

# **East Ayrshire Council Leadership of the development of new local strategic priorities**

**Best Value thematic work in councils 2022-23**



**Prepared by Audit Scotland  
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# Key messages

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- 1** The council has continued to maintain its strong performance and focus on continuous improvement reported in previous Best Value reports. The council has robust arrangements in place to secure Best Value and has a clear understanding of areas where it can improve further.
- 2** The council's leadership has been effective in working with its partners and setting out a clear vision and priorities for its communities. The council has a record of working well with its partners. The East Ayrshire Community Plan 2015-2030 is viewed as the area's 'sovereign plan'. It is centred around three key themes of economy and skills, safer communities and wellbeing, each with its own delivery plan. The Council's Strategic Plan 2022-27, published in June 2022, is aligned to this.
- 3** The council's new priorities were developed from sustained engagement with its communities. A section on 'What we heard from our communities' is in the plan for each of its six priorities. A commitment to empowering its citizens is demonstrated through its established Vibrant Communities Service.
- 4** The council has a long-established culture of self-assessment and improvement in both its services and its governance.
- 5** The council's overall service performance in relation to other councils has improved since 2010/11 and been maintained over the last five years. Over half of Local Government Benchmark Framework (LGBF) indicators were in the top two quartiles in 2021/22.
- 6** As part of the council plan development, a council-wide strategic self-assessment was completed based on the Best Value criteria. The council has developed and implemented a bespoke in-house East Ayrshire Self-Assessment Model (EASAM). Ten service reviews have progressed during 2022/23 on areas including facilities and property management, people and culture, finance and ICT and members' services.
- 7** The council's current public performance reporting on services is balanced with useful commentary and will be developed further to provide a clear link to the strategic priorities.
- 8** The council has clear commitments to reducing inequalities and addressing climate change in its Strategic Plan 2022-27. An innovative approach to

developing its climate change strategy was led by children and young people from across East Ayrshire.

- 9** Alongside the Strategic Plan the council has developed a Medium-Term Financial Strategy, Workforce Strategy and Digital Strategy as part of their wider Strategic Framework 2022-27. Each of the strategy documents include forward looking actions which recognise the need to align resources and maintain flexibility to integrate new ways of working and further opportunities to digitalise services.
- 10** The council updated the 2021-24 Service Improvement Plans as part of the mid-point review to incorporate relevant actions relating to the Strategic Plan 2022-27. In line with demonstrating continuous improvement, the council plans to develop new service improvement plans, covering the period 2024-2027 in 2024.
- 11** Key to delivery of the councils' plans will be achievement of the transformation programme, overseen by the Programme Management Office (PMO). With the new Strategic Framework in place the council recognises that a key priority is to measure, monitor and report on the achievement of potential benefits arising from investment or change projects.
- 12** The council workforce strategy is aligned to the strategic plan. The strategy explores options for growing and developing employees and pathway opportunities for new employees to join the council workforce. Further work is taking place to review and develop workforce data to support workforce projections and to identify future skills gaps and development needs which will support future review and redesign of services.
- 13** Good progress has been made against the recommendations within the [Best Value Assurance Report](#) and previous Annual Audit Report findings. Improvement actions from this review are included at [Appendix 1](#) of this report. It sets out the council's response to audit recommendations made.

# Scope of the audit

1. When discussing the Local government in Scotland Overview 2022, the Accounts Commission noted: “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. <sup>1</sup>
- 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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.** Throughout this report we detail our review of the council's progress against the 2018 Best Value Assurance Report recommendations.

**7.** 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.

**8.** 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.

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# Council vision and priorities

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**The council has established a clear vision of overarching strategic priorities through its community planning arrangements. Strategic priorities are shared with communities and stakeholders.**

**9.** 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. The council's website includes a page dedicated to the 'Council Strategic Framework 2022-27'. This framework brings together the 2022-27 strategic plan and the associated medium term financial strategy, workforce strategy and digital strategy covering the same period.

**10.** East Ayrshire Community Plan 2015-2030 is viewed as the council's sovereign plan. It provides the overarching strategic context that the council and its partners want to achieve for the communities of East Ayrshire.

