

Leadership of the development of new local strategic priorities

West Lothian Council
Best Value thematic review 2022-23



Prepared by Audit Scotland
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Key messages

Council vision and priorities

- 1 West Lothian Council has created a clear vision through its new Corporate Plan 2023-28, which was agreed in May 2023. The council must now set its associated performance targets so progress can be monitored.
- 2 The council should work with its Community Planning Partnership to publish and implement the new Local Outcomes Improvement Plan.

Citizen and community engagement

- 3 The council highly values and has acted on citizens' feedback through its consultation processes.
- 4 The council has demonstrated good practice through its Citizen Led Inspection programme. It should consider resuming this to involve citizens in the design and improvement of services.

Reducing inequalities and tackling climate change

- 5 The council and its partners have clear ambitions to tackle poverty and reduce climate change. It has used lived experience to inform its corporate strategies and has put in place governance arrangements to monitor progress.

Alignment of delivery plans

- 6 The council is developing new corporate strategies and service delivery plans to align to its new Corporate Plan. It has financial planning arrangements in place to support the alignment of resources to council priorities.

Leadership

- 7 The council Executive Management Team is well established and is supported by senior officers. The council has been effective in gathering the views of citizens to develop the council priorities. It is important that elected members work together to make strategic decisions to ensure the longer-term financial sustainability of service delivery.

Follow up of 2017 Best Value Assurance Report

- 8** The previous external auditor concluded that the council made good progress in implementing the Best Value and Assurance Report recommendations and that improvement actions were largely completed by 2018.

Scope of the audit

1. When discussing the Local government in Scotland Overview 2022, William Moyes, Chair of the Accounts Commission said: “Councils are operating in a complex and increasingly volatile, unprecedented and unpredictable environment. Strong leadership from councils is needed now more than ever, with new and returning councillors being able and willing to make difficult decisions about where and how to spend highly pressurised resources.”
2. This report concludes on the effectiveness of the council’s leadership of the development of the council’s strategic priorities, following the 2022 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. ¹
- The Accounts Commission reports nationally on thematic aspects of local government bodies’ approaches to, and performance in, meeting their Best Value and community planning duties. Local government appointed auditors report locally on any such Best Value thematic work prescribed by the Accounts Commission.

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

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. 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.

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

Council vision and priorities

West Lothian Council has created a clear vision

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

9. [The Local government in Scotland Overview 2022](#) highlighted the pivotal role that Scotland's councils have in supporting and working with communities as they respond to the impacts of Covid-19. Following the council elections in May 2022, councils will have reviewed their priorities.

10. West Lothian Council agreed its new Corporate Plan (2023-2028) in May 2023. It has a clear vision to create "a thriving West Lothian" over the next five years.

11. Eight priorities were originally identified in 2012 and reviewed as part of the corporate planning process in 2017. In 2022 the number of priorities was reduced to simplify the plan and to target services towards those most in need. The new Corporate Plan sets out five priorities:

- Raising educational attainment
- Strengthening care and support for children, adults and older people
- Investing in skills and jobs
- Helping to create strong and sustainable communities, and
- Tackling homelessness, poverty and inequality.

12. The new Corporate Plan 2023-2028 was presented to the Corporate Policy and Resources Policy Development and Scrutiny Panels (PDSP) in May 2023 for comment and the feedback was provided to Council prior to approval.

13. The Corporate Plan, corporate strategies and annual management plans for council services are accessible on the council's website and intranet and are regularly signposted through council communications. A communication plan is in progress to ensure citizens, staff and partners are aware of the new council vision and priorities. Part of the Council's approach to transformation is to increase its focus on citizens.

14. The council has reviewed its corporate strategies linked to the previous corporate plan with end of strategy reports submitted to the relevant PDSPs for information. The five new corporate strategies (1. Raising Attainment, 2. People, 3. Customer, 4. Performance and Transformation and 5. Corporate Governance) are currently in development and all the strategies are scheduled

to go to Corporate Policy and Resources PDSP in October 2023 and then Council Executive in November 2023. The Raising Attainment Strategy will follow a different governance route, Education PDSP in October 2023 and then Education Executive in November 2023. The strategies will be published on the council website following approval and will be communicated internally, along with the Corporate Plan, thereafter.

