li> </ul> | <p><b>Travel, Connectivity and Infrastructure</b> </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roads, paths, cycling and walking networks in the region are improved</li> <li>• Communities are protected from the impact of floods</li> <li>• Sustainable travel in the region contributes to net zero<sup>2</sup></li> <li>• The Council is a low carbon organisation</li> <li>• People have access to services that are modern, efficient and responsive</li> <li>• Digital connectivity supports thriving rural communities</li> </ul> | <p><b>Education and learning</b> </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Places of learning are inclusive, sustainable and meet the needs of local communities</li> <li>• We get it right for every child</li> <li>• Children, young people and adults transition successfully through all life stages</li> <li>• Young people and adults succeed in what they want to achieve</li> <li>• Participation in creativity and play is part of early and lifelong learning experiences</li> <li>• Local people can build their skills and confidence</li> </ul> | <p><b>Health and Wellbeing</b> </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prevention and early intervention assist people to have independent lives</li> <li>• Access to personal support and care helps keep people safe</li> <li>• People are active, resilient and improving their health and wellbeing</li> <li>• Help is provided to tackle the causes and effects of poverty, inequality and increased cost of living</li> <li>• People have access to high quality, affordable housing that supports their independence, prosperity and wellbeing</li> </ul> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Source: [Dumfries and Galloway Council: Delivery of the Council Plan 2023-2024](#)



**14.** The previous Council Plan 2017-22 included four priorities; build the local economy, provide the best start in life for all children, protect the most vulnerable people and to be an inclusive council. This plan was underpinned by individual service business plans for 2019-23 which were refreshed in 2021/22. Updated service business plans are due for approval in August 2023.

**15.** The Dumfries and Galloway Community Planning Partnership (CPP) has produced a Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP). The LOIP 2017-27 sets out eight outcomes which link to the four themes outlined in the Council Plan 2023-28. In March 2023 the CPP Board approved proposals for a new LOIP covering the period 2023-2033, which is anticipated to be approved at the CPP Board meeting in June 2023. The council has been making improvements to its performance management arrangements over time to report progress against the previous council plan.

**16.** In the BVAR the Commission said that the council needed to report more consistently and coherently on its performance and where it needs to improve. Since then, the council has been making improvements to its performance management arrangements and these need to continue.

**17.** Performance against the previous council plan was monitored through the relevant service and area committees on a six-monthly basis. In March 2022 the council published an 'end of term report' for the 2017-22 plan. This reports that the council delivered 124 of its 139 priority pledges with the remaining 15 delivered in part. This addressed the concern raised in the 2021/22 Annual Audit Report (November 2022) that the latest report of performance against the Council Plan 2017-22, on the performance section of the council's website, was dated September 2020.

**18.** Detailed reports were also published which identify the individual Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) within each service business plan alongside the values, targets, current status and trends. The reports provide elected members with sufficient detail to monitor and track delivery of performance and outcomes of KPIs. The most recent performance reports include planned improvement actions where they are not on target. The performance reports on the former plan were also made publicly available on the council's website to ensure transparency and are updated every six months. The six-month assessments (April to September 2022) of the progress on the delivery of service business plans were presented to the relevant service committees during February and March 2023. These reports include an exception report which set out proposed actions to improve performance and future monitoring of areas which have not met the target.

### **An annual delivery statement is in place that sets out the actions to deliver the Council Plan 2023-28 strategic outcomes during 2023/24**

**19.** Arrangements to report effectively against the new council plan must now be a priority. The Council agreed in March 2023 that proposals for the development of a measurement framework to assess the impact of progress on agreed outcomes, over the term of the Council Plan will be presented to the Council in September 2023.

**20.** The annual delivery statement that sets out the actions to deliver the Council Plan 2023-28 strategic outcomes during 2023/24 was approved at the meeting of the Council on 30 March 2023.

**21.** The statement provides the focus on the activities, outputs and projects for the year ahead which will help achieve or contribute to the agreed strategic outcomes set out in the Council Plan. The annual delivery statement for 2023/24 includes one hundred and thirty-six actions across the twenty-three strategic outcomes included in the Council Plan. Each action has been assigned to a lead committee and lead chief officer, as well as being cross referenced to the related themes and outcomes of the Council Plan.

**22.** The statement reflects that there are a wide range of day-to-day operational activities, set out within service business plans, which support and underpin the Council Plan, and are of importance to elected members, stakeholders, partners and staff. Service business plans from 2023/24 will be presented to service committees in August 2023.

### **Progress on delivery of actions will be reported to elected members regularly**

**23.** From 2024/25, elected members will receive an annual review of delivery in the previous year (i.e., 2023/24) and will also be asked to agree the next year's delivery statement at the Council meeting held to set the annual budget. Annual reporting on delivery and proposals will include case studies with clear links to strategic outcomes and delivery.

**24.** The Corporate Management Team (CMT) will oversee a quarterly review of progress across activity within the annual delivery statement and ensure any actions or follow up required is undertaken throughout the year. The review of the first quarter data and progress is scheduled for the CMT meeting on 30 August 2023. This aims to reflect the shared responsibility for achieving the Council Plan outcomes and the joint efforts to deliver the actions within the annual delivery statement.

**25.** Regular six-monthly progress reports will be presented to service committees through 2023/24 service business plans performance reporting from November 2023. This approach will provide visibility on progress for the public and elected members during the year alongside summary reporting on an annual basis to full Council. Reporting on specific topics or decisions, in line with elected member decisions will also continue.

**26.** A further report is planned for September 2023 with proposals for a focussed suite of measures for the Council Plan, based on published evidence and aligned to the agreed Council Plan strategic outcomes. These will be outcome measures, focussed on the medium-term delivery and which provide for evidence of progress across the themes in the Council Plan 2023-28. The adoption into specific service business plans will be determined once these are identified and where they can be attributed across service plans, they will be. The reporting of these cross-Council Plan measures as part of an overarching measurement framework will form part of the annual delivery reporting. This development is intended to allow the council to track the impact and results of its work over the Council Plan term.

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## Recommendation 1

The measurement framework to assess the impact of progress on agreed outcomes needs to be put in place. The service business plans should:

- Provide a clear link to the council's agreed outcomes.
  - Include an improvement action plan and measurable targets.
  - Align with the financial and workforce position of the council.
  - Be subject to regular review and update.
  - A balanced view of progress should be reported regularly to members.
- 

**27.** Measuring the impact of working with partners is also being developed. For example, the council is currently participating in the design of measurement frameworks for some important partnership strategies such as the Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP) and the Regional Economic Strategy, as well as continuing to work within established approaches for health and social care. The intention is to ensure these and other pieces of work measuring impact are aligned and consistent.

**28.** An impact assessment of the annual delivery statement for the Council Plan in 2023/24 was undertaken on 21 March 2023. It has indicated seven positive impacts (age, disability, race, human rights, health & wellbeing & health inequalities, economic and social sustainability and environmental sustainability, climate change and energy management) and six with no impact. This has been published on the [council website](#).

**29.** We will assess the effectiveness of the council's performance reporting framework over the term of our audit appointment.

**The website has lots of performance information, but it would benefit from a high-level summary, tailored benchmarking analysis and it needs to be kept up to date**

**30.** The council uses the [performance information section](#) of its website to report performance to the public and includes links to the following sub-sections:

- Council performance
- Benchmarking
- Budgets and finance
- Best value
- Equality and diversity
- Transformation
- Audit and inspections

- Consultations
- Business plans and performance reports.