**11.** The plan is supported by three yearly community planning cycles which provides an opportunity for the plan and its underlying priorities to be reviewed and adapted to reflect new or emerging challenges. It also ensures the continued focus on the delivery of the shared partnership vision for East Ayrshire. The current Community Plan cycle covers the period of 2021 – 2024.

**12.** The Community Plan is centred around three key themes of economy and skills; safer communities and wellbeing. Each theme has its own delivery plan and strategic leads are in place for each of the themes.

**13.** The Council's Strategic Plan describes how the council will deliver these ambitions for communities and provides the link between the Community Plan and the council's Service Improvement Plans and strategies.

**14.** The East Ayrshire Community Planning Partnership (CPP) has produced a Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP). The LOIP is produced for three yearly planning cycles. This ensures plans remain up-to-date and appropriate for delivering improvement on current and emerging key priorities.

**15.** The LOIP 2021-24 sets out the performance management framework for community planning in East Ayrshire. This provides a mechanism for public reporting of the CPP ambitions for local communities and the impact achieved in meeting these objectives. Each LOIP measure is reported for East Ayrshire alongside the national Scottish measure. Performance is reported annually in the LOIP Annual Performance Report. Alongside this, individual thematic updates are prepared outlining progress against each of the respective delivery plans for economy and skills, safer communities and wellbeing.

## **The Strategic Plan 2022-27 sets out clearly the council's priorities. Engagement with communities and stakeholders was used to inform the strategic plan priorities.**

**16.** Prior to the Local Government elections in May 2022, the previous council started work to support the development of high-level priorities that could be taken forward by the new council in establishing a strategic plan. In the year up to June 2022, the previous council reviewed the recovery and renewal plans, set the council budget without the use of reserves, reviewed the community plan and the health and social care strategic plan. This work concluded with the agreement of high-level priorities which the newly appointed Council reviewed and discussed at their first meeting in June 2022. The Strategic Plan 2022-27 is the council's first strategic plan. In previous years the council had worked towards the Community Plan and complementary Transformation Strategies.

**17.** East Ayrshire Council has a proven track record of investing time in engaging extensively with communities about their needs on a regular and continuous basis. The [Best Value Assurance Report](#) on East Ayrshire Council published in 2018 concluded that the council "includes local people in planning services and spending public money" which "has led to community groups having a positive attitude and a sense of control in shaping their own areas".

**18.** The council has continued this commitment of regular engagement with local communities. The council used the views collected from recent community consultation and engagement as the basis to inform the new strategic plan priorities. These priorities were then open to consultation, with further views sought on the proposals.

**19.** In developing the new plan and priorities the council established a working group consisting of key strategic leads from across the council and the Health and Social Care Partnership to look at previous feedback and engagement information from communities. Following the drafting of the new priorities, the Vibrant Voices platform was used to gather feedback from community organisations and residents on the priorities identified.

**20.** The high-level Strategic Plan for the period 2022-2027 was considered and approved by Council in June 2022. The Strategic Plan focusses on six priority themes:

- Building a fairer economy
- Tackling poverty and inequality
- Improving community wellbeing
- Supporting children and young people
- Delivering a clean, green East Ayrshire
- Ensuring financial sustainability and resilience.



**21.** The priority themes identified build on work from previous Transformation Strategies and the Covid-19 Recovery and Renewal Dynamic Action Plan. Each of the priorities has key actions to be delivered and these are identified within the plan. The Strategic Plan was approved in June 2022 with the detailed action plan approved by the council in October 2022.

**22.** The strategic plan themes underpin the community plan priorities as outlined within the LOIP. The strategic framework describes how the council will deliver on the shared ambitions the council has for the communities of East Ayrshire.