Long-term priorities were identified in collaboration with the Community Planning Partnership

15. West Lothian Community Planning Partnership (CPP) works with 21 partners and the community organisations to identify and achieve local priorities. The CPP has a 10-year Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP) 'Achieving Positive Outcomes 2013-23'. This was refreshed in 2019 and a new draft was created following a period of consultation with partners and communities. This was discussed at the CPP Board in March 2020, but implementation was paused due to the pandemic. West Lothian has 13 regeneration plans based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. The CPP wants to better align these to the LOIP as part of the new plan.

16. Engagement for the new Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP) identified four focus areas:

- Creating skills and jobs
- Improving health and wellbeing
- Creating affordable and sustainable housing
- Creating net zero carbon communities

17. These areas were integrated into the council's new Corporate Plan so that priorities are aligned. The LOIP 2023-2033 was agreed by the CPP in August 2023. The council will build this into its service delivery and performance reporting.

Recommendation 1

The council should work with the West Lothian Community Planning Partnership to publish and implement the new Local Outcomes Improvement Plan.

Performance indicators and targets for the new priorities are in development

18. The council publishes a wide range of performance information annually on its website and in the [Factfile](#) online annual report, for example, amounts invested across the school estate, in property, roads and IT infrastructure, customer interactions and educational attainment. The website provides the

links through its Key Priorities from the Corporate Plan to allow assessment of measures in relating to individual priorities.

19. The council is in the process of developing a performance scorecard for the 2023-2028 Corporate Plan. The performance scorecard for the Corporate Plan is currently in draft and will be considered by the Executive Management Team in September 2023. It is anticipated that it will be finalised shortly thereafter and details published in a similar timescale to the corporate strategies.

20. The Corporate Plan sets out how it will track progress at a high level, but specific indicators, baselines and targeted performance are not included. The [2017 Best Value and Assurance Report](#) recommended that council should be clear on the key performance indicators that support its vision and priorities so that it is able to effectively monitor whether it is achieving its vision and planned investment. The council should be clear on the performance outcomes it is aiming for across its priority areas. It should also be clear on the acceptable level of performance in non-priority areas.

Recommendation 2

The council should ensure there is sufficient alignment when developing its new performance scorecard to support the evaluation of services.

Citizen and community engagement

21. 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.

22. 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.

The council highly values and has acted on citizens' feedback through its consultation processes

23. Community empowerment is viewed as key to transforming services in West Lothian and this is reflected throughout the creation of the Corporate Plan 2023-2028. The council actively engaged with people living and working in the area to develop its new priorities. The council has a three-phase public consultation process to inform strategic planning called 'Your Council Your Say':

- Phase one was used to set the priorities for the 2023-2028 Corporate Plan. It ran from June to July 2022, receiving over 5,000 responses from citizens and council employees, 23 organisations and five community councils. The results were considered by the full council in October 2022.
- Phase two of the consultation was used to inform the budget saving options along with questions relating to local tax levels. It ran from October 2022 to November 2022 and received around 2,500 responses. The results were considered by full council in December 2022 with special Corporate Policy and Resources Policy Development and Scrutiny Panels (PDSP) held in late January 2023. PDSPs are working groups including members and representatives from external community bodies.
- Phase three will run in 2024 to inform budget saving options for 2026/27 and 2027/28.

24. This is viewed as a key part of the planning process and is highly valued by citizens. To ensure every citizen was involved, a paper copy of the consultation was sent to each household in the local authority areas. The Executive Management Team were aware of the environmental impact this would have but

wanted to take an inclusive approach to setting strategic priorities. This process could be viewed as an area of good practice.

25. Members and officers listened and acted on feedback following the ‘Your Council Your Say’ consultation. Homelessness was highlighted by citizens in the consultation and as a result it was made a priority. The process is transparent as every comment submitted is published on the council website along with a response from officers.

Citizen Led Inspections were paused due to Covid-19 and the council should consider resuming this programme

26. Since 2011 the council operated a Citizen Led Inspection programme. This involved inviting members of the community to directly observe and inspect council services and assess whether they met local needs. It encouraged community members to get involved in improving and re-designing council services by using members of the public to observe, use and feedback on council services. The programme was paused due to Covid-19 as face-to-face services stopped. As recommended in the [2017 Best Value and Assurance Report](#), this programme provided a positive base to fully implement the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015.

Recommendation 3

The council demonstrated good practice through its Citizen Led Inspection programme. It should consider resuming this to involve citizens in the design and improvement of services.