**31.** The [Council Performance sub-section](#) includes a link to an [interactive tool](#) (Pentana) which allows citizens to view the council's performance in 2021/22 (where data is available) for a range of both LGBF and council-specific performance indicators and provides a graphical representation of the direction of travel for each indicator and the trend in performance over the last few years. The current notes section for each performance indicator provides narrative for those indicators where the target performance has not been achieved.

**32.** While the interactive tool provides a lot of information when interrogated, it would be useful to have a summary of performance showing how many indicators were improving, deteriorating or staying the same. Also, the benchmarking section currently directs members of the public to the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) website to conduct their own analyses. Benchmarking information is analysed and used internally by officers in the council in service reviews and for exception reporting where performance across Scotland has improved but the council's performance has decreased. The council should consider placing this analysis on the council website.

**33.** Our review of the various links to performance information listed above found some of the sections contain broken links and out of date information that needs to be updated and kept up to date.

**34.** The Accounts Commission issued a new [Statutory Performance Information Direction](#) in December 2021 which applies for the three years from 2022/23. It requires a council to report its:

- performance in improving local public services (including those provided with its partners and communities), and progress against agreed desired outcomes (SPI 1). The Commission expects this reporting to allow comparison both over time and with other similar bodies (drawing on Local Government Benchmarking Framework and/or other benchmarking activities)
- own assessment and audit, scrutiny and inspection body assessments of how it is performing against its duty of Best Value, and how it has responded to these assessments (SPI 2).

**35.** The council should review the content of its performance website to ensure it meets the requirements of the new SPI direction.

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# Citizen and community engagement

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**36.** 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. There must be a focus on getting the services people need in place, to have the best impact on the lives of individuals and communities.

**37.** 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.

## **Community empowerment is a key principle in the Council Plan 2023-28 which was developed in consultation with citizens, community planning partners and staff**

**38.** The previous section covers the engagement with consulted citizens, community planning partners and staff on the Council Plan 2023-28.

**39.** The Council Plan 2023-28 includes principles for how the council will deliver the strategic outcomes in the Council Plan and one of these principles is "**Support Our Communities**" which will be demonstrated by:

- **Empowering communities and individuals:** empower customers, communities and staff and build skills and confidence to enable people and communities to achieve their ambitions.
- **Focus on local and place:** use places, wards and school clusters as the basis of local planning and delivery; and embrace the creativity and resilience of our places and people.
- **Work in partnership:** ensure that service delivery is achieved, working alongside communities and with local, regional and national partners.
- **Invest to enable change:** encourage and attract inward investment to deliver the ambitions of communities and local people.

## **The council has a strong track record in community engagement and working with local communities is part of the culture of the council**

**40.** The BVAR reported that, "*Working with local communities is part of the culture of the council and it is implementing its arrangements for community empowerment. The council works well with its partners and is committed to further developing its relations with local community councils, the third sector*

*and other partners, including the South of Scotland Enterprise Agency and Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal.”*

**41.** The council has a community planning and engagement team, following the council’s community participation and engagement strategy. Council officers, community planning partners and elected members have received training on best practice in community engagement.

**42.** The council uses a range of approaches to involve communities in decision-making. It holds public consultations on major policy decisions, involves communities in decisions about services, targets specific, seldom heard groups and uses the results to make change happen. For example, its Tackling Poverty Reference Group includes 30 people who have lived in, or are living in, poverty. The council uses their feedback to improve services by removing barriers for those living in poverty. The group has been involved in developing council and community planning partnership strategies, such as the homeless strategy and locality plan. It has also influenced the council’s approach to tackling fuel poverty.

**43.** Ward officers are in place for the 12 wards. They talk to and work with local communities, councillors and partners such as the third sector. They are located in wards and organise events for communities to engage with elected members on topics chosen by the communities.

**44.** The council website has a ‘[Community Conversations](#)’ webpage which provides an opportunity for communities to engage directly with the council, on issues that are important to them. Community conversations are held in each electoral ward to discuss specific issues. The most recent (February and March 2023) was in response to the severe flooding that has recently affected householders and businesses in the region. Feedback forms are attached to the webpage for the relevant ward meetings, and these shows the concerns raised by citizens with the council’s response to each.

**45.** The council has made progress implementing the requirements of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. In 2021/22, six assets were transferred to communities through ownership. There were also 48 indications of interest (stage one applications) and seven formal applications in progress (stage two).

**46.** In 2022/23 the council funded 18 participatory budgeting projects totalling £0.2 million. These were focussed on increasing income from employment and helping to reduce the costs of living in order to tackle poverty and inequalities.

**47.** In September and October 2021, the council engaged with citizens, customers, staff and partners with regard to the [council's budget for 2022/23-2024/25 and the Renewal and Recovery Plan](#) (RRAP) - published in November 2020 - to understand what:

- people want to see and do in the future
- people want and need from the council
- the council should stop doing, could do less of and could do differently.

**48.** The feedback from this engagement exercise was presented to the meeting of the Council in December 2021 and it was agreed that political groups would take into account feedback from citizens, customers, staff and partners as referred to in the report and detailed in the appendix to the report as they developed their budget proposals for 2022/23 and beyond. Examples of what the council should stop doing/could do differently/less tended not to refer to an individual service or part of a service but included: hiring consultants, paper-based processes, duplication and hiring consultants. The responses were grouped by theme, e.g., climate change and roads, and the vast majority of comments suggested improvements within the theme rather than stopping a service, such as “stop using polluting diesel vehicles” and “stop letting roads deteriorate”.

**49.** Examples of where the council provided more opportunities for local participation in decision making, are set out below:

- Support for community resilience work – including a new Resilience Plan template, training and practical support - [Preparing for emergencies in the community - Dumfries and Galloway Council](#). The council’s work won a COSLA Gold Excellence Award in 2022 - [Details - DGC Press Releases](#).
- A Community Council newsletter is published six times per year and topics include consultation and engagement; sharing of best practice across community councils; planning and licensing information; Queen’s Platinum Jubilee, King’s Coronation etc. This newsletter has been highlighted as an example of best practice by the Improvement Service.
- Scottish Tech Army co-produced a template for a Community Council website, a model for up-to-date information and a menu of support for local citizens.
- A dedicated online Community Council Enquiry Service (CCES) which guarantees a written response to an enquiry about a council service within five days.
- A dedicated email address for general enquiries ([Community.Councils@dumgal.gov.uk](mailto:Community.Councils@dumgal.gov.uk)) which is monitored and reported on
- Community councils being supported to become more representative of their community including work with the two youth councillors in each of the 12 Wards [Youth Council & Listen2Us - YouthWork - Dumfries and Galloway Council](#)
- Ensuring that as many community councils are established and supported to be effective through webpage information; training and sharing of good practice in good governance [Community councils - Dumfries and Galloway Council](#)
- The CPP Board includes a representative from the network of community councils; and all community councils are members of the Community Planning Stakeholder Group ([dumgal.gov.uk](http://dumgal.gov.uk))

- Community Councils are a key partner in the work on Place Planning – Borderlands Place Plans as well as Community Planning Locality Plans and the new Local Place Plans – reference to Community Councils is in the FAQs for the LPPs [Local Place Plans - FAQ's - Dumfries and Galloway Council](#).