**23.** The contents of the Council’s Strategic Plan 2022-27 are summarised in [Exhibit 1](#).

## Exhibit 1

### East Ayrshire Council’s vision, values and priorities, 2022-27

#### Vision (shared with Community Planning Partners):

*East Ayrshire is a place with strong, safe and vibrant communities where everyone has a good quality of life and access to opportunities, choices and high quality services which are sustainable, accessible and meet people’s needs.*

#### Values:

Quality      Equality      Access      Partnership

#### Priorities:

 <b>Building a Fairer Economy</b>	 <b>Tackling Poverty and Inequality</b>	 <b>Improving Community Wellbeing</b>
 <b>Supporting Children and Young People</b>	 <b>Delivering a Clean, Green East Ayrshire</b>	 <b>Ensuring Financial Sustainability and Resilience</b>

Source: East Ayrshire Council, [Strategic Plan 2022-27](#)

## Action plans with associated actions and timescales have been developed for each of the six strategic priority themes.

**24.** The council's Strategic Framework was approved in October 2022. The Strategic Framework 2022-27 brings together the:

- Strategic Plan 2022-27
- Strategic Plan Action Plan 2022-27
- Medium Term Financial Strategy 2022-27
- Workforce Strategy 2022-27 and
- Digital Strategy: Our Digital Journey to 2027 and Beyond.

**25.** The Strategic Plan Action Plan outlines details of key activities that have the largest potential impact in delivering the council's priorities. The action plan outlines how performance will be measured and includes high-level timescales for delivery of each action.

**26.** The council's current Service Improvement Plans cover the period 2021-24. Progress is reported annually to Cabinet and this also provides an opportunity for services to highlight any new or emerging work. The council plans to develop new Service improvement plans, covering the period 2024-2027 in 2024.

**27.** In March 2023, all the action plans of the 2021-24 service improvement plans were updated as part of a mid-point review. This allowed key actions relevant to each service contained within the Strategic Plan 2022-2027 to be included. Each service improvement plan includes an improvement action plan that contains a list of actions linked to outcomes, who is responsible for that action and timescales.

## The strategic plan outlines partnership working arrangements that will support delivery of the council's ambitions.

**28.** The 2018 [Best Value Assurance Report](#) recommended that the council develop a council-wide plan for working with the business sector.

**29.** In 2019 the Ayrshire Economic Joint Committee was established with agreement from East, North and South Ayrshire councils. The committee is committed to delivering economic growth across Ayrshire and is implementing a governance structure to oversee delivery of the Ayrshire Growth Deal which was formally signed in November 2019.

**30.** Deloitte reported within their Audit Dimension and Best Value report for 2021/22 that the council had adopted the Ayrshire Growth Deal as one of its strategic priorities for 2021-2024 with all community planning partners committed to working collectively and proactively to maximise their impact and benefit throughout the local communities. Actions to support the delivery of the shared strategic priorities endorsed by all partners are set out in the Delivery

Plan considered by Council on 24 June 2021. The strategic plan 2022-27 incorporates the Ayrshire Growth Deal opportunities within the Building a Fairer Economy priority.

**31.** The council has continued to focus on working with the business sector as evidenced through its strategic plan. The council views the £251.5m Ayrshire Growth Deal as being a key driver in attracting innovative and internationally focussed companies; improving strategic transport and digital infrastructure; working with communities to raise aspiration and ambition; providing employment and skills support and improving access to jobs.

### **The council has established a Programme Management Office but is still developing its benefit realisation approach.**

**32.** A key recommendation of the [Best Value Assurance Report](#) published in 2018 was for the council to put arrangements in place to support, monitor and deliver the expected outcomes of the transformation strategy. This included:

- creating a programme management office to coordinate people and activities
- developing tools to assess whether the council has achieved its aims
- determine and secure the skills necessary to implement the strategy.

**33.** Following a review of the Council's management structure in June 2021, the Programme Management Office (PMO) was created to oversee change and project management across the Council.

**34.** The PMO has now been established within the council's Corporate Support Service and is responsible for setting, maintaining and ensuring standards for project management across the council. A work plan for the PMO is in place. Currently PMO support is in place for ten projects linked to the strategic plan actions. The PMO has responsibility for promoting best practice and centrally tracking the status and progress of each of the projects. The PMO will provide a source of advice and guidance for programme and project management, as well as being the information hub of the programme. It fulfils a monitoring role and oversees and co-ordinates activities for the programme.