West Lothian Community Choices empowers citizens to direct funding

27. West Lothian Community Choices is the council’s participatory budgeting scheme which supports local decision-making and allows citizens to direct funding. Examples include:

- Between November 2020 and April 2021 a budget of around £167,000 for five park improvements was decided by citizens leading to the installation of outdoor gym equipment, flowers and tree planting, and improved drainage for a skatepark.
- Young people also influenced the redesign of supported accommodation services with a Community Choices grant of around £950,000. Around 60 young people who are currently in supported accommodation or has used supported accommodation recently were asked to participate. Views were gathered through e-surveys, focus groups and one to one discussion to identify where improvements could be made.

- A Community Choices grant of £25,000 was made available in March 2023 for equalities projects in West Lothian. This enabled the council to learn how to improve its equality processes as officers from the Community Planning and Community Wealth Building teams will lead the delivery with support from the council's Equalities Officer.

The CPP has a key role in shaping recovery from the pandemic

28. A Covid-19 third sector recovery summit was held in September 2020 called 'Creating a new West Lothian'. This was an online event which was attended by around 100 representatives from across the West Lothian third sector and Scottish, UK and local Government elected members. The summit recognised the role of the third sector during the pandemic and the partnership approach needed in the recovery. There was concern that third sector recovery support might be constrained by partnership arrangements and a lack of resources. The council should build on the local partnerships made during the pandemic to support recovery.

29. During the pandemic the council implemented new technology to support elected members so they could attend meetings remotely, vote and members of the public could watch. The council citizen engagement infrastructure was also developed so the council now has a contact centre and payments for services such as school meals can be made electronically.

Reducing inequalities and tackling climate change

30. 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.

31. The [Local Government in Scotland Overview 2022](#) report highlights that changing demographics, the impact of the pandemic, service disruption and inflation have increased pressure on council services and people already experiencing inequality are most affected. As councils take steps to radically change how they deliver services, the needs of the most vulnerable or people living in poverty must be at the centre.

32. The Accounts Commission's report also notes that councils have a critical role in achieving Scotland's national climate change goals and contributing towards the national target of net zero by 2045.

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

34. West Lothian Council has focused recovery from the pandemic on two key approaches, its anti-poverty work and jobs task force, other aspects of recovery are mainstreamed through council work.

A new 'Tackling Poverty' strategy has been developed in consultation with partners and will be monitored by the Anti-Poverty Task Force

35. The Council Executive approved a new 'Tackling Poverty' Strategy for 2023/24 to 2027/28 in August 2023, which aims to mitigate the effects of poverty on vulnerable households in West Lothian.

36. The council carried out a range of consultation as part of developing the new strategy. A wide reach survey was carried out along with discussions with locality planning groups, the Experts by Experience lived experience panel and other key stakeholders. The strategy and action plan were circulated to the council Corporate Policy and Resources PDSP members for comment.

37. The Tackling Poverty Strategy, action plan for 2023/24 and Integrated Impact Assessment were submitted and approved by the Community Planning Partnership Board in August 2023.

38. In August 2023, an end of year progress scorecard was produced for 2022/23 which highlighted that one indicator (35 indicators across 8 outcomes) was regarded as 'red' in relation to 'Percentage of children in poverty' in West Lothian which showed a percentage of 21.1%. This was above the long-term target of the 2018/19 to 2022/23 plan of 18%. The remaining indicators were green apart from two which were amber.

39. Targets are set out in the new plan with data for comparison areas included for benchmarking. This is aligned to national and local strategies and plans such as the Fairer Scotland Action Plan.

40. The Anti-Poverty Task Force will continue to oversee strategic development and monitor progress of the annual Tackling Poverty Action Plan. The Lead Officer remains the Head of Finance and Property Services with representatives from community planning partners who will take responsibility for key actions to help work towards the overall outcomes. Progress will be reported annually to the CPP.

Arrangements to help support a human rights-based approach to council activity are in place but it is too early to judge their effectiveness

41. West Lothian Council is demonstrating a commitment to implementing a human rights-based approach to service delivery. Progress is monitored through the Council's Corporate Working Group for Equality and its use of Integrated Impact Assessments is well developed. An assessment must be carried out on all new policies, plans and services changes to ensure they meet the relevant duties relating to equality, Fairer Scotland and human rights and sustainability. A template is available for committee papers and guidance is available on the intranet.

42. The council's Equality and Diversity Framework 2021-25 has eight equality outcomes aimed at addressing inequality, poverty and addressing fairness issues. The council is working with a number of partners including Edinburgh and Midlothian Council, NHS Lothian, Midlothian Health and Social Care Partnership and East Lothian Integrated Joint Board to improve outcomes. Each organisation is responsible for its delivery and performance, but they hope to achieve joint outcomes through this approach.