### **The council is working with its Community Councils on how it engages with its communities**

**50.** The BVAR recommended that the council look at how it works with community councils to maximise the value community councils can bring. In response, the Communities Directorate Business Plan 2018 to 2023 includes an improvement project 'Community Council Development Programme'. Community Councils have supported the council's budget consultation process and there is an ongoing programme of engagement with Community Councils. Specific actions include:

- the Scheme for the Establishment of Community Councils was implemented in consultation with the Community Councils
- Community Council federations were re-established including a review of constitutions to have better co-ordination and strengthening the collective voice of community councils in a locality
- a programme of in-person and online awareness sessions on the roles and responsibilities of Community Councils and Dumfries and Galloway Council and on their roles as consultees and consultors; and on methods for carrying out consultation and engagement
- in addition to the 3-4 elected members, each of the council's 12 wards has a dedicated ward officer that acts as a point of contact for Community Councils
- an annual Community Council satisfaction survey is held which identifies areas of improvement in council communications and support
- annual ward visits by the Director Communities to the wards which includes new/concluding community council projects in the locality.



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# Reducing inequalities and tackling climate change

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## The Council Plan 2023-28 is based upon a core set of principles that include addressing both inequalities and the climate emergency

**51.** 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.

**52.** Changing demographics, the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis increase pressure on council services and people already experiencing inequality are most affected.

**53.** The Accounts Commission's, [Local Government in Scotland Overview 2023](#) report highlights 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 to create a fairer, more socially just economy for their citizens.

## The Council Plan 2023-28 includes addressing inequalities within one of its principles

**54.** The council recognises the challenges it faces in engaging with a large, dispersed population. One of the Council Plan principles is "**Support Our Citizens**" which will be demonstrated by:

- **Put customers at the heart of services:** provide responsive and reliable services that achieve high standards of customer care.
- **Address inequalities:** assess the impact of change to ensure inclusivity, celebrate diversity and secure social benefits of change.
- **Support the most vulnerable and in need:** target resources to have a positive impact for the most vulnerable, people in need and those who are disadvantaged.
- **Offer digital services:** embrace the opportunities and potential of digital technologies to improve outcomes and services for citizens and staff.

**55.** One of the recovery themes in the Renewal and Recovery Plan (RRAP) is "*Inequalities and Vulnerability*" with the strategic objective in the plan being

*“Take a practical and inclusive approach to everything we do focusing on tackling inequalities and supporting the vulnerable across a broad range of services, partners and communities”.*

**56.** The CPP Board approved the CPP’s Covid Recovery Plan in November 2021, and one of the recovery objectives in the plan is *“Vulnerable people are safe and healthy”*. The plan also includes the Poverty and Inequalities Strategy and Action Plan.

**57.** The initial findings from the engagement exercise (carried out online and through drop-in community conversations meetings) in relation to the RRAP were reported to the Response, Renewal and Recovery Sub-Committee in October 2021 and to full Council in December 2021.

**58.** To ensure there was continuity between the RRAP and service business plans, the council’s Senior Leadership Team (SLT) determined at the start of 2022 that each service business plan would include relevant actions, rather than having a stand-alone RRAP.

### **The council and its community planning partners are working to reduce inequalities through delivery of the Local Outcomes Improvement Plan 2017-27**

**59.** The BVAR concluded that, *“The Community Planning Partnership has a clear focus on reducing inequalities.”* The CPP’s vision is ‘working together to create an ambitious, prosperous and confident Dumfries and Galloway where people achieve their potential’. The CPP has a good understanding of local needs and issues. Plans are based on research, data analysis and feedback from a range of CPP and other stakeholders, including third sector organisations and individuals with experience of inequality. The CPP includes community council representatives.

**60.** The CPP’s Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP) 2017-27 sets out eight outcomes (such as reducing health and wellbeing inequalities) that the CPP is working to improve. The CPP used local data to identify groups that are most disadvantaged and directs its efforts towards these under each LOIP outcome. The LOIP performance management framework draws on performance reported against strategies and projects of the council and other partners, alongside case studies.

**61.** The LOIP 2017-27 draft Annual Performance Report for 2021/22 was presented to the CPP Board meeting held on 17 March 2023 for consideration. The covering report highlights that the LOIP Annual Report had been delayed due to the late publication of a range of partners’ performance information and other demands on the contributors. The report also notes that other CPPs have been in a similar position with their annual reports being delayed.

**62.** The CPP has developed a single locality plan to tackle food poverty. This innovative approach is based on academic research that identified pockets of poverty in Dumfries and Galloway not always represented by national measures. The CPP also sought feedback from the Tackling Poverty Reference Group. This highlighted gaps in food bank provision across the region and a need for more coordinated arrangements to make it easier for

people in poverty to access help. The locality plan for Dumfries and Galloway aims to achieve four outcomes by 2027, for example providing support to people who need help with food where, when and how they need it. The CPP recognises the challenges of tackling food poverty in remote and rural areas, such as the presence of stigma in small communities. The Food Sharing Annual Report for 2021/22 was presented to the CPP Board meeting held on 17 March 2023 for consideration.

**63.** The CPP has established an Equality and Diversity Working Group, the aim of which is to work in partnership to empower people to make positive contributions to their communities, by challenging discrimination, by promoting greater integration and by maximising support for everyone across the region. The remit of the working group is to:

- improve co-ordination and integration between public sector organisations and communities of interest for the nine protected characteristics set out in equalities legislation.
- identify opportunities for joint working that improve the efficiency of services in Dumfries and Galloway
- respond effectively to the needs of communities and individuals with reference to the protected characteristics.

**64.** The working group's membership includes a number of representative groups, including age, religion, disability, gender, race and sexuality. The group agrees a workplan for the year ahead with guidance and support from the Community Planning Executive Group. The group also produces an annual calendar of awareness days which is published on the CPP website.

**65.** In 2021 the CPP established a Poverty and Inequalities Partnership, comprising a number of organisations including public sector, third sector and individuals. It aims to progress local work to address some of the challenges people are facing due to the increases in the cost of living. There is a link on the home page of the council's website to the '[Cost of Living: Dumfries and Galloway website](#)' that has been developed by partners to help those in need easily find information on the support available.

**66.** In March 2023, the CPP Board approved proposals for a new LOIP covering the period 2023-2033; future locality plan arrangements and the finalised refreshed Community Planning Governance and Operating Framework/Terms of Reference to support the new Community Planning model for Dumfries and Galloway. There will therefore be a transitional period for officers to work through during 2023 as they implement this refreshed approach.

**The council has arrangements in place to ensure compliance with equalities legislation and uses the results of equality impact assessments to highlight any barriers or discrimination that may affect people using council services**

**67.** The 2021/22 Annual Audit Report concluded that the council continues to demonstrate a commitment to deliver fairer outcomes for staff and the people

of Dumfries and Galloway. The council has set key equality outcomes, refreshing every four years, which are based on local and national priorities. The current equality outcomes run from 2021-25.

**68.** As required under the Specific Equality Duty Regulations (Scotland) 2012, the council reports every two years on progress on equality. This is reported to committee and is publicly available on the council website. The council continues to engage with key stakeholders and groups to improve accessibility and use of services. This includes:

- Monitoring equality – the council routinely monitors equality and diversity information, for example as part of forms and surveys.
- British Sign Language (BSL) – the council have developed a shared BSL Plan in partnership with NHS Dumfries and Galloway and Police Scotland V Division. The plan sets out how the council promotes and supports BSL in Dumfries and Galloway
- Recite Me Web Accessibility and Language Toolbar – to ensure the council website is accessible and inclusive a Recite Me toolbar is included within the website which allows visitors to view the website in a way which works for them, for example translating web content into over 100 different languages.