**35.** The Council Management Team (CMT) approved the Project Management Framework in March 2023. They receive monthly reports on the PMO and strategic plan. Management recognises that the successful delivery of projects for organisational change or improvement of community outcomes require continual focus on the intended benefits. To support this, a benefits realisation approach is being developed as part of the Council's Project Management Framework. This will monitor, report and evidence the achievement of potential benefits arising from investment or change and will seek to embed benefits realisation into the work to the council.

### **The council reports on its performance regularly**

**36.** During 2022/23, and following the May 2022 Council elections, the council continued to report its performance in the same way as before its Strategic Plan 2022-27 was published. It reported performance against service improvement plans, selected indicators were also reported through East Ayrshire Performs summary reports and the council produced its annual report on performance indicators and the Local Government Benchmarking Framework in April 2023. High level reporting, including key highlights and risks for each key strategic priority, has been reported to the Council Management Team on a monthly basis.

### **The council has not yet reported progress against the new strategic action plan. Arrangements are being developed.**

**37.** The council has yet to report its progress against actions set out in the Strategic Plan 2022-27, published in June 2022, to elected members or the public, although plans are in place to report during 2023. Reporting performance against measures set out in its Strategic Plan Action Plan, published in October 2022, will be reported in October 2023.

**38.** The Strategic Framework, approved by Council in October 2022, set out the intention that elected members would receive regular updates on the delivery of the Strategic Plan Action Plan and proposed that these updates be presented alongside East Ayrshire Performs quarterly summary performance reports. As the Strategic Plan 2022-27 is the council's first council plan for some time, the council did not already have a process in place to report against a council plan.

**39.** The performance indicators currently included in the Strategic Plan Action Plan reflect those currently measured but there is a recognition that whilst these indicators provide an indication of progress, there is potential to collect and collate other information that would provide a wider picture. The PMO plans to work alongside services to identify additional qualitative evidence that could further inform progress, learning and evaluation. This could include feedback from communities, service users, employees and partners.

**40.** The Chief Executive proposed, in his covering paper for the Strategic Framework, that an annual report be produced to provide an opportunity for reflection, review and revision of the plan if necessary. The council plans to do this by March 2024. As the council develops its approach to benefits realisation, this will provide a further opportunity to consider whether reporting arrangements need to be refined or enhanced.

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## **Recommendation 1**

**The council should ensure arrangements are established to report regularly to elected members and the public on progress against the Strategic Plan 2022-27.**

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## **Directions of travel rather than specific targets have been set for indicators for the six strategic priorities.**

**41.** The council's Strategic Plan Action Plan 2022-27, set out as part of the council's Strategic Framework, includes a list of indicators for each of the six priorities:

- Building a fairer economy (12 indicators – 11/12 with targets)
- Tackling poverty and inequality (12 indicators – 11/12 with targets)
- Improving community wellbeing (14 indicators – 14/14 with targets)
- Supporting children and young people (11 indicators – 10/11 with targets)
- Delivering a clean, green East Ayrshire (12 indicators – 9/12 with targets)
- Ensuring financial sustainability and resilience. (7 indicators – 3/7 with targets).

**42.** There are targets for 60 of the 68 indicators. However, targets tend to be fairly high level, eg 'increase', 'decrease', 'Reduce the gap with Scotland' rather than specified numbers. Only two targets include a specific percentage. Being more specific about targets would help focus those in the council working towards them and would also allow elected members and the public to understand more fully how effectively the council has performed against individual measures in relation to its aims when performance is reported.

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## **Recommendation 2**

The council should ensure the performance targets it sets should be specific, measurable and aligned to the Council's benefits realisation model.

