

The Audit of Best Value and
Community Planning

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

A follow-up report

The logo for the Accounts Commission, featuring a stylized 'A' with a checkmark inside a circle.

ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

Prepared by Audit Scotland
May 2014

The Accounts Commission

The Accounts Commission is a statutory, independent body which, through the audit process, requests local authorities in Scotland to achieve the highest standards of financial stewardship and the economic, efficient and effective use of their resources. The Commission has four main responsibilities:

- securing the external audit, including the audit of Best Value and Community Planning
- following up issues of concern identified through the audit, to ensure satisfactory resolutions
- carrying out national performance studies to improve economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local government
- issuing an annual direction to local authorities which sets out the range of performance information they are required to publish.

The Commission secures the audit of 32 councils and 33 joint boards and committees.

Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000 under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. We help the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission check that organisations spending public money use it properly, efficiently and effectively.

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Commission findings

- 1. The Controller of Audit made his report to update the Accounts Commission on Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's progress against the Commission's findings on previous Best Value audit work in the council published in December 2012. In those findings, the Commission recognised that the council was making progress but not in all areas. The Commission asked the Controller of Audit to monitor progress and report back to the Commission. Previously, in findings published in November 2011, the Commission had expressed serious concerns about the overall progress of the council since the first Best Value audit in 2006.**
- 2. The Commission accepts the Controller of Audit's report and welcomes the progress made by the council against our previous findings.**
- 3. We are encouraged by the increased scrutiny and challenge of performance by councillors and by the progress made in how the council manages its workforce, notably in the performance, learning and development of individual employees. We note that the council recognises the need to evaluate and act upon customer and citizen views more effectively.**
- 4. The existing structure of local government has been in place since 1995 and in the islands since 1975. Set against that timeframe it is wholly reasonable for the public to expect its council to have become a customer-focused organisation which demonstrates the principles of best value and is consistently improving its performance. While we therefore welcome the significant progress made in developing a culture of continuous improvement in the council, the key challenge for the council will be to ensure this culture becomes a permanent feature and is not compromised by events such as changes in political or officer leadership. Clear and effective shared leadership between members and officers, adherence to principles of best value, and a strong corporate capacity to support improvements are the essential ingredients to make the culture permanent.**
- 5. There is positive momentum in the council, and it needs to maintain this momentum to ensure it delivers continuous improvement.**

Introduction

1. The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 created a statutory duty of Best Value for all councils, and the Accounts Commission for Scotland is responsible for reporting to the public on the extent to which individual local authorities meet this duty. Audit Scotland staff carry out the audit work on Best Value and the Controller of Audit provides audit reports to the Commission.
2. The first Best Value and Community Planning audit report on Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (the Comhairle) was published in August 2006. The audit found that the Comhairle could not demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement and that the pace of change within the Comhairle needed to be increased. Following a second audit report, in November 2011, the Accounts Commission (the Commission) expressed concerns over the slow pace of improvement in certain key areas and requested a subsequent progress report from the Controller of Audit around 12 months later. This follow-up audit report was published in December 2012.
3. In its findings in December 2012, the Commission recognised that progress had been made by the Comhairle since 2011. In particular, it noted developments in its performance management system, although the potential benefits of this had still to be fully realised. However, the Commission noted with concern that further progress was needed in some areas. In particular, the Comhairle was still not able to gauge properly the satisfaction of customers, and it needed to make more progress in managing its workforce effectively. In particular, the Comhairle needed to:
 - improve completion rates for performance appraisals;
 - address rising sickness absence levels;
 - deliver the improvement plan developed from its staff survey.
4. The Commission encouraged the Comhairle to increase the momentum of improvement, and to underline this, it asked the Controller of Audit to report on progress "at an appropriate time within the next 18 months". This follow-up audit assesses the extent to which the Comhairle has addressed the Commission's concerns and continued to improve in the areas identified in the 2012 Best Value follow-up audit report.
5. We gratefully acknowledge the cooperation and assistance provided to the audit team by Councillor Angus Campbell, Leader of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar; Malcolm Burr, Chief Executive; Lesley McDonald, Head of Executive Office; and all other councillors and staff involved.