43. It is too early to assess how effective these arrangements are in achieving the intended outcomes.

Economic recovery and growth following the pandemic focused on retaining, upskilling and creating employment in the area

44. The Job Task Force was established in June 2018 in partnership with the UK and Scottish Governments, Scottish Enterprise, West Lothian College and West Lothian Council, to bring together key partners to support the development and inclusive growth of the West Lothian economy.

45. Unemployment is below 3% in West Lothian which is similar to pre-pandemic levels. The issue for West Lothian similar to much of Scotland, is the high level of job vacancies.

46. In partnership with West Lothian College, a successful pilot project was trialled to encourage local firms to invest in upskilling and retraining their staff. The project is called the Flexible Workforce Development Fund. Against a backdrop of unfilled vacancies and skills shortages, £120,000 of Economic Development grant funding was awarded to more than 30 businesses. Sectors included construction, technology, manufacturing, engineering and food & drink. More than 300 staff have benefited from a range of courses provided by the college.

47. The Jobs Task Force core focus has been supporting higher-value jobs. However, the Jobs Task Force has encouraged local firms with job grants in return for fair wages, to take some residents out of economic inactivity. Support has also enabled West Lothian firms to address skills shortages by supporting their investment in training.

Reducing climate change is a strategic priority for the council and it is considered a corporate risk

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

49. Outcome four in the council's Corporate Plan focuses on creating strong and sustainable communities. The council signed the Climate Change Declaration in 2007 and declared a Climate Emergency in September 2019. It has a Climate Change Strategy 2021-28 and aims to achieve a net-zero position by 2045. The strategy recognises that reducing the use of resources including water, energy, and transport fuel will have a positive impact on the council budget. It also sets out the governance structure for reporting.

50. The Council has actively engaged with young people to develop its climate strategy. A survey was conducted in 2021 to input the views of young people

into the strategy. It received 1184 responses and helped the council identify key priorities and ideas for addressing issues.

51. A Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan 2022-2028 was approved by the full council executive in April 2022. The first annual report went to the Environment and Sustainability PDSP in June 2023 and the update reported nine out of 64 actions had been completed. It is too early to assess whether the council's actions will be enough to achieve the planned net-zero position by 2045.

52. Failure to adapt to climate change is included in the council's corporate risk register and monitored through the corporate risk management process. The Council should continue to progress these actions and update the Environment and Sustainability PDSP through its quarterly climate change update reports.

Alignment of delivery plans

53. 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.

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

Updated medium-term and longer-term financial plans were put in place in February 2023

In February 2023, West Lothian Council agreed a five-year revenue budget strategy and a detailed three-year revenue budget plan for the 2023/24 to 2025/26, including proposed saving measures.

55. The agreed budget reflects an estimated overall budget gap of £39.4 million over the five-year period and £28.0 million over the three-year period 2023/24 to 2025/26. Incorporating the decisions of Council and West Lothian Integration Joint Board, budget savings of £26.8 million have been agreed over the three-year period to meet this gap leaving a remaining budget gap of £1.2 million. The budget highlights a number of risks, uncertainties and potential cost pressures that could impact on the ability of the council to balance the five-year revenue strategy and three-year detailed revenue budgets.

56. The council has a strong track record of identifying and delivering planned savings to achieve balanced budgets. The accumulated savings from 2007 through to 2023 amount to £150 million. However the council faces heightened financial challenges in delivering balanced budgets and financially sustainable services and more radical solutions will be needed to ensure service delivery remains financially sustainable. Strong collaborative leadership supported by robust financial planning will be required to make the strategic decisions to deliver financially sustainable services into the longer term.

Service delivery plans are being updated to align with the council's new Corporate Plan

57. As noted at paragraph 14, the council is developing its new corporate strategies to support the Corporate Plan 2023-28. New service plans are under development following the publication of the updated Corporate Plan and budgets. Service improvement templates have been created and progress will be reported to elected members at the end of 2023.

Workforce plans and the People Strategy are being updated to support the new Corporate Plan

58. The council has a corporate workforce plan and all services have workforce plans that address workforce priorities and future planning requirements. The council's People Strategy 2018-23 sets out the culture and key priorities for the workforce. An annual staff survey has been held since 2009 to support employee engagement and address workforce needs.