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## **Performance information could be made more accessible and understandable for members of the public. A clearer link to council priorities would be helpful.**

**43.** There are areas in which the council could improve its public performance reporting. The performance information the council reports is balanced and the commentary provided against individual indicators is useful. The council is committed to reporting progress against the priorities it set out in its Strategic Plan 2022-27, published in June 2022., before the end of the 2023 calendar year. Performance is reported across a number of reports (SPI and LGBF reports, EA Performs, LOIP Annual performance report). There is no overarching framework, that is publicly available, setting out the purpose of each report or how they link together. Although the council does compile a summary of LGBF performance, it does not summarise its performance against its own priorities. There are a few instances where information on the council's performance webpages is not up to date. In April 2022, the council's Strategic Self-Assessment identified an action to further strengthen Public Performance

Reporting arrangements and to maximise the use of the Pentana Performance Management system.

**44.** The council has a dedicated performance management webpage that includes a wealth of information and this would be strengthened by including a document describing its overall approach to performance management, which the council has provided to us. The council reports its performance to the public in a number of ways via its website:

- **East Ayrshire Performs** – Quarterly performance reports are presented to Cabinet and the Governance and Scrutiny Committee. These include information relating to the council’s financial performance and selected service performance that include areas of interest to elected members, areas of strong or under-performance, and areas where performance information has become available during the year. They provide up-to-date information on how the council is managing finances and capital projects, as well as progress in relation to issues such as absence management and health and safety. Performance against selected indicators appears under the heading ‘Business Briefings’. Of the four East Ayrshire Performs summary reports produced relating to 2022/23, three have ‘Business Briefings’ sections.
- **Performance indicators** - The council provides a link to a list of 55 indicators endorsed by the Governance and Scrutiny Committee on 25 April 2019. Performance over the last three years is provided where available. The latest information available is for 2021/22. The council agreed to continue to report on 54/55 of these indicators in 2022/23. The link in which this information appears includes data for 45 out of the 55 indicators (reported to a joint meeting of the Council and the Community Planning Partnership Board on 22 September 2022). It has not been updated to reflect the remaining ten indicators that were reported in a report to the Governance and Scrutiny Committee in April 2023.
- **Local Government Benchmarking Framework** – In a clear and balanced report to the Governance and Scrutiny Committee in April 2023 the council presents analysis it has conducted on its performance against other councils and compares its own performance with previous years on the 82 indicators (out of a possible 103) where data was available at that time. It features a summary of its performance as well as a focus on indicators where it has performed well (Quartile 1) and where its performance is in Quartile 4. For these indicators it sets out improvement actions.

**45.** The 2021-24 Service Improvement Plans and their associated action plans, updated in March 2023, are not linked from the council’s performance management pages.

**46.** It would be beneficial for elected members and members of the public if the council publish the existing summary report of its performance linked to its new strategic priorities. The council does ensure a large amount of performance information is made available on its website, as described above although on some occasions it is presented in a number of documents and would benefit

from being available in one source. The council is planning a review of the current suite of indicators during 2023/24 and is also committed to improving its public performance arrangements.

**47.** The Accounts Commission issued a new Statutory Performance Information Direction in December 2021 which applies for the three years from 2022/23. It requires a council to report its:

- performance in improving local public services (including those provided with its partners and communities), and progress against agreed desired outcomes (SPI 1). The Commission expects this reporting to allow comparison both over time and with other similar bodies (drawing on Local Government Benchmarking Framework and/or other benchmarking activities)
- own assessment and audit, scrutiny and inspection body assessments of how it is performing against its duty of Best Value, and how it has responded to these assessments (SPI 2).

**48.** The council should review the content of its performance website to ensure it meets the requirements of the new SPI direction.

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### Recommendation 3

The council is committed to publishing a performance management framework on its website and should ensure its performance information is linked to its new strategic priorities, is up-to-date, clearly set out and easily accessible.

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### The council's overall performance in relation to other councils has improved since 2010/11, remaining relatively stable over the last five years.

**49.** The council participates in the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF). The framework brings together a wide range of information about how all Scottish councils perform in delivering services, including the cost of services and how satisfied citizens are with them.

**50.** The most recent National Benchmarking Overview Report 2021/22 by the Improvement Service was published in March 2023. Using this information, the council compiled and presented a tailored annual performance report on its 2021/22 performance to its Governance and Scrutiny Committee in April 2023, see paragraph 44.