Summary

Overall conclusions

The Comhairle has consolidated earlier progress in developing performance management, reporting and self-evaluation, to establish a more effective and embedded culture of challenge and improvement. It has also built on these foundations to demonstrate real improvements in key areas such as asset and workforce management. The Comhairle has brought together the views of its communities and used these to influence decisions and service design. It recognises it can make further progress in developing its approach to understanding and responding to customer views.

6. The Comhairle has responded well to the Commission's findings on the December 2012 Best Value follow-up report. It has used its corporate improvement plan to drive the improvements required and to monitor progress. As a result, a more effective culture of performance management and self-evaluation is embedded across the organisation, and an increased pace of change is evident, especially in key areas such as asset and workforce management.
7. The Comhairle recognises there are still areas for further improvement. It has recently revised its corporate improvement plan to reflect other improvement initiatives over and above those identified in Best Value audits. In addition, an effective corporate improvement member/officer working group (MOWG)¹ has been established that monitors the plan and holds responsible officers to account for its delivery.
8. The Comhairle's improvement work now benefits from a greater focus on self-evaluation. It has matured in its approach to this, directing the process towards areas where it can have greatest corporate impact and including a broader range of people in challenging performance. This integrates well with the regular, detailed performance management reports now produced for each service, to support effective scrutiny by elected members and to hold directors to account for performance.
9. The proportion of staff receiving a performance appraisal each year has more than doubled in recent years to 86 per cent, although this is still below the Comhairle's target that all staff receive an annual appraisal. Performance appraisals have now become an integral part of staff and service training and development plans. However, more needs to be done to ensure all departments are completing these plans.
10. Average sickness absence (excluding teachers) in 2012/13 was 10.4 days. This was a decrease from the previous year and below the Scottish average of 10.9 days. Average sickness absence for teaching staff was 7.2 days in 2012/13. Absence amongst teachers has been decreasing over the past four years but remains above the national average of 6.6 days. The Comhairle achieved these reductions in sickness absence against a backdrop of average

¹ The MOWG consists of the chief executive, all directors, the head of executive office, the Comhairle's Convener, and the chairs and vice-chairs of the audit and scrutiny and policy and resources committees.

staff absence in local authorities increasing nationally during 2012/13. Its latest figures for 2013/14 (unaudited) show the recent reduction in average staff absence (excluding teachers) to have been sustained, while the average absence amongst teachers is significantly lower at 5.6 days. The Comhairle expects to introduce further improvements in managing absence during 2014/15.

11. The Comhairle has continued to make progress on improvement actions resulting from its 2012 staff survey. It has implemented new HR policies and strategies and developed a greater emphasis on the performance of individuals and their training and development needs. It is planning to carry out a further staff survey in 2015 to judge the success of its actions and identify further areas for improvement.
12. More limited progress has been made in developing effective and systematic approaches to evaluating customer and citizens' satisfaction since our 2012 report. While there are clear examples of the Comhairle's decisions and the design of its services being influenced by consultations and feedback, it acknowledges that it can improve further in this area.
13. Through its routine annual work, the local external audit team will continue to monitor future improvement and developments in the Comhairle and liaise with Audit Scotland staff nationally. More widely, scrutiny bodies in the local area network (LAN) will also assess future risks through the shared risk assessment (SRA) process and provide support and challenge as appropriate.

Audit Findings

Improvement processes

The Comhairle monitors its corporate improvement plan closely through its corporate improvement member / officer working group (MOWG). It has developed the plan to include additional improvement initiatives over and above those identified in previous Best Value audit reports. The Comhairle has also identified improvement actions through better self-evaluation procedures. It has matured in its approach to this, directing the process towards areas where it can have greatest corporate impact and including a broader range of people in challenging performance.