**69.** The council has a process in place to consider equality and socio-economic disadvantage in the review and development of policies, practices and decisions (impact assessments) and records the outcome for relevant committee reports. The results of impact assessments allow council services to highlight any barriers or discrimination that may affect people using services. The council publishes a copy of the impact assessment toolkit as well as a summary of the results from all of the assessments completed in the previous six months on its website. It is positive to note that the council provides transparency to the public of the results of impact assessments and has a dedicated email address to respond to questions regarding impact assessments from the public.

**70.** The budget proposal 2023/24 to 2025/26 approved by the Council includes a number of Policy Investment Proposals and Change and Savings Options, each of which includes an impact assessment showing the potential impact of the proposal for each of the nine equalities protected characteristics, in addition to human rights, health and wellbeing inequalities, economic and social sustainability and environmental sustainability/climate change.

### **The council has a process in place to consider if its policies affect human rights but it could set out its overall approach more clearly**

**71.** There is legislation which covers human rights. Taking a human rights-based approach is about making sure that people's rights are put at the centre of policies and practices and giving people opportunity to realise those rights. Councils should make explicit reference to the work they do to promote this or reflect it as part of their plans to reduce inequalities.

**72.** In the council, as set out in paragraph 54, one of the four principles of the Council Plan is ‘Support our citizens’ and this includes addressing inequalities and supporting the most vulnerable and in need. The Council Plan does not explicitly refer to human rights although the impact assessment conducted on the draft Council Plan in March 2023 indicated that it had been assessed as having a positive impact on human rights.

**73.** As part of the impact assessment process policymakers are asked to indicate if the policy affects people’s human rights. The impact assessment toolkit lists the various rights, e.g. Right to education, as well as providing a link to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The policymaker is asked to indicate if the impact is positive or negative or if there is no impact on the following aspects:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation or any other prohibited conduct.
- Advance the aims of the Human Rights Act:
  - Prevent breaches of human rights
  - Respect people’s rights
  - Foster good relations – tackle prejudice, promote understanding.

### **The council plan is silent on whether council it is still working towards its target of achieving net zero carbon emissions in Dumfries and Galloway by 2025**

**74.** The Scottish Government has recently published guidance on public sector leadership on the global climate emergency to help public bodies in leading climate action. Around two-thirds of councils, including Dumfries and Galloway Council, have formally declared a climate emergency.

**75.** The council declared a climate emergency on 27 June 2019. At the same time, it set out a 12-point plan to achieve an ambitious area-wide - Dumfries and Galloway as a whole, not just the council - net zero carbon emissions target by 2025. This was the most ambitious target set by a Scottish council.

**76.** One of the key activities outlined in the 12-point plan was the need to create a new corporate priority and associated commitments to focus attention and resources on the climate emergency declaration and create the framework for future action and activity. The new priority - ***to urgently respond to climate change and transition to a carbon neutral region*** - was considered as part of the mid-term review of the previous council plan in 2020 and subsequently adopted. The associated commitments were:

- Encourage understanding of how the way we live and work in the region impacts on climate change.
- Empower our communities and stakeholders to make significant changes to reduce emissions and adapt to a low carbon approach.

- Lead on the transition to cleaner and greener technologies
- Promote and protect our region’s natural environment.
- Contribute to a greener economy, maximising the region’s green energy potential.

**77.** In 2021, the council published its climate change strategic plan - *The Route Map for Carbon Neutral in Dumfries and Galloway*. This set out priorities for carbon reduction, e.g., large-scale switching to electric vehicles. Also included was an extensive list of quantified actions to reduce carbon emissions in areas such as agriculture, council buildings, transport and waste.

**78.** There are no references to the target for Dumfries and Galloway to achieve a net zero carbon status by 2025 in either the Council Plan 2023-28 or the annual delivery statement. As discussed in paragraph 10, a paper was prepared setting out proposed alterations to the draft council plan resulting from a consultation exercise. This included a number of comments around putting more emphasis on climate change and giving greater prominence to the principles, which were actioned. The first of the four Council Plan principles is “Safeguard Our Future” and is made up of two elements:

- **Address the climate emergency:** urgently respond to climate change and transition to a carbon neutral region.
- **Protect our natural capital:** protecting and enhancing our region’s natural capital and habitats through conservation and sustainable development.

**79.** The strategic outcomes most directly related to climate change sit under the ‘Travel, connectivity and Infrastructure’ theme and are:

- sustainable travel in the region contributes to net zero
- the council is a low carbon organisation.

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## Recommendation 2

The council should clearly set out its net zero emissions target and how it plans to achieve it.

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# Alignment of delivery plans

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## The council will demonstrate how it will deliver the Council Plan priorities through the service business plans, due to be presented to service committees in August 2023

**80.** 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.

**81.** The council will demonstrate how it will deliver its priorities through its service business plans. The 2023/24 service business plans, which support the new council plan, are to be presented to service committees in August 2023.

## The revenue budgets 2023/24 to 2025/26 are aligned to Council Plan 2023-28 priorities

**82.** The Accounts Commission's, [Local Government in Scotland Overview 2023](#) says that councils should be more transparent with the public about scale of service demand, the extent of backlogs and changes to eligibility criteria necessary to ration access to services and any impact this has on unmet need. In this context, demonstration of how finances are aligned with locally set priorities is important. As reported above, the council engaged with citizens, customers, staff and partners on council's revenue budget for 2022/23 - 2024/25, The processes for the development and agreement of the Council Plan 2023-28 and the council's 2023-24–2025/26 budget were closely aligned and both were agreed by the Council at the same meeting on 28 February 2023.

**83.** The budgets are structured to reflect the council's services which are provided by the following departments:

- Skills, Education and Learning
- Economy and Resources
- Communities
- Social Work

**84.** The service business plans will then show how the services focus on delivery of the council priorities and outcomes with reference to the annual budget for each of the services. In addition, the approved budget includes seven Policy Investment Proposals, and eighteen change and savings options that are linked to the Council Plan themes and strategic outcomes.

**85.** A cross-party budget panel was established to allow panel members to contribute and provide opportunities to develop strategic thinking in relation to the council's medium term financial strategy, alignment with the Council Plan and development of the council budget for 2023/24. This is a positive development in the way in which the council is developing its financial planning to promote decisions being taken which align with the priorities of the council.

**86.** In 2021/22 the auditor reported that financial management arrangements were effective. At 31 March 2022 the council held £90 million, general funds in reserve. This included £8.1 million unallocated reserves, which equates to 2% of the council's net revenue expenditure, in line with the reserves strategy. The remaining £81.9 million of these reserves have been earmarked for specific purposes.

**87.** The council is reporting increased financial pressures from 2022/23 onwards as a result of the current financial climate but is reporting that it is on track to deliver its 2022/23 budget. The outturn will be reported in the 2022/23 Annual Audit Report.

**88.** The Finance, Procurement and Transformation Committee provides scrutiny, challenge and gain assurance with regard to all aspects of finance, procurement and transformation in order to provide assurance to full Council in line with the Council Plan. The committee receives detailed financial reports, which are accompanied by an overview and presentation from the Head of Finance and Procurement. The Council also receives financial monitoring reports.

