

Shared risk assessment: Assurance and improvement plan 2011–14

Aberdeenshire Council



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Assurance and Improvement Plan

Update 2011-14

Introduction

1. The Assurance and Improvement Plan (AIP) for Aberdeenshire Council was published in July 2010, setting out the planned scrutiny activity for the council for the period April 2010 to March 2013 based on a risk assessment. As part of the process of on-going scrutiny based on current risk assessments, the local network have updated the AIP, revised its assessment and reconsidered the level of scrutiny required for the council. The appendix provides a revised timetable for proposed scrutiny activity.
2. The AIP focuses on strategic scrutiny activity ie scrutiny activity at the corporate or whole service level. Baseline scrutiny activity, including unit level inspection, the annual audit, inspecting the housing and council tax benefit functions and Audit Scotland national studies will continue throughout the period of the AIP. Scrutiny bodies reserve the right to make unannounced scrutiny visits and undertake additional work resulting from specific Ministerial requests.

Summary

3. As was the case in 2010, no significant scrutiny risks were identified by the local area network (LAN) of scrutiny body representatives for Aberdeenshire Council for 2011/12.

Areas of on-going risks and uncertainties

4. Whilst no significant scrutiny risks were identified by the LAN, there continues to be uncertain scrutiny risk due to gaps in performance information for a number of the local outcomes where the local targets and timescales have yet to be confirmed or the baseline data is not available. In addition, due to recent changes to the council's approach to corporate improvement and performance management, including the recent introduction of Aberdeenshire Performs, there remains uncertainty over their effectiveness in delivering improved outcomes for service users. These areas of uncertain scrutiny risk will be kept under review by LAN members through the shared risk assessment process.
5. The council prepared a best value improvement plan in response to the Best Value audit of June 2008 and reported progress against this plan twice yearly until March 2010. The last report, covering the period to December 2009, showed 70 per cent of the actions were complete with the remaining 30 per cent on schedule. The outstanding actions have been subsumed within the council's Corporate Improvement Plan (CIP). Progress against the CIP has yet to be reported although plans are in place for

quarterly progress updates to be submitted to the Corporate Improvement Board, chaired by the chief executive. Audit Scotland will continue to review the council's progress in implementing its best value improvement plan actions as part of the 2010/11 annual audit. Based on progress to date, and the current uncertainty regarding the impact of the improvement actions, the LAN has scheduled a BV2 audit during 2012/13. This timescale will be kept under review by the LAN and will be influenced by the extent to which the council can clearly demonstrate that its BV improvement plan and CIP has had an impact on how it delivers best value.

Changes to 2010/11 risk assessments

6. **Social Work Services.** This service has been reassessed, from an area of uncertainty in 2010, to an area with no significant scrutiny risks as a result of the targeted scrutiny work undertaken by SWIA in August 2010. The link inspector will continue to maintain contact with the social work service and offer support for self-evaluation and improvement activity. The service plans to undertake a systematic audit of case files across all care groups with the support of SWIA in January 2012. The results of this audit will feed into next year's SRA.
7. **Financial position.** As at 31 March 2010 Aberdeenshire Council reported a general fund balance of £16.303 million, with £6.772 million earmarked for specific commitments and an unallocated general fund balance of £9.531 million. This is above the council's target minimum of £7 million but equates to only one per cent of the net operating expenditure for 2009/10. Although the council has been proactive in preparing financial plans and identifying savings, in common with all councils there is a risk that it will be unable to deliver all of these savings, given the scale of the savings involved. This has therefore been reassessed from an area of no significant concern in 2010 to an area of uncertainty this year. Audit Scotland will monitor the financial position of the council during the annual audit process.
8. **Use of resources – people.** This corporate area has been reassessed as having no significant scrutiny risks due to the introduction of the Worksmart policy (see paragraph 16 below) and the progress made in implementing the Workforce Strategy Implementation Plan. The significant reduction in funding in the years ahead will clearly have implications for the council's workforce and the impact of this on the council's ability to deliver quality services will be kept under review by LAN members.

National risk priorities

9. **The protection and welfare of vulnerable people (children and adults) including access to opportunities.** The LAN has not identified any significant scrutiny risks for Aberdeenshire Council for this national priority. Inspections carried out by the Care Commission up until 30 November 2010 note that the majority of services are consistently maintaining good grades and that the council compares favourably with other local authorities over the four quality themes.
10. **Assuring public money is being used properly.** Assurance on the use of public money is obtained through the annual audit process conducted by Audit Scotland and Best Value reviews. Within the

council there are several mechanisms which assist in providing assurance that public funds are not misused. Proper scrutiny of activities is undertaken by both members and officers. The council has an effective scrutiny and audit committee which is supported by an effective internal audit section.