Corporate improvement plan

14. In June 2012, the Comhairle agreed its corporate improvement plan in response to the five areas identified for further action in the 2011 Best Value audit, namely:
 - Performance Management
 - Continuous Improvement/ Self Evaluation
 - Pace of Change/ Change Management
 - Partnership Arrangements
 - Customer Satisfaction
15. This improvement plan also included actions to address communication issues that were highlighted in the 2012 staff survey. It detailed specific actions required to address each improvement area, assigned each action to a senior officer, and set out the timescale in which the action should be achieved. Subsequently, the Comhairle amended its 2012 action plan to include all areas of improvement activity, including the results of self evaluation and external audit and inspection, to ensure resources are focused on addressing priority improvement areas.
16. In December 2012, we reported that the Comhairle had the capacity to deliver its improvement plan, but highlighted the need for senior officers and councillors to continue to monitor progress on a regular basis and to ensure that actions are prioritised and coordinated effectively. The corporate improvement MOWG has successfully monitored implementation of the plan since July 2012, meeting monthly to assess progress and maintain the pace of change.
17. While the Comhairle has assessed that much of the work in its 2012 action plan is now complete, it continues to maintain a corporate focus on developing improvements under the five main themes highlighted in the 2011 Best Value audit report. As a result, in September 2013, it agreed a revised corporate improvement plan. The MOWG continues to receive reports addressing progress against the original action plan, but at each meeting, it also now considers in detail one of the five areas for improvement to agree any additional actions required.

Self-evaluation

18. The 2011 Best Value audit report identified that the Comhairle did not have a corporate self-assessment process to help it identify where it most needed to improve. In response, the Comhairle has implemented the 'How Good Is Our Council?' (HGIOC) self-evaluation toolkit², rolling out its use across service departments.
19. The Comhairle's internal challenge team, comprising two senior officers from each of its six departments, carries out HGIOC assessments. It has recently agreed to extend the internal challenge team to include two elected members from the audit and scrutiny committee and two from the policy and resources committee. It will also include an independent, external person in the challenge team who has relevant evaluation experience. This person will act as a 'critical friend' and bring greater independence to the process.
20. The Comhairle first used the HGIOC self-evaluation toolkit in early 2013. It examined itself against quality indicators relating to:
 - its key processes for delivering services;
 - developing, managing and improving partnerships; and
 - improving the quality of services to stakeholders.
21. Both the Comhairle's elected members and its corporate management team have monitored how well departments have carried out the self-evaluations, analysed their results and considered what these mean for the quality of the Comhairle's services. The corporate improvement MOWG has provided strong leadership to promote use of the self-evaluation toolkit to deliver improvements. This has included prioritising which areas will be assessed, and questioning the appropriateness of some of the indicators used for self-evaluation. As a result of this monitoring and management, the process has more focus on outcomes and greater potential for impact and improvement.

Performance management

The Comhairle has consolidated the significant progress made earlier in developing its performance management framework and public performance reporting. It has strengthened its culture of performance management and improvement and increased the level of scrutiny and challenge by councillors.

22. The Comhairle has made significant progress since the 2011 Best Value report in developing its performance management framework. It is continuing to increase the level of scrutiny and challenge by councillors, and embed a performance management culture throughout the organisation that now sees performance and improvement routinely discussed in a mature way.
23. Under the revised arrangements, performance management is a standing agenda item for each service committee, and the policy and resources committee. At each meeting,

² The *How Good Is Our Council?* self-evaluation framework was originally developed by Perth and Kinross Council but is now widely used across public bodies

councillors receive a monitoring report detailing performance against relevant indicators linked to the Comhairle's single outcome agreement (SOA). The reports highlight where targets have not been met and provide an explanation of the potential impact of any under performance. Directors also draw members' attention to key aspects of performance for their particular department and associated actions being taken.

24. The performance monitoring reports cover a good range of issues and use a standard presentational approach, providing councillors with a clear and consistent overview of how departments are performing. Overall, these arrangements mean progress is considered in detail in an appropriate forum, scrutiny and challenge on performance has improved and directors are held to account more effectively.
25. The Comhairle has continued to develop *Interplan* (its corporate performance monitoring system) to support improvements to its performance management framework. The system aligns clearly the Comhairle's corporate themes, to national outcomes, local objectives, Outer Hebrides CPP objectives, and actions in service business plans. This allows the Comhairle to demonstrate the impact of its work more effectively, and provides a clear illustration of how local tasks and actions contribute to corporate objectives and national outcomes.
26. The Comhairle improved its public performance reporting arrangements during 2013 with the introduction of its 'public performance calendar'. The calendar presents a range of information, structured around the outcomes planned in the local Single Outcome Agreement (SOA), as well as service specific information. It also provides the public with access to further information by providing hyperlinks to the performance pages of the Comhairle's website. Here the public can access more detailed performance material, such as the Comhairle's comparative performance in the local government benchmarking framework. Public reaction to the calendar has been very positive.
27. Councils are required to report performance in a balanced and transparent way. While the Comhairle has improved its public performance reporting, its public-facing reports could give more attention to those areas where performance is less successful and what is being done to address it. Achieving this would be evidence of the Comhairle continuing to mature and being able to report to its communities on performance more confidently.

