

News release

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Aberdeenshire Council needs clearer vision to address underlying weaknesses

Aberdeenshire Council continues to deliver many services to a good standard but needs to be clearer about what it wants to achieve.

In a report published today, the Accounts Commission says council officers and councillors work well together, local residents are positive about services, finances are well-managed and there is a strong emphasis on partnership working with other public and third sector bodies.

But the council needs to be clearer and more decisive. The commission says it is hard to see what the council intends to achieve from its high-level priorities. While many areas of Aberdeenshire are thriving, the council needs to increase its focus on neighbourhoods with higher levels of deprivation. This is now more urgent to mitigate the additional impact of Covid-19, and to address the significant gap in educational attainment between poorer areas and others.

Alongside this, the council must put in place a long-overdue strategy to better manage its workforce, at a time when significant numbers of staff are aged over 50. This will help the council tackle long-standing vacancies among teachers and social care staff.

Tim McKay, Interim Deputy Chair of the Accounts Commission, said, "Aberdeenshire Council's services are mainly performing well, and residents are largely satisfied. The council has strong foundations and with increased focus can build better performance. But there are underlying weaknesses that it must address – too many priorities, a need for greater clarity about how services are performing, and the absence of a robust workforce plan.

"The council must step up its efforts to ensure communities are empowered and to focus on areas with higher levels of poverty. It needs to be much clearer in its purpose, direction and pace in order to improve services and the lives of all local people."

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Notes to editors

1. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Accounts Commission. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

- The Accounts Commission is the public spending watchdog for local government. It holds councils and various joint boards and committees in Scotland to account and help them improve. It operates impartially and independently of councils and of the Scottish Government, and meets and reports in public

- Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. It provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission for Scotland.

2. The work for this audit was done prior to the onset of the current Covid-19 emergency. The Commission recognises the significant pressures under which local government finds itself in this current situation. Equally the Commission is of the firm view that the principles of sound financial management, good governance, public accountability and transparency remain vital.

3. Best Value Assurance reports, prepared for the Accounts Commission, offer a rounded and comprehensive analysis of a council's performance. These reports cover how effectively councils are managing changes in services; involving the public in decisions; ensuring enough skills and time to deliver clear priorities; and providing clear information so the public can gauge improvement.