11. In its best value improvement plan the council acknowledged that it needed to do more to demonstrate services are competitive and agreed to undertake a systematic review of services across the council. The council completed a review of its trading services in May 2009. The report made a number of recommendations for improvement and proposed that the situation be reviewed once all of the recommendations had been implemented. The LAN will review the progress made by the council in demonstrating that its services are competitive as part of the 2010/11 annual audit. In the meantime this is an area of uncertainty for the LAN.
12. **How councils are responding to the challenging financial environment.** The Comprehensive Spending Review covering public sector expenditure for the period 2011/15 was announced in October 2010 and the Scottish Government responded to it by announcing a single year Scottish budget for 2011/12. This creates uncertainty over the medium term financial planning. The council is currently working on revised budgets to save £54 million over the two years to 2012/13. Aberdeenshire Council continues to be proactive in responding to the current financial environment and the LAN has, therefore concluded that there are no significant scrutiny risks for this area.
13. It is acknowledged that the financial climate will impact on the council's workforce and its ability to deliver its outcome targets and maintain service performance into the future. The extent of this is currently uncertain and will be kept under review by LAN members.

Review of 2010/11 planned activity

14. The 2010/11 scrutiny plan has been substantively completed in accordance with the timetable reported. The Care Commission's inspection of adoption and fostering service, planned for February 2011, was brought forward to December 2010 in order to ensure all inspections were completed by 31 March 2011.

Scrutiny plan changes

15. As a result of the findings of the targeted scrutiny work undertaken by SWIA in August 2010, the Initial Scrutiny Level Assessment (ISLA) planned for 2011/12 is no longer required. Instead, Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland (SCSWIS) will support the Social Work Service's plans to undertake a systematic audit of case files across all care groups in January 2011.
16. The statutory minimum inspection frequency which previously applied to regulated care services has been removed and replaced by a more proportionate approach which will be used to plan inspections of care services in 2011/12. The plan will be updated each year, be subject to appropriate consultation and be agreed by Scottish Ministers.

17. As reported above, the LAN has scheduled a BV2 audit during 2012/13 in response to uncertainties in the impact of the council's improvement activity following the last Best Value audit. This timescale will be kept under review by the LAN and will be influenced by the extent to which the council can clearly demonstrate that its BV improvement plan and CIP has had an impact on how it delivers best value.
18. The 2013/14 scrutiny plan will involve an ISLA by SCSWIS as part of their three year programme. The details are included in the appendix.

Appendix 1 Summary of scrutiny activity

Aberdeenshire Scrutiny Plan	2011-12											
Scrutiny activity for year 1	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
SHR - Monitor the outcomes from the post inspection improvement plan for Homelessness												
Audit Scotland Fire & Rescue												
SCSWIS - supported self evaluation and audit of case files across all care groups.												
	2012-13											
Indicative scrutiny activity for year 2	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
SCSWIS – follow up activity and supported self evaluation												
Audit Scotland - Best Value 2 visit (timing to be confirmed)												
	2013-14											
Indicative scrutiny activity for year 3												

Footnotes

- The focus of the AIP is strategic scrutiny activity, that is scrutiny activity which is focused at corporate or whole service level, but there will also be baseline scrutiny activity at unit level on-going throughout the period of the AIP. This will include, for example, school and residential home inspections. Scrutiny bodies also reserve the right to make unannounced scrutiny visits. These will generally be made in relation to care services for vulnerable client groups. The annual audit of local government also comprises part of the baseline activity for all councils and this includes work necessary to complete the audit of housing benefit and council tax benefit arrangements. HMIE, through the District Inspector, will continue to support and challenge Education Services regularly and as appropriate.

- The new body, Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland (SCSWIS), will be in place from April 1st 2011 and will regulate care services and inspect social work services based on the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010.
- HMIE and Learning and Teaching Scotland are to form a new quality and improvement agency on 1 July 2011.
- The Accounts Commission has decided to undertake Best Value audits of Fire & Rescue Services and Authorities during 2011. Planning is currently taking place and Audit Scotland will contact LAN leads when the detail of the fieldwork is established
- Audit Scotland also undertakes a series of national performance audit studies. Field visits to individual local authorities often form part of this work. When a visit is planned to a council this will be communicated to the council through the LAN lead.
- In April 2008, the Accounts Commission agreed to a request from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to take over the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's responsibility for inspecting housing and council tax benefit (benefits) services in Scotland. As Audit Scotland has no inspection function, this 'benefits performance audit' work has been incorporated into the annual audit of local government. The timing of the audits will be confirmed through the LAN lead.