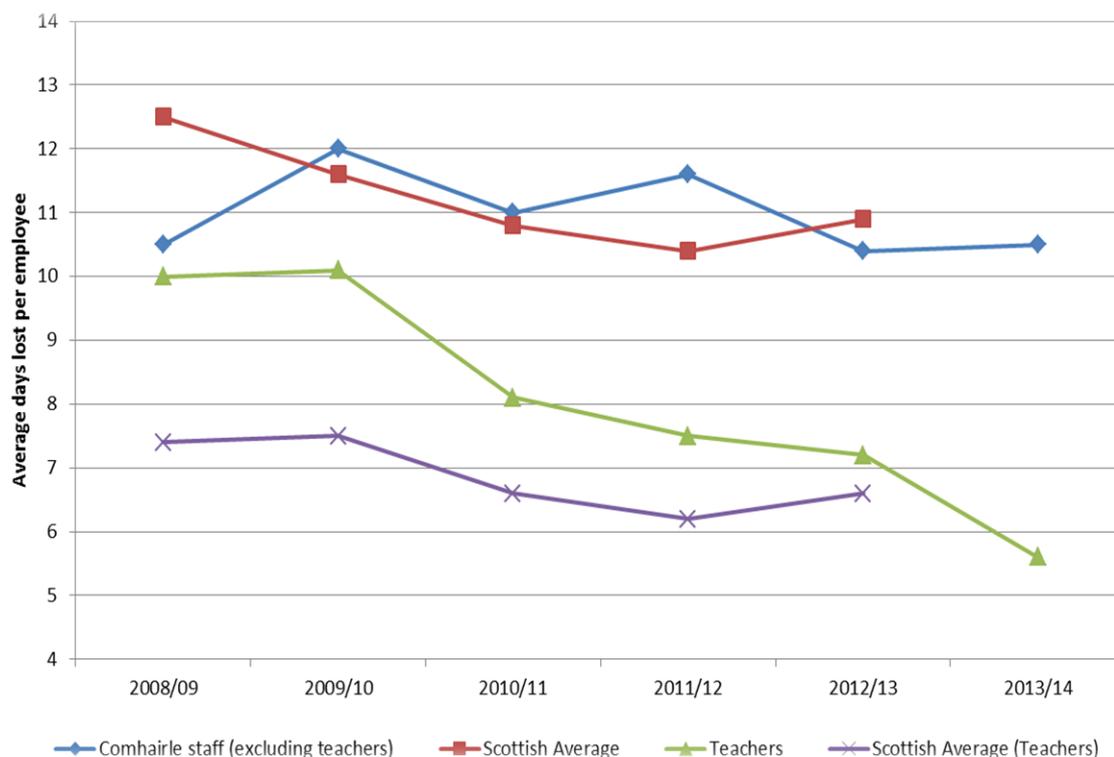
Workforce management

The Comhairle has made significant improvements in the management of its workforce. It has reduced sickness absence, and improved its understanding of staff development needs by increasing completion rates for staff performance appraisals. It has also implemented a range of actions resulting from its staff survey. The Comhairle plans to introduce further improvements to recording information in this area during 2014.