**The council has agreed a three-year budget covering the period 2023/24 - 2025/26 as part of its ongoing development of a medium-term financial strategy. While the council has a strong track-record in developing and delivering savings to ensure balanced budgets, initial work shows that the delivery of further financial savings to balance future budgets is a significant challenge**

**89.** The BVAR reported that the council needed to increase its pace of change to deliver the scale of the financial savings required to sustain services. It was recommended that the council should finalise and agree its long-term savings plans. While the council still does not have long term savings plans it is developing a three-year medium-term strategy. The challenges in doing this are recognised in its May 2023 [Local Government in Scotland Overview 2023](#) report, the Accounts Commission commented on the limited flexibility councils have with their funding, noting that: "An increasing proportion of funding is ringfenced or directed for national policy initiatives. While this is important to help deliver national priorities, it prevents councils from making decisions about how funds can be used at a local level, to meet local need".

**90.** Since 2010/11 the council has identified, agreed and delivered savings of £116 million. Although this has had a positive contribution to delivering balanced budgets in previous years, the funding gap projected to 2026/27 will require the council to identify new and innovative ways to identify significant recurring savings for the medium to longer term. A medium-term financial



strategy report was presented to the Council meeting on 29 September 2022, which estimated a £50 million funding gap over the five-year period to 2027/28. The report asked members to note the work being undertaken to develop the council's medium term financial strategy taking into account the volatility of current projections in relation to pay increases, non-pay inflation and Scottish Government funding.

**91.** On 28 February 2023, the Council approved a balanced revenue budget for 2023/24 and indicative budgets for 2024/25 and 2025/26. The budget identified a budget gap of £12.989 million for 2023/24 as a result of anticipated pay and other cost pressures. The Council agreed the following measures to close the budget gap in 2023/24:

- increase Council Tax by 6 per cent equating to £4.830 million
- use of service concessions fiscal flexibility equating to £3.7 million
- identified change and savings programme options equating to £2.397 million
- revenue flexibilities equating to £1 million
- application of non-recurring resources of £1.376 million.

### **The council needs to take an innovative approach when considering how services will be delivered in the future**

**92.** The approved budgets for 2023/24 to 2025/26 include seven Policy Investment Proposals, costing £2.533 million in 2023/24, £2.919 million in 2024/25 and £2.919 million in 2025/26. The proposals show how they are linked to the Council Plan 2023-28 themes and strategic outcomes, provides details of the benefits to the council and how these benefits will be demonstrated/evidenced e.g., on roads improvement and cost of living support.

**93.** In addition, the approved budget includes eighteen Change and Savings Options (including investing in energy efficiency and reducing energy usage) expected to reduce the council's funding gap by £2.397 million in 2023/24, £7.446 million in 2024/25 and £16.421 million in 2025/26. The options show how they are linked to the Council Plan 2023-28 themes and strategic outcomes.

**94.** One of the Change and Savings Options relates to achieving targeted savings from transformational ideas (£0.750 million in 2023/24, £4 million in 2024/25 and £12 million in 2025/26) by establishing change programmes during 2023 designed to deliver new service models within reduced resources and embedding existing transformation projects commissioned in previous years. This Savings Option highlights that there will be workforce changes required as the council will have fewer but more multi-skilled staff and many staff will have to be supported and retrained to transfer into new or in demand roles.

**95.** The 2023/24 annual delivery statement for the Council Plan based on the strategic commitments, programmes and projects reflected in the Council Plan, is linked to the agreed capital and revenue resources reflected in the agreed budget. This should be demonstrated through the service business plans which should show how the services focus on delivery of the council priorities and outcomes with reference to the annual budget for each of the services. The council's arrangements for budgeting and financial planning for the medium term demonstrate a sound understanding of financial planning and risk awareness which has been incorporated into financial plans. The council has a good track record of delivering savings targets in the past but it cannot underestimate the challenges it faces in the next five years to identify and deliver savings to address the expected funding gap. Therefore, the council needs to ensure they continue to monitor financial forecasts, ensuring financial plans reflect best available information to support effective use of resources in a financially sustainable way.

**96.** The above demonstrates that savings and investment proposals in the council's 2023-24–2025/26 budget are assessed against the Council Plan 2023-28 outcomes and principles to ensure they support and contribute to these. The development of the cross-party budget panel provides for a sustained and consistent focus on cross member development and delivery of the Council Plan and future budget decisions, to ensure and sustain alignment.

### **The 2023/24 programme of service change replaces the previous transformation programme**

**97.** In relation to transformation of services, the Council Plan delivery statement 2023/24 agreed at the Council meeting on 30 March 2023 reflects the Council decision through agreement of the 2023/24 budget to establish a programme of service change to support future financial sustainability and prioritisation of services, supported with additional capacity and specialist financial and analytical skills and resources. Elected members recognised that a change programme aligned with a new Council Plan, financial strategy and budget process were important and this was agreed cross party.

**98.** There is existing work arising from the council's previous transformation programme. Much of this programme had continued to be completed and decided by elected members, but there are some areas that are still to be concluded, particularly in relation to waste management and education services. These have been discussed at SLT and budget panel in the development of the 2023/24 budget, having been revisited by directors and heads of service to ensure any outstanding options remain viable and appropriate within the context of this Council administration. These have been updated and are included in the emerging programme developing the new change and savings programme.

**99.** The last reporting of the previous transformation programme was prior to the local elections in May 2022 through the Finance, Procurement and Transformation Committee (November 2021) and to the Council meeting in December 2021. The focus for the council at that time was on digital and assets. At the time members agreed that reporting on the completion of any

activity under the transformation programme was to be through the relevant service committees.

### The council is to develop an asset management plan

**100.** Although the council has an Office Accommodation Strategy 2021-2031 and officers have confirmed that steps are being taken to develop Depot and Schools Asset Management Plans, there is no council-wide strategy or plan which covers all of the council's built assets and is linked to the capital investment strategy. Regular estates condition surveys are undertaken across all council owned properties to inform the capital investment strategy and prioritise capital expenditure.

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## Recommendation 3

The council should introduce an asset strategy and plans to demonstrate that it has the right assets in place to support the delivery of services.

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### A ten-year capital investment strategy is in place

**101.** The council has a ten-year capital investment strategy which is updated annually. The strategy was developed to reflect the council's strategic priorities and is effectively linked to its treasury management strategy and future costs of borrowing.

**102.** A report was presented to the Finance, Procurement and Transformation Committee in February 2023 which provided details of the updated capital investment strategy budget for the period 2023/24 to 2032/33, to reflect the local government finance settlement for 2023/24 announced in December 2022. Significant projects within the capital investment strategy over the ten-year period include the Dumfries High School replacement (£44.079 million), Dumfries Academy refurbishment/Loreburn Primary relocation (£23.006 million) and Whitesands flood protection (£21.790 million).

**103.** The Capital Investment Strategy Monitoring 2022/23 (Quarter 3) report to the Finance, Procurement and Transformation Committee in February 2023 highlighted that, the current budget profile for the 2022/23 Capital Programme includes an allowance for programme slippage of £8 million to reflect a range of risks to the progression of schemes including; continued supply chain issues, longer delivery timescales, issues associated with market volatility and internal resourcing pressures. Based on the 31 December 2022 position, slippage of £5.426 million was already anticipated, leaving a balance of £2.574 million for any further delays in the programme. Total capital programme is around £40 million (including slippage allowance). In the most recent February 2023 update to members, delays and significant projected overspends were reported on the Newton Stewart and Langholm Flood Protection Schemes. Report to members show the projected costs of projects compartmented to budgets but there is no monitoring against project completion timelines.

