

Shared risk assessment: Assurance and improvement plan 2011–14

Falkirk Council



Falkirk Council

Assurance and Improvement Plan

Update 2011–14

Introduction

1. The Assurance and Improvement Plan (AIP) for Falkirk Council was published in July 2010. It set out the planned scrutiny activity for the council for the period from April 2010 to March 2013. Planned scrutiny was proportionate, based on an assessment of scrutiny risks.
2. In early 2011 the local area network (LAN) undertook an interim refresh of the AIP. It considered the implications of new evidence emerging from scrutiny activity, the council's own information and other readily available data on its assessment of risk and future scrutiny plans. This report summarises the outcomes of this exercise. Appendix 1 provides an updated timetable of planned scrutiny for the period April 2011 to March 2014.

Summary

3. Over the past year, the council has continued to make improvements in its arrangements for delivering services to its citizens. This has reduced risk and uncertainty in a number of areas, and no significant concerns have emerged. The LAN has recognised the council's commitment to continuous improvement. We believe the council is well placed to achieve further improvements and manage the challenges posed by the financial context, although some uncertainty remains about the future pace of change.

Review of 2010/11 planned activity

4. Scrutiny during 2010/11 was largely completed in line with the plan set out in the AIP. This was targeted at a Social Work Inspection Agency (SWIA) inspection of Polmont Young Offenders Institution and a follow-up review of the 2008 inspection of social work services, Care Commission reviews of fostering and adoption and Her Majesty's Inspector of Education (HMIE) working in partnership with the council in providing assistance for validated self-evaluation.
5. No inspection activity was undertaken the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) in 2010/11, with a previously planned review of the council's progress in addressing stock condition issues being deferred until 2011/12 to provide more time for condition information to be compiled and to enable work to be fully coordinated with a wider self-evaluation of the housing service.

6. A very positive report was submitted by SWIA following the inspection at Polmont Young Offenders Institution. SWIA also found that following their 2008 inspection of social work services progress had been made on all recommendations, however, in some areas progress was slow. The outcome of this work will be used to inform an Initial Scrutiny Level Assessment (ISLA) for adult and children's' services in 2011/12.
7. The Care Commission undertook announced inspections of fostering and adoption services in July 2010 and reported good to very good assessments for both areas.
8. HMIE has worked with the council, at the council's request, to develop validated self evaluation in the education service. The director of education and her management team has instilled a positive self evaluation culture within the service.

Risk assessment changes

9. Overall, the LAN recognises that improvement have been achieved in a number of areas, reducing risk and uncertainty for a number of the issues previously highlighted. No significant concerns had emerged.
10. Key areas where risk and uncertainty was considered to have reduced included:
 - Sustainable environment – uncertainty over future progress in delivering on this strategic priority has been removed with outcome indicators showing a generally positive direction of travel over the medium term, with improving performance in areas such as abandoned vehicles and fly tipping. It was noted that some performance issues remain in particular areas such as RSL allocations and planning, but overall it was concluded there were no significant concerns in relation to this strategic priority.
 - Education – a sustained improvement in SQA attainment levels has reduced the uncertainty previously highlighted over performance in this particular aspect of the service. There has also been some evidence of improvement in the proportion of school leavers going on to positive destinations. However, a trend of improvement toward national averages is not yet evident and the figures for young people not in employment or training has risen and is above national and comparator authority averages. Uncertainty remains in this particular aspect of the service. More generally the service has a mature approach to self-evaluation and the value of this in helping to reduce scrutiny risk is recognised.
 - Social work – improvements in arrangements to support employment opportunities for adults with a learning disability has removed the uncertainty previously highlighted over performance in this particular aspect of the service. Plans are in place to address uncertainties in relation to the extent to which out of area placements are required, but this remains an area of uncertainty until the impact of these can be seen.
 - Housing – the service has introduced a number of new procedures and arrangements, which over time should help to improve performance. This includes a commitment to undertake a self-

evaluation. At this stage, however, there remains uncertainty about the overall impact of these initiatives.

- Development services – a self-evaluation of the planning function has led to an improvement plan being developed. Performance levels have stabilised and steps have been taken to streamline processes and shorten timescales. This removed the uncertainty previously highlighted over performance in this particular aspect of the service. Overall, it was concluded there were no significant concerns in relation to this service.
- Partnership working – further evidence of effective partnership working was available in some specific areas including prison social work services and older people’s services. However, in advance of planned inspection activity in relation to more strategic aspects of partnership working this remains an area of uncertainty.
- Information & communication technology – improvements in the policies and arrangements for key aspects of ICT arrangements have removed the uncertainty over this corporate assessment area. Overall, it was concluded there were no significant concerns in relation to ICT.