Sickness absence

28. Changes in the Comhairle's average staff sickness absence in recent years are shown in Exhibit 1, page 11.

Exhibit 1

The Comhairle's sickness absence levels 2008/09 - 2013/14³

Source: Statutory performance indicators and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's data for 2013/14

29. During 2012/13, sickness absence fell below its 2008/09 level to an average of 10.4 days lost per employee⁴ (excluding teachers) and was below the national average of 10.9 days. Absence levels for teaching staff also continued to decline to 7.2 days, although this remained above the Scottish average of 6.6 days. The Comhairle achieved reductions in sickness absence in 2012/13 when there was an increase in the average absence levels amongst local authority staff nationally.
30. The Comhairle's unaudited data for 2013/14 shows the recent reduction in average staff absence (excluding teachers) to have been sustained. Average absence amongst teachers during 2013/14 has fallen to 5.6 days and is now almost half the level it was in 2008/09.
31. The Comhairle has actively reduced the level and cost of absence in a number of ways. Directors are now provided with quarterly sickness absence reports for their teams, so they are better informed and more able to pro-actively manage absence levels. The Comhairle has also revised its policy for granting special leave, resulting in a saving of £30,000. In addition,

³ Sickness absence in 2013/14 is from the Comhairle's own unaudited data. National averages are not yet available for 2013/14

⁴ Sickness absence data in our December 2012 report is different from the figures shown here. During 2013, the Comhairle identified an element of double counting in sickness absence within its integrated HR/payroll system (Resourcelink). As a result of subsequent corrections, its recalculated absence rates are lower than those previously reported.

since May 2013, it has employed a temporary HR assistant to assist line managers to implement sickness absence procedures, and target key areas needing attention.

32. The HR assistant has focussed on providing support to home carers where occupational health has signed them off from work, as the Comhairle identified this as the top priority area for attention. To date, five home carers who were previously on long-term sick leave, either have returned to work or are no longer employed by the Comhairle. The HR assistant will continue to focus on the remaining 30 long-term sick leave cases within Home Care before providing wider support across other services. The appointment of the HR assistant has also resulted in more effective management of short term sickness absence (up to 37 consecutive hours) through consistent application of relevant policies.
33. In December 2012, we reported that the Comhairle was not clear on the underlying causes for its high level and increases in sickness absence, and that quarterly reporting on sickness absence was inconsistent across departments. An internal audit report in July 2013 concluded that the Comhairle still had difficulties in obtaining a clear understanding of the underlying causes of sickness absence across the organisation due to departments' ad hoc approaches to recording sickness absence. The Comhairle is working to improve its information base by establishing a consistent corporate approach to absence recording through an upgrade to its integrated HR/Payroll system (Resourcelink) by the end of 2014. If effective improvement is to continue, it will need to be supported by a better understanding of what influences the absence levels that are achieved, as this will help make the action needed clearer.

Staff performance appraisal

34. The Comhairle introduced a performance appraisal process for its staff in September 2009, as part of its arrangements to manage service performance and support the delivery of business plans and the corporate strategy. Previous Best Value audit reports expressed concern that the number of performance appraisals completed was well below the Comhairle's target for all staff to receive an annual appraisal, suggesting that the process was not effective.
35. Improving the performance appraisal rate is part of the corporate aim of embedding a performance management culture in the Comhairle. It has achieved ongoing improvement over the past four years, driving completion rates up from 42 per cent in 2009/10 to 86 per cent in 2012/13. The Comhairle's staff appraisal rate for 2013/14 is currently being finalised.
36. As part of its focus on ensuring all staff receive a performance appraisal, the Comhairle monitors completion rates quarterly. While closer monitoring is a positive development, it is complicated when done on a quarterly basis by departments having different appraisal cycles. Some departments carry out appraisals in the first quarter of the financial year, following approval of business plans, while others complete appraisals later in the year, when drafting the following year's business plan. This limits the potential for any corporate analysis of the appraisal data, and consequently the effectiveness of links to annual planning and corporate workforce development initiatives. The Comhairle might benefit from considering what improvements it could achieve by having a more standardised appraisal cycle.

37. The Comhairle's recent success in driving up completion rates provides it with much better information for preparing departmental training plans. With the introduction of its new Learning and Development Strategy approved in June 2013, performance appraisals and departmental training plans are now a fundamental part of departmental business and financial planning processes. However, not all departments have produced annual training plans to date. Given the importance now given to learning and development, the Comhairle needs to ensure that a full set of departmental training plans is available, so that it can assess overall corporate development needs and the relevant resources required.