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## Recommendation 4

To assess the impact on services of capital project delays, reports to members on the capital programme should show progress against planned project timelines as well as monitoring costs.

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### The council has a digital strategy and plans to demonstrate how its digital infrastructure supports delivery of services priorities

**104.** The council's Digital Strategy 2021-2026 was approved by the Economy and Resources Committee in November 2021. This reflected on experience from the pandemic as well as providing direction on customer and citizen needs around digital services. The strategy is aligned with the new Council Plan principles of:

- Offer digital services – embrace the opportunities and potential of digital technologies to improve outcomes and services for citizens and staff.
- Put customers at the heart of services – provide responsive and reliable services that achieve high standards of customer care.
- Make best use of resources – ensure that there is good governance and effective management of resources, with a focus on improvement, to deliver the best outcomes for local people.

### A council-wide workforce strategy and workforce plan are in place, but both are being updated to align with the Council Plan 2023-28

**105.** The BVAR reported that workforce planning needed to improve, recommending development its first organisation-wide workforce plan, detailing the numbers and skills of staff required in the medium and longer term.

**106.** A council-wide Workforce Plan covering the period 2019-2022 was developed following the BVAR to shape the future workforce of the council. The council also developed a People Strategy covering the period 2021-2026 which was approved by Economy and Resources Committee in November 2021.

**107.** The council-wide Workforce Plan highlighted that identified that the age profile of its workforce is a challenge with 57 per cent of employees aged between 40 and 59 years old and only 0.3 per cent of the workforce aged under 20 years old. This situation is impacted by the fact that the current population of Dumfries and Galloway is substantially different from the Scottish population profile. There is a larger proportion of older people and a markedly smaller proportion of young people in the region and the gap is likely to widen over time. The median age in Scotland is 41 years whereas in Dumfries and Galloway it is 48 years.

**108.** Both the council-wide Workforce Plan and People Strategy are being updated to align with the Council Plan 2023-28 and will be reported to members in September 2023.

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## Recommendation 5

Both the council-wide Workforce Plan and People Strategy should be updated to align with the Council Plan 2023-28.

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### The council demonstrates collaborative working with partners

**109.** One of the Council Plan themes is Economy, a key initiative to support Dumfries' economy is the Borderlands Deal. This brings together the five cross-border local authorities (Cumberland Council, Westmorland and Furness Council, Dumfries and Galloway Council, Northumberland County Council and Scottish Borders Council) to promote economic growth and competitiveness of the area that straddles the Scotland-England border. The Borderlands Deal partners are working together to deliver transformative change across the region to maximise the benefits of population growth and increased productivity.

**110.** Central to the Borderlands' governance arrangements is the Partnership Board, which is responsible for oversight and decision making relating to the delivery of the Deal and the strategic programme of investment. The Board is supported by Chief Executives, Chief Economic Development Officers and Finance Officers from the partner authorities. There are six seats on the Partnership Board, made up of one representative from each of the partner local authorities, and one for the Chair of the Economic Forum. The first formal partnership board meeting took place in June 2021.

**111.** Dumfries and Galloway Council has the role of accountable body for both the Scottish Government funding for the Growth Deal and that part of the UK Government funding which relates to Growth Deal Projects physically located in Scotland. The council as an accountable body enters into the financial legal agreements with the UK and Scottish Government in respect of the Growth Deal.

**112.** Delivery of projects within the Borderlands Deal are at an early stage however consideration has been given to the board's governance arrangements and benefits monitoring and realisation. The key Dumfries and Galloway Council elements of the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal that are reflected in the council's Capital Investment Strategy over the short term are the Stranraer Marina project and the Business Infrastructure Scheme. Progress with necessary decision making to advance projects being made through the council's Economy and Resources Committee. The Partnership Board has agreed a benefits realisation plan which takes into account expected outcomes and benefits through delivery of projects. It is important that the council through the partnership board continue to monitor and track delivery of benefits in line with approved business cases to ensure outcomes of projects are delivered as expected and where there is non-delivery of

benefits, post implementation reviews are undertaken to understand and learn from past experience to inform future project delivery.

**113.** Quarterly progress reports to the Board provide sufficient detail to allow members to perform their roles and responsibilities to challenge, monitor and scrutinise progress, financial costs and delivery of the Borderlands Deal. Reporting of performance of the Borderlands Deal is transparent and allows stakeholders sufficient information to assess performance and delivery.

**114.** A detailed risk register is held for each project which details risk/cause/impact, likelihood/impact of risk, mitigating actions, risk owner, date raised, RAG risk rating and last updated date of risk. This risk register provides sufficient detail on risks impacting on delivery and the actions in place to mitigate the risk however, this level of detail is not supplied within progress reports with only a description and risk rating being disclosed. In 2021/22 the previous auditor recommended that further detail should be provided within progress reports where the detailed risk register is not presented. This will allow members the opportunity to review and monitor risks and escalate actions where necessary to ensure risks are mitigated and contributes to successful delivery of the Borderlands Deal.

**115.** Updates relating to the Borderlands Deal are reported to Council meetings and the Council also reviews and approves the next phases of towns to be entered into the Borderlands Place Programme.

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# Leadership

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**116.** 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. Councillors should show a commitment to agreed council priorities and work together to achieve them.

**117.** In May 2022, local government elections were held across Scotland. Forty-three councillors were elected to represent the twelve wards of Dumfries and Galloway Council. A coalition administration involving Labour, SNP, Independent and Liberal Democratic councillors and new co-leaders of the Council were appointed.

**118.** At the beginning of February 2023, the co-leader of the Council from the Labour Party stepped down from their role leaving the co-leader from the SNP as the leader of the administration. On 28 February 2023, the Council met to approve the 2023/24 revenue budget. Three separate budget proposals were presented to the meeting (from the SNP & Independent, Labour and Conservative groups) and the Conservative Group budget proposal was approved. As a result, the SNP leader of the Council stepped down and a special meeting of the Council was held on 7 March 2023 at which members agreed a new administration led by the Conservative Group.

**119.** The Council is supported by the following main committees:

- Audit, Risk and Scrutiny Committee
- Civic Government Licensing Panel
- Communities Committee
- Economy and Resources Committee
- Education and Learning Committee
- Finance, Procurement and Transformation Committee
- Local Review Body
- Planning Applications Committee
- Social Work Services Committee.

**120.** The Chief Executive took up post in July 2022 and is supported in the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) by the Director of Skills, Education and Learning, Director Economy and Resources, Director Communities, Chief

Social Work Officer, Head of Finance and Procurement (S95 officer), Head of Governance and Assurance (Monitoring Officer) and the Chief Officer of Dumfries and Galloway Integration Joint Board (IJB). The CMT comprises the SLT plus the other eight Heads of Service who report to the three directors and two Social Work Senior Managers.

### **The leadership has been effective in setting clear priorities in the Council Plan 2023-28 but now needs to demonstrate how the priorities will be delivered**

**121.** 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.

### **There is effective collaborative working between members and with members and officers towards the achievement of the priorities**

**122.** A Member-Officer Working Group on Governance and Culture presented its findings to the Council meeting in March 2022, which included key messages:

- “The shared endeavour about serving our communities should be embedded across all our elected members and services.
- The new Council can learn from this work in shaping its arrangements.
- Elected members need to lead by example in setting the tone and culture by working together and also working with senior officers more closely.
- Elected members and officers need to work together to manage the volume of committee business to ensure there is a shared understanding of capacity, with effective communication arrangements complementing the decision-making forums.”