59. Workforce plans are a key activity for the delivery of the council's People Strategy, which aims to attract and retain the workforce needed to deliver in priority areas, ensure effective leadership, and develop the necessary workforce skills and capacity. Services are currently updating their workforce plans to ensure they continue to reflect the nature of the services the council will provide and the skills needed to deliver our essential services in the years ahead.

60. In recognition that succession planning is also an essential part of workforce planning, the council is in the process of piloting Stages 1 and 2 of a Succession Planning Framework across services.

61. Recruitment of skilled workers still remains the biggest challenge across most of the council services. Specific recruitment difficulties include skilled trades within Building Services, lawyers, procurement specialists, care workers, HR advisers, and waste/ recycling operatives in all these areas a number of vacant posts remain in which they are unable to recruit. Environment Health and Trading Standards officers also continue to be difficult to recruit and alternative options such as graduate programmes or reallocation of duties are being actioned or considered. Competing with private organisations is challenging as the private sector can offer greater reward packages.

62. The council is aware of the financial impact of workforce on the budget, and it reported in March 2023 that the three-year revenue budget will result in an overall small net decrease of full-time equivalent posts. The council has a well-established process to enable displaced employees to transfer to other posts. Workforce plans set out how necessary reductions will be achieved, and how this will be communicated to those affected and the organisation more widely, as well as setting out how progress will be monitored.

63. The council acknowledges service delivery is changing and that the digital skills of employees are core to future service delivery. It has put in place Digital Champions to improve digital competence.

IT projects taking place across the council are guided by a digital strategy and implementation plan

64. The council's approach to digital transformation is compliant with the key areas of good practice in a digital council as set out in Audit Scotland's [Good Practice Guide](#). Of the nine strategies developed to support the delivery of the Corporate Plan 2018-23, two of these are ICT-focussed:

- Digital transformation strategy 2018 to 2023 - to support the development of digital services
- ICT strategy 2018 to 23 - to ensure the council has the ICT infrastructure to succeed in the eight priority areas identified by the corporate plan.

65. A robust governance framework is in place for both strategies, including regular consultation and communication with management, elected members and stakeholders. This includes an annual review undertaken and reported to the council's Corporate Management Team and to the relevant PDSP. This includes an update on the agreed performance scorecard and action plan published on the performance pages of the council website. An end of strategy review was undertaken in the final year of the strategy and was reported to the relevant PDSP on the achievement of outcomes and progress against the performance indicators and the agreed actions.

66. The council is currently developing a new Performance and Improvement Strategy to replace the previous Digital Transformation and ICT strategies to align with the new Corporate Plan.

The council has updated its Corporate Asset Management Strategy along with a ten-year capital investment strategy and along with its Capital Strategy

67. The council approved the Corporate Asset Management Strategy and General Services ten-year investment strategy 2023/24 to 2032/33 in February 2023. The council's asset management approach confirms it has both a high level and detailed plan in place around its assets and has considered their use in relation to the council priorities. The plans are extensive in terms of use of resources, monitoring of their progress and includes various reviews through regular committee and panel meetings. In March 2023 the council approved an updated capital strategy 2023/24 to 2032/33.

68. West Lothian Council has been proactive in its asset management regarding the safety risk identified in the use of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) as a building material. The council has assessed its estate, identified the affected buildings and is undertaking remedial works on those assets. Further work is required to fully scope and approve the final solution for the replacement or repair of St Kentigern's Academy and identify funding to support the associated costs.

Leadership

69. 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.

70. 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.

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

The council Executive Management Team is well established and supported by senior officers

72. The West Lothian Council Executive Management Team is well established. The Chief Executive has been in position since 2010, and he is supported by three Depute Chief Executives and the Head of Finance and Property Services. The very experienced Head of Finance and Property Services (the council's section 95 officer) retired in August 2023. The council was aware of the skills gap this could create; an interim Head of Finance & Property Services was appointed in May 2023, which allowed a period of handover.

The council has good processes in place to encourage continuous improvement

73. Services undertake an annual self-assessment to ensure they continue to provide high quality, value for money services to the people and local communities in West Lothian. The West Lothian Assessment Model (WLAM) is an evidence-based assessment model, based on the European Foundation for Quality Management framework.

74. Each service considers the effectiveness of leadership, strategies, policies, processes and procedures and how effectively the service manages relationships with employees, partners and citizens. This requires employees to consider the long-term impact of the service in relation to the stated strategic objectives. WLAM is well embedded and understood within the council and shows the council has a commitment to self-assessment and continuous improvement. How Good is Our School is the assessment model is used in West Lothian Schools.