Staff survey

38. The Comhairle carried out a staff survey in January 2012 and reported on the findings in June 2012. As we previously reported, in comparable areas, the survey showed a picture of general improvement from its previous survey in 2008. This was evident in job satisfaction as well as how satisfied staff were with key aspects of management, such as listening, encouragement, delegation and decision-making. However, a relatively low proportion of staff believed that good performance was recognised, that performance appraisal was beneficial and that poor performance is dealt with effectively.
39. In September 2012, the Comhairle approved an improvement plan in response to the issues raised in the staff survey, which included actions relating to communication, performance, support and training. It has now delivered most of this action plan and implemented a number of developments, including the introduction of a respect at work policy, a new Learning and Development Strategy and a greater emphasis on performance appraisal and departmental training plans. The corporate improvement member/officer working group (MOWG) is responsible for monitoring delivery of the action plan. The Comhairle is planning to carry out another staff survey in 2015.

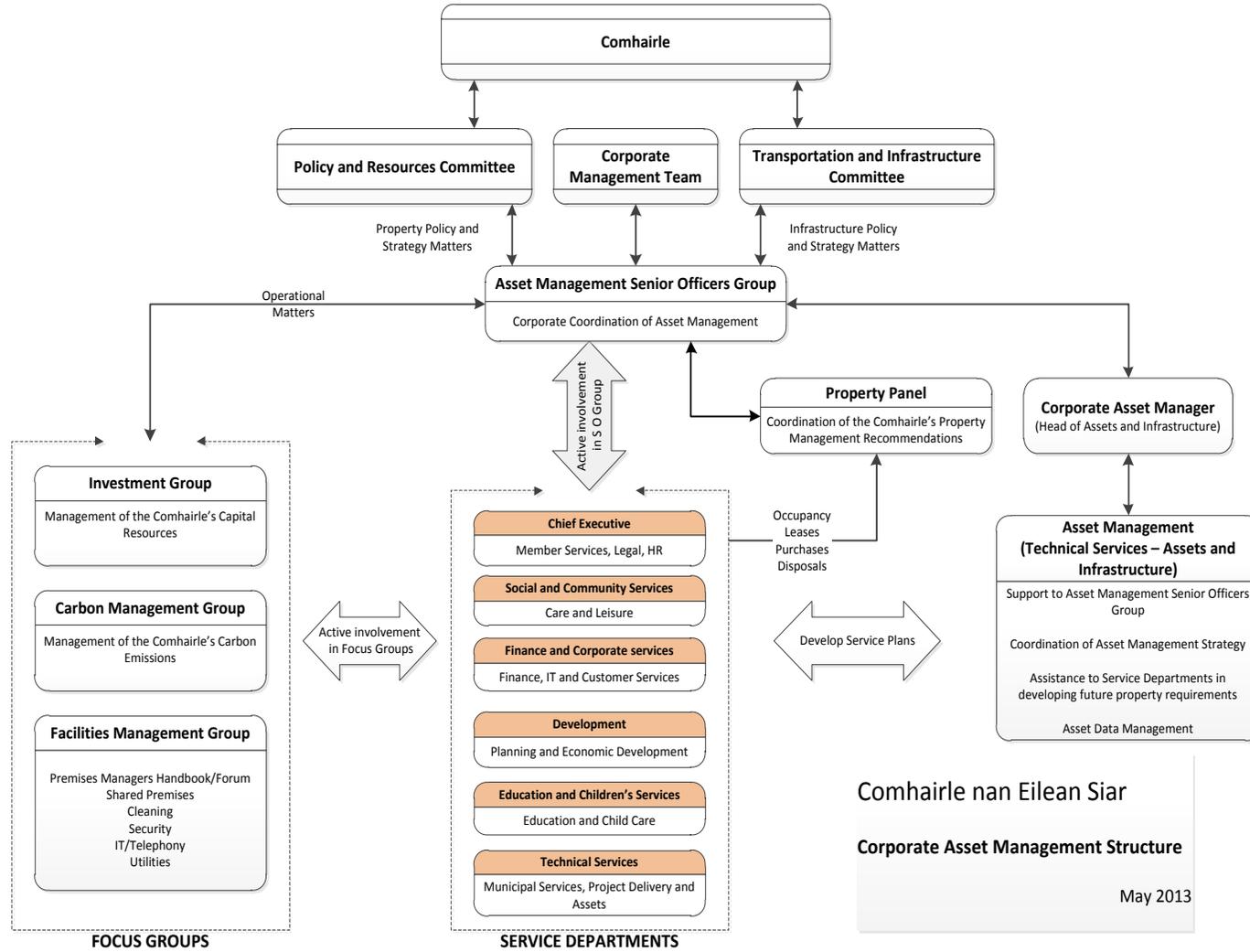
Asset management

Since 2012, the Comhairle has put in place strategic plans and supporting arrangements to improve the management of its assets. Along with its community planning partners, it has established a framework for collaborating on the management of assets.

40. The 2012 Best Value audit report highlighted that the pace of change in asset management had been slow, but that asset management related strategies and plans were in development. Since then, the Comhairle has introduced new plans and structures to support more effective asset management.
41. In June 2013, the Comhairle approved a new 2013-2018 Corporate Asset Management Plan (CAMP). This is underpinned by a planning framework to integrate asset management and investment decisions, as shown in Exhibit 2, page 14. The framework includes an Asset Management Senior Officers Group, chaired by the Chief Executive, which monitors progress of the plan, coordinates investment options and provides a forum to identify best practice. The plan also includes an 'improving asset management' checklist for councillors' use in reviewing performance, as well as a system to assess project priorities and cost allocations.

Exhibit 2

The Comhairle's asset management structures



Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
Corporate Asset Management Structure
 May 2013

Source: Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Corporate Asset Management Plan

42. In February 2014, the Comhairle approved a Property Asset Management Plan (PAMP). This five-year plan outlines the Comhairle's vision for its property portfolio and supports asset management objectives in the corporate strategy, investment strategy and corporate asset management plan. Progress is also evident in the development of a suite of sector specific asset management plans (covering roads, marine infrastructure, vehicles and plant, etc.) and these are due for completion by the end of 2014.