**123.** In June 2022 the Council agreed the establishment of new inclusive political leadership forums and these reflect the findings of the Member-Officer Working Group. This demonstrates the positive steps taken by leaders to work together to strengthen governance arrangements.

**124.** A cross-party budget panel was established in 2022 to allow panel members to contribute and provide opportunities to develop strategic thinking in relation to the council’s medium term financial strategy, alignment with the new Council Plan and development of the council budget for 2023/24. This is a positive development in the way in which the council is prioritising its financial planning processes through increasing governance in this area.

**125.** The council vision and priorities section of this report highlights that an annual delivery statement is in place that sets out the actions to deliver the Council Plan 2023-28 strategic outcomes during 2023/24. Progress on delivery of actions will be reported to elected members during the year and



annually and elected members contributed to the discussion and approval of the annual delivery statement at the Council meeting held on 30 March 2023.

**126.** From our attendance at Audit, Risk and Scrutiny Committee meetings in December 2022 and February 2023 and having viewed the Council meeting in February 2023 to agree the 2023/24 Revenue Budget, we have seen that members and officers demonstrate mutual respect, trust, honesty and openness and appropriate behaviours.

### **There is an ongoing programme of training and development for elected members**

**127.** 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.

**128.** The appointment of new members and leaders resulted in an induction programme and training and development programme being implemented. These programmes were developed by drawing on national guidance from the Improvement Service, previous decisions by members and recommendations from a review of financial internal controls and procurement standing orders and a scrutiny review on support for elected members. Training provided in May-June 2022 focussed on:

- conduct, governance and the different roles of elected members in the first phase of induction
- quasi-judicial and regulatory functions, which is essential for elected members to allow them to take part in decision making relating to formal or statutory processes.

**129.** The above sessions were recorded and uploaded to the council intranet area reserved for member training and serve as a resource for members to access as they wish. Officers are of the view that this resource has proved useful in supplementing in-person sessions for members elected at by-elections given they start part way through the life of a Council. After Summer 2022 recess, a further round of training was implemented between August and December 2022. This included completion of a political skills assessment toolkit, skills development (e.g., using IT, engagement methodologies and being an effective chair), information and knowledge transfer (including briefings and workshops on service activities, supporting members in navigating the council and the issues that members will be making decisions about) and improvement service support.

**130.** The BVAR recommended that the council needed to understand the reasons for low attendance at training events. In response attendance at every training event is now recorded and feedback sought from attendees. E-learning completion was also registered and recorded on the system. Members are advised of their progress in relation to the Personal Development Plans and any additional skills development or knowledge transfer events were added to the programme to meet the needs identified in the Personal Development Plans. This demonstrates that the council has

appropriate arrangements to ensure newly elected members have undertaken relevant training to undertake their role and governance responsibilities.

### **The format of elected members' reports has improved and is evolving**

**131.** The BVAR recommended that the council should work with members to agree the level of information in committee reports, to ensure they are clear and concise.

**132.** Since the BVAR, committee reports are provided earlier to enable elected members to consider the content more fully through their group meetings which is generally around two weeks before the date of the meeting. In addition, efforts have been made to streamline the volume of information contained in reports and to focus on that information required to make an informed decision.

**133.** Chairs and Vice Chairs of committees meet with report authors prior to committee meetings to discuss draft agendas and reports, and this provides an early opportunity for any queries regarding the content or level of information in reports to be discussed. Reports that are for information only or noting are limited to enable members to focus on strategic decisions. Getting the balance right can be difficult and this is kept under regular review by officers.

**134.** Officers have advised that a new report template has been developed which will link more closely with the Council Plan 2023-28. This is currently being consulted upon and will have input from the SLT, CMT and elected members before it is launched after the Summer 2023 recess. Alongside this, report writing guidance is currently being refreshed and this will include guidance on the level of information required in committee reports.

### **The council's leadership demonstrates a collective support for self-evaluation and continuous improvement**

**135.** The Accounts Commission's, [Local Government in Scotland Overview 2023](#) says councils have never faced such a challenging situation. Radical change, achieved through greater collaboration, is urgently needed if councils are to maintain services. This needs to be driven by a structured approach to self-evaluation in councils.

**136.** The BVAR concluded that the SLT had invested significantly in self-evaluation and improvement initiatives at strategic and service levels.

**137.** The council introduced self-evaluation using the Public Service Improvement Framework (PSIF). Officers have advised that the council continues to apply the principles of the Improvement Service's PSIF which is a self-assessment approach to support improvement in organisations, with a comprehensive review of their own activities and results. It promotes a robust approach to continuous improvement and is mapped to a number of established organisational improvement tools.

**138.** This was a feature during the restart/recovery activity following the pandemic. An evaluation framework, based on PSIF, was developed and

implemented to support council services in evaluating their activities, with facilitated working sessions held with each Head of Service Management Team to ensure it was applied consistently.

**139.** The council's service review toolkit is based on PSIF and this has recently been used within governance and assurance and roads. Officers are currently refreshing the service review toolkit which will see an increase in data analysis, in line with the 'results' section of the PSIF. On completion of new service business plans the council will reintroduce its programme of PSIF assessments which will commence later in 2023.

**140.** The BVAR commented that the council's response to underperformance was not always clear. Council services set out their improvement activity in their service business plans. Under the previous transformation programme strategic improvement activity was embedded cross-council as well as within service business plans. In the period of recovery from the pandemic an evaluation framework was developed, using PSIF principles and approach to help services identify improvement opportunities and reset for a new normal and that informed current service business plans including improvement activities. In the future significant improvement activity will be included in the change and savings programme from 2023/24 and reflected in service business plans.

**141.** The BVAR concluded that although there had been a significant programme of self-evaluation and improvement activities, there were some inconsistencies in how the improved processes are applied across directorates. In response the council has worked to develop a strengthened network of organisational development, performance and improvement service lead officers to implement changes to practice consistently across services. A review of all related processes and practices with the Corporate Management Team has been undertaken to identify areas of inconsistency in practice, and develop a programme of training, support and intervention to reaffirm procedures and promote consistency.

**142.** The oversight of the SLT in recovery and overseeing transition through interim arrangements and the consistent approach and application of workforce engagement, communications, service business plan preparation to support self-evaluation are cross-council examples of the approach in place.

**143.** An effective performance management framework which includes reporting progress against the council plan objectives and driving improvement actions is now key to the council demonstrating Best Value in how it delivers services.

**Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) data is used by officers but is not discussed with elected members to show how the council compares to others and how lessons could be learned. The high-level data shows overall, indicators have improved over time but at a slower rate than councils across Scotland**

**144.** The Accounts Commission's, [Local Government in Scotland Overview 2023](#) says that councils should have a clear plan for strengthening their use of data to understand needs, make decisions and direct resources.

**145.** The evaluation framework, mentioned at paragraph 137, sets out how professional benchmarking data and LGBF indicators will be used as part of the process of review. Also, referring to the LGBF is mentioned in the council's service review toolkit.

**146.** Information from the LGBF is analysed and used internally by officers in the council in service reviews and more generally, to understand what it means for their service and why there are any differences in performance. In March 2023, the LGBF featured in a regular internal insights paper for the Senior Leadership Team. However, the council has not produced LGBF reports for members for the last few years. In March 2023, when the 2021/22 LGBF data became available, the council sent an email to all elected members to draw their attention to it, highlighting the newly improved online LGBF dashboard with detailed indicator level analysis. This is useful but does not include narrative for elected members at council-level on why performance might differ from other councils and how it could learn and make improvements.