Elected members undertook a structured induction programme which supports continuous improvement

75. Following the local government elections in May 2022 councillors undertook an induction programme. The council has an established Elected Member Development Programme which was reviewed and refreshed before the 2022 Council Elections. After the elections the council delivered a structured induction programme in May and June 2022. A Welcome Pack was issued to provide background knowledge, reference documents and sources of information.

76. The topics and delivery arrangements had been informed by engagement with a small representative group of elected members before the elections. Feedback from previous elected members was used to improve the training leading to the inclusion of sessions on statutory guidance and softer personal skills. A library of presentation slides and recordings is available through the Elected Member Development pages on the council's intranet. The effectiveness of the Induction Programme was assessed through a survey of all members. Feedback was positive and suggestions were taken forward through the ongoing Elected Member Development Programme.

77. From our observations members are respectful, open and honest and demonstrated appropriate behaviours at committee meetings. Members work together effectively for the achievement of priorities.

The council's leadership has been effective in setting clear priorities and now needs to work together to develop sustainable plans for delivering them

78. As reported above, the council has set clear priorities and is developing new delivery plans to align to those priorities but increasing financial pressures mean more radical solutions are needed to ensure financially sustainable services. Strong collaborative leadership is required to make these difficult decisions. Working with partners and the community will be important in finding innovative ways to deliver sustainable services.

79. We will review the effectiveness of strategic decision making over the course of the audit appointment and report in our annual audit reports.

Appendix 1

Improvement Action plan

| Issue/risk | Recommendation | Agreed management action/timing |
|---|---|---|
| <p>1. Alignment of priorities with Community Planning Partnership</p> <p>West Lothian Community Planning Partnership (CPP) Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP) sets the over-arching priorities and outcomes for the community planning partners including the council.</p> <p>The council incorporated the CPP's 4 focus areas into its Corporate Plan priorities while the LOIP was in development. The new LOIP 2023-2033 was agreed by the CPP in August 2023. The council now needs to build this into its service delivery and performance reporting.</p> | <p>The council should work with the Community Planning Partnership to publish and implement the new Local Outcomes Improvement Plan.</p> <p>Paragraph 17</p> | <p>The new LOIP will be published and development work will be undertaken to agree a suite of performance indicators across the partnership.</p> <p>Training on the LOIP will be made available to elected members and officers.</p> <p>Responsible officer: Depute Chief Executive (Education, Planning, Economic Development and Regeneration)</p> <p>Agreed date: March 2024</p> |
| <p>2. Alignment of performance measures with strategic priorities</p> <p>The council is in the process of developing a performance scorecard for the 2023-2028 Corporate Plan. It is important the council is clear on the level of performance outcomes it aims to achieve.</p> | <p>The council should ensure there is sufficient alignment with its strategic priorities when developing its new performance scorecard to support the evaluation of services.</p> <p>Paragraph 20</p> | <p>The council will review and refresh performance and planning arrangements across council services to support the delivery of the Corporate Plan, corporate strategies and the transformation objectives.</p> <p>The targeted outcome of this development work will be to advance the management and prioritisation of meaningful data in the system and drive improvement in key priority areas.</p> <p>Responsible officer:</p> |

| Issue/risk | Recommendation | Agreed management action/timing |
|---|---|---|
| | | <p>Depute Chief Executive (Corporate, Operational and Housing Services)</p> <p>Agreed date: June 2023 to March 2025</p> |
| <p>3. Citizen Led Inspection Programme</p> <p>The council demonstrated good practice through its Citizen Led Inspection programme. The programme invited members of the community to directly observe and inspect council services and assess whether they met local needs. It was paused during the Covid-19 pandemic as face-to-face services stopped.</p> | <p>The council should consider resuming its Citizen Led Inspection programme to encourage citizens to become involved in the design to improvement of services.</p> <p>Paragraph 26</p> | <p>The council will re-introduce Citizen Led Inspection, which has offered valuable insights and provided the council with customer-designed improvement actions. This will be progressed as part of wider review of the corporate approach to customer experience, where the council will seek to identify new ways to capture customer experience of key council services and processes and utilise that information to improve service provision.</p> <p>Responsible officer:</p> <p>Depute Chief Executive (Corporate, Operational and Housing Services)</p> <p>Agreed date: January 2024 to March 2026</p> |

Leadership of the development of the council's strategic priorities

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