43. The Accounts Commission has previously highlighted that the Comhairle should look at greater opportunities for collaboration around asset management. There is now a greater ethos of collaboration in the Comhairle than existed previously. At a practical level for example, it is exploring opportunities for asset sharing and co-location with its partners. This includes, consideration of the potential for co-location with Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) for business advice services, an integrated stores facility with NHS Western Isles (NHS WI) and the University of Highlands and Islands (UHI) for occupational therapy and schools equipment, and co-location with Police Scotland in Tarbet.
44. Work is ongoing to identify further opportunities for asset sharing with partners and with the wider community. In support of this, in September 2013, the Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership (OHCPP) approved a governance structure for collaborative asset management. This included establishing a Collaborative Asset Management Group involving senior officers from the Comhairle, HIE, NHS WI, and the Scottish Futures Trust. This group allows partners to consult on opportunities for collaborative asset management, to share investment plans, strategies and core asset data, and to co-ordinate multi-agency work-streams.

Customer satisfaction

The Comhairle has made some progress to better understand customer satisfaction and use this to inform decisions and service design. It recognises there is still scope to generate this information in a more efficient and effective way.

45. The 2011 Best Value audit report identified that the Comhairle needed to measure customer satisfaction more effectively. It noted there were some good examples of approaches to gathering information about customer satisfaction within individual services, and recommended that the Comhairle use these to develop its corporate approach. However, our follow-up report in 2012 highlighted that little progress had been made to share good practice and learning across services, and that the Comhairle had not implemented its plan to establish a rolling programme of direct user surveys by June 2012.
46. The Comhairle acknowledges that it has not made as much progress as planned in coordinating its community and partner engagement and consultation activity in a more efficient and effective way. Progress on this has been slower due to greater priority being given to addressing immediate resource challenges. It is also concerned to avoid 'consultation fatigue' through gathering residents' opinions too much amongst its small communities.
47. Despite not delivering all of its planned improvements, the Comhairle is clearly more committed to, and focused on, customer satisfaction. It conducted an island-wide consultation

on its 2013-15 budget strategy, which helped inform the choices made. The Comhairle provided feedback on how it had taken account of the public's views in setting the 2013/14 budget and indicative budget for 2014/15. It published this feedback on its Communities Connect *Portal-E-Sgìre*. There are other good examples of where the Comhairle has recently consulted with communities and responded to feedback in its decisions and service design. These include:

- using a public opinion survey to influence its new waste strategy
- developing a programme of user surveys to assess satisfaction with its Care at Home and homelessness services
- using survey feedback from parents/carers about their local schools to inform the Department of Education and Children's Services business plan for 2014/17 and its validated self-evaluation (VSE) in 2013
- consulting with stakeholders to develop a customer charter for its planning service
- amending the timetable for the Broadbay bus service in response to feedback from local communities.

48. In addition, in June 2013 the Comhairle surveyed all suppliers who had expressed an interest in any tender during the previous year, to assess their views on the efficiency of its procurement procedures. The survey was issued to 341 suppliers and 47 responses were received. The Comhairle developed a range of actions in response to the feedback received and believes this contributed to the significant improvement in its 2013 Procurement Capability Assessment (PCA) score, as highlighted in Audit Scotland's April 2014 report [Procurement in Councils](#). This has increased during 2013 from 40 to 57 per cent, rising above the national average and exceeding the Scottish Government target of 50 per cent.
49. Following a successful pilot in 2011, the Comhairle adopted the Customer Satisfaction Measurement Tool (CSMT)⁵ as a corporate standard in January 2013. The CSMT enables the Comhairle to compare user satisfaction levels across departments and over time with other Scottish councils. The CSMT is currently being applied to user surveys for planning and building warrant applications. There is scope to extend its use to other regular user surveys.
50. The corporate improvement MOWG continues to monitor progress against intended customer satisfaction improvements. Its customer services steering group is also taking forward developments. For example, it is seeking to establish a coordinated schedule for customer service activity across the Comhairle, and is looking at the potential for using social networking as a means of gathering customer feedback.
51. In April 2014, the Comhairle issued a questionnaire seeking views on a wide range of council services from all community councils, residents' associations, elected members, community planning partners, youth councils and a sample of one in ten households. The responses will be analysed and reported to the Comhairle in September 2014, with a view to helping inform

⁵ The Improvement Service, Consumer Focus Scotland, Local Area Research + Intelligence Association (LARIA) and the Scottish Government jointly created the CSMT. It was launched in 2010.

the budget setting process for 2015/16. The Comhairle plans to issue similar questionnaires on an annual basis.

Recommendations

The progress made by the Comhairle in response to previous Best Value reports is significant. There has been a clear increase in the pace of and prospects for improvement. However, Best Value is about continuous improvement, and the Comhairle will therefore want to sustain its progress.

To support this, we provide the following recommendations in relation to the areas covered by this specific audit work. We would expect the Comhairle to embed these within its overall improvement agenda, and to see them reflected in its key documents, such as the Corporate Improvement Plan. As indicated in the Summary section of this report, local external auditors will monitor progress as part of their annual audit activity. The recommendations are that:

52. The Comhairle should build on its progress in recent years, particularly in relation to self-evaluation, and more fully embed an improvement focused culture throughout the organisation.
53. The Comhairle should more effectively develop the skills of its workforce by:
 - ensuring that all staff having an annual performance appraisal;
 - considering the benefits of having a more standardised annual appraisal cycle linked to departmental business plans and corporate workforce planning; and
 - ensuring that departmental training plans are developed across all departments.
54. The Comhairle should manage its workforce more effectively by making best use of its information systems and monitoring sickness absence more consistently across the organisation. It should also generate a better understanding of the underlying causes of sickness absence, to ensure it can take appropriate action and be effective in achieving further improvements in absence levels.
55. The Comhairle should extend its use of the Customer Satisfaction Measurement Tool (CSMT) across all regular user surveys. It should also agree a coordinated corporate schedule of customer service activity to ensure that it gathers customer feedback most efficiently.
56. The Comhairle should report its performance to the public in a more balanced and transparent way by giving more attention to those areas where performance is less successful and what actions it will take to address this.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

A follow-up report

This report is available in PDF and RTF formats, along with a podcast summary at:

www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

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