11. There were no areas where it was considered that risk had increased to a notable extent. There are a number of areas previously identified in the AIP where some uncertainties remain. In addition to the areas outlined above, some uncertainty remains about the future pace of change.

National risk priorities

The protection and welfare of vulnerable people (children and adults)

12. The Care Commission has reported positively on the quality of educational establishments, but grades in other areas (children & young people, older people, homecare) have been more mixed. This remains an area of uncertainty and there will be no reduction in the planned scrutiny level for inspection of such establishments.
13. This scrutiny priority will be considered further as part of the ISLA review planned by the Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland (SCSWIS) for October 2011 and the multi-agency Child Protection (CP2) inspection planned for May/June 2011, with flexibility built into the inspection process to respond to emerging risks.

Assuring public money is being used properly

14. The annual audit has confirmed that at the corporate level, the council has appropriate arrangements in place to help prevent and detect fraud, inappropriate conduct and corruption. Self-evaluation and improvement processes are improving, but only the education service can currently demonstrate a comprehensive approach that provides significant assurance over improvement processes. There is some uncertainty in this respect while the council’s self evaluation processes mature.

The council's response to the challenging financial environment

15. Like all public sector organisations the council faces significant financial pressures as a result of the economic downturn and the outcome of the national spending review. The council has shown an understanding of the financial challenges it faces and has made early progress in addressing these. It has established a clear strategy for managing its overall spending based around four themes: efficiency, prioritisation, costs of employment and income generation.
16. It is acknowledged that the financial climate may impact on the council's 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.

Scrutiny plan changes

17. The individual exercises included in the forward scrutiny plan for the council are generally consistent with that previously established. The reduction in risk summarised above will have the effect of narrowing the scope of a number of these. The timing of a number of exercises has also been amended. Key changes are:
 - Housing follow-up work will be fully coordinated with the service's planned self-evaluation exercise. Previously it was planned that a standalone self-assessment of progress in addressing previous issues identified by the SHR would be requested. The timing of this work has been amended to May 2011 as a result. It is anticipated that any subsequent scrutiny will be able to be tightly targeted.
 - An initial scrutiny level assessment (ISLA) planned for 2011/12 will draw on the results of recent follow-up inspection, alongside other evidence including CP2 findings. This will determine the subsequent extent of social work scrutiny. SWIA has offered to provide support to social work should it decide to undertake self evaluation.
 - The scope of the council's BV2 audit planned for 2012/13 will be narrower than envisaged previously. The AIP contains a number of areas of uncertainty where we identified that a BV2 audit would be necessary to assess activity in these areas. However, due to the improvement in some of these areas the scope of the council's BV2 audit will be narrower, recognising a reduction in the areas of uncertainty and improvements in arrangements for self-evaluation. The overall aims of the audit will remain as described last year.

Appendix 1 Summary of scrutiny activity

| Falkirk Council Scrutiny Plan | | | | 2011-12 (Year 1) | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|-----|------|---|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Scrutiny activity | Apr | May | June | July | Aug | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar |
| SHR – desk top review of the Council’s self assessment followed by work targeted at risk areas identified from the review. Work will include a review of the outcomes from the housing allocations system, impact upon the homeless and progress in the investment programme for meeting the Scottish Housing Quality Standard. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Multi-agency inspection of services to protect children under CP2, including Adoption and Fostering | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Audit Scotland Fire and Rescue | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Initial Scrutiny Level Assessment (desk top risk assessment) for adult and children’s services followed by work targeted at risk areas identified from the review. The follow up work will also be informed by the CP2 scrutiny. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| SCSWIS Post ISLA | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2012-13 (Year 2) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Issues for scrutiny /improvement | | | | Scrutiny bodies /council potential involvement | | | | | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> BV2 Audit (Quarter 3). | | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Audit Scotland. | | | | | | | | |
| 2013-14 (Year 3) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Issues for scrutiny /improvement | | | | Scrutiny bodies /council potential involvement | | | | | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow up of issues identified in the BV2 audit (Quarter 2). | | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Audit Scotland. | | | | | | | | |

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.
- SCSWIS will undertake supported self evaluation work with councils during 2011. Planning is currently taking place and SCSWIS will contact LAN leads when the detail of the fieldwork is established.
- 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.