**147.** At a high level the 2021/22 LGBF data on the council, published by the [Improvement Service](#) in early 2023, shows that 56 per cent of the council's indicators have improved over time. However, at the base line year 2010/11, 56 per cent of indicators were in the top 2 quartiles by 2021/22 this has fallen to 39 per cent. This shows the pace of improvement has slowed compared to the rest of Scottish councils. While this is only high-level comparisons at a national level it indicates that there is a need for discussions with members on the data.

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## Recommendation 6

The council should provide annual LGBF reports to elected members which include narrative on why the council's own performance might differ from other councils and how it could learn and make improvements.

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### The council has made good progress on recommendations reported in the 2018 BVAR. Effective performance reporting against the new council plan is now key

**148.** The 2018 BVAR concluded that the council has clear strategic direction, underpinned by effective leadership and systems in place for planning, monitoring and continuing to improve. It concluded that the pace of improvement had increased over time and this needed to continue to respond effectively to future challenges.

**149.** In response to the BVAR the Council approved a Best Value Improvement Plan in December 2018. Progress of the improvement plan has been reported to the Council and the latest update report was presented to Council in June 2019 highlighted that three of the seven recommendations were complete. No progress reports were reported to council showing how the remaining actions had progressed.

**150.** Progress on the actions has however been reported by the previous auditor. In the 2020/21 Annual Audit Report it was concluded that *'the Council has made good progress in implementing the actions from the plan.'*

**151.** This report covers all the areas covered by recommendations in the BVAR and demonstrates good progress against the improvement actions:

- long term savings plans, see paragraphs 90 to 91
- organisation wide workforce plan, see paragraphs 105 to 108
- consistency of practices across the council, see paragraphs 141 to 143
- performance management arrangements, see paragraphs 16 to 26
- working with community councils, see paragraph 50
- working with members to improve attendance at training events, see paragraph 130
- working with members to improve committee reports, see paragraphs 131 to 134.

## Service performance

**152.** The BVAR concluded that in 2018 national indicators 'show performance is mixed but indicators measuring services to the public have generally been maintained or improved'. The 2021/22 Annual Audit Report did not include an updated service performance assessment. We will report on the council's most recent service performance in the 2022/23 Annual Audit Report. We will aim to reflect on 2022/23 service performance reported by the council. If this has not been published by the time our report is compiled, we will use the local government benchmarking framework data as the basis of our reporting.

# Appendix 1

## Improvement Action plan

| Issue/risk                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Recommendation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Agreed management action/timing                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>1. Performance management</b></p> <p>The planned performance reporting framework should now be progressed to monitor service performance and delivery of its priorities.</p> <p>Key to the achievement of the priorities and outcomes in the Council Plan will be the detailed service business plans that sit beneath this. These are due to be approved in August 2023.</p> | <p>The measurement framework to assess the impact of progress on agreed outcomes needs to be put in place and progress reported regularly to elected members.</p> <p>The service delivery plans should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a clear link to the council's agreed outcomes.</li> <li>• Include an improvement action plan and measurable targets.</li> <li>• Align with the financial and workforce position of the council.</li> <li>• Be subject to regular review and update.</li> <li>• A balanced view of progress should be reported regularly to members.</li> </ul> | <p>A report is planned for Full Council in October 2023 with proposals for a focussed suite of measures for the Council Plan, based on published evidence and aligned to the agreed Council Plan strategic outcomes.</p> <p>The CMT will oversee a quarterly review of progress across activity within the annual delivery statement and ensure any actions or follow up required is undertaken throughout the year.</p> <p>The review of the first quarter data and progress is scheduled for CMT in August 2023. Regular six-monthly progress reports will be presented to service committees through 2023/24 service business plans performance reporting from November 2023.</p> <p>Director Economy and Resources<br/>6 October 2023</p> |
| <p><b>2. Climate change target</b></p> <p>The council declared a climate emergency on 27 June 2019. At the same time, it set out a 12-point plan</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <p>The council should clearly set out its net zero emissions target and how it plans to achieve it.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <p>The Council's Cross Party Working Group on Climate Change meets regularly and future</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

to achieve net zero carbon emissions target by 2025.

However, there are no references to the target for Dumfries and Galloway to achieve a net zero carbon status by 2025 in either the Council Plan 2023-28 or the annual delivery statement.

There is a risk that without clear targets the council will not meet the net zero emissions target by 2025.

reporting and updates to Committee will reflect their recommendations and considerations.

As part of these discussions the future targets for net zero emissions and actions – working with regional and national partners – will be re-established and recommendations brought to Committee for consideration.

Director Economy and Resources

31 March 2024

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### 3. Asset management strategy

An asset management strategy should be in place to demonstrate the right assets are in place to support delivery of services in line with priorities. This should support the council's capital plans.

The council should introduce an asset strategy and plans to demonstrate that it has the right assets in place to support the delivery of services.

The Council will develop an Asset Management Plan (AMP) for all built assets.

Survey data is scheduled to be complete by August 2023 which will inform the development. Following completion of the surveys a programme of engagement and discussion will take place with Council services to gather further information and data. The intention is for this to complete by February 2024. Thereafter the AMP will be prepared and presented to Committee for approval.

Property, Estates and Programme Manager

30 June 2024

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### 4. Monitoring capital projects

Reports to members on the capital programme show cost information

As well as cost information, reports to members on the capital

All Quarterly Asset Class Monitoring Reports to Service

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and a general narrative on the projects but there is no reporting of planned project completion timelines.

programme should show progress against planned project timelines.

Committee will include an additional appendix showing progress against planned project timelines from financial year 2023/24. The Quarterly Monitoring Reports presented to the Finance, Procurement & Transformation Committee will reflect similar information for agreed priority projects. Arrangements will be issued by the Head of Finance & Procurement to support this.

Head of Finance and Procurement

31 August 2023

### 5. Workforce planning

A council-wide Workforce Plan covering the period 2019-2022 was developed and a People Strategy covering the period 2021-2026 was approved November 2021. However, they have not been reviewed to ensure alignment with the new Council Plan priorities.

Both the council-wide Workforce Plan and People Strategy should be updated to align with the Council Plan 2023-28.

The Council's People Strategy has been updated to align with the new Council Plan.

Workforce Plans are already being refreshed and these will be presented to members later this year.

Head of People and Transformation

30 November 2023

### 6. LGBF reporting

The council has not produced LGBF reports for elected members for the last few years. In March 2023, when the 2021/22 LGBF data became available, the council sent an email to all elected members to draw their attention to it, highlighting the newly improved online LGBF dashboard with detailed indicator level analysis. However, it did not include narrative on why the council's own performance might differ from other councils.

The council should provide annual LGBF reports to elected members which include narrative on why the council's own performance might differ from other councils and how it could learn and make improvements.

The detailed briefing reports provided to Elected Members on LGBF pre pandemic will be re-instated for the 2022/23 LGBF publication.

LGBF comparison is being utilised as part of budget development and change and savings development and is informing programmes of work.



The council is missing opportunities to identify areas for improvement from LGBF data.

Director Economy and Resources

By 31 March 2024 – LGBF next publication

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# Dumfries and Galloway Council

## Leadership of the development of new local strategic priorities

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