**51.** It reported that when comparing its performance with other councils, 53.7% of the performance indicators for which data is available were in the top two quartiles in 2021/22. [Exhibit 2](#) sets out performance in the last five years and in 2010/11 as the reference year. Performance has remained relatively stable, between 49.4% and 56.3%, over the last five years.

**Exhibit 2****Percentage of LGBF indicators for East Ayrshire Council in the top two quartiles in 2021/22**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Quartile 1 &amp; 2 Performance</b>
2021/22	53.7%
2020/21	50.0%
2019/20	56.3%
2018/19	49.4%
2017/18	55.3%
2010/11	43.5%

Source: East Ayrshire Council, LGBF

**52.** When comparing its own performance over time, the council reported improving or maintaining performance in 64.6% of LGBF indicators between 2020/21 and 2021/22 (The LGBF data has changed slightly since this was reported in April 2023 and as at July 2023 this figure is 54.0%). When comparing performance between 2010/11 and 2021/22 the council has improved or maintained performance in 62.2% of performance indicators.

**53.** The council is in the process of preparing a summary against the suite of 55 indicators it has chosen to reflect its performance against since April 2019.



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# Citizen and community engagement

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**The council's new priorities were developed from sustained engagement with its communities. The council demonstrates genuine commitment to working with and empowering local communities.**

**54.** East Ayrshire Council's 2018 Best Value Assurance Report (2018 BVAR) commented positively on the council's citizen and community engagement, referring to 'a genuine commitment...to work with and empower local communities'.

**55.** The BVAR reported that the council:

- is encouraging people to get involved in making their community a better place to live. There is evidence of communities across East Ayrshire finding solutions to local issues. This has led to community groups having a positive attitude and a sense of control in shaping their own area.
- includes people in planning services and spending public money. Local people have attended participatory budgeting events, where they decided which projects should receive funding.
- has transferred responsibility for 44 assets to communities, such as buildings and land, since 2014. This has given people greater control over services important to them, while reducing costs for the council.

**The importance the council places on working with its communities to develop services is clear from its Strategic Plan 2022-27**

**56.** Throughout the Strategic Plan 2022-27, the council's focus, effort and the importance it places on working with communities is evident.

**57.** The foreword and introduction to the plan make reference to the council's assets including its vibrant and passionate communities, working collaboratively with communities, meeting their needs and being informed by feedback from communities. The introduction also sets out the council's intention to work with communities to address challenges such as increases in the cost of living, increased demand for services and pandemic recovery and renewal, while continuing to deliver improved outcomes.

**58.** The council introduces its vision by stating ‘Our communities are at the heart of everything we do’. Its ‘vibrant communities’, are central to its vision: East Ayrshire is a place with strong, safe and vibrant communities where everyone has a good quality of life and access to opportunities, choices and high-quality services which are sustainable, accessible and meet people’s needs.

**59.** It elaborates on its vision in how it wants to work with communities in the following terms:

*As a Council we are committed to place-based working and to community power, ensuring that the people and the communities we serve are at the very centre of our work and are able to shape and influence the services they require. We believe that only by working together with our communities can we achieve our ambitions and address the challenges we face. We want to unlock the skills and talent that exist in our communities and to harness community power to help people to live happier, healthier and longer.*

**60.** As described in [Exhibit 1](#), the council has developed six high-level priorities in its Strategic Plan 2022-27. Instead of establishing a stand-alone priority in relation to community engagement and empowerment the council has embedded references to working with its communities throughout its priorities. The descriptions of all of its high-level priorities include references to working with communities and partners. [Exhibit 3](#) sets out examples of the sub-priorities (referred to by the council as key priorities) that refer directly to the involvement of communities.

### Exhibit 3

#### Examples of references to community engagement and empowerment in the council’s key priorities

High-level priority	Key priority
<b>Ensuring financial sustainability and resilience</b>	Improve service delivery, innovation and design by empowering frontline teams and the communities we serve and ensuring that early intervention and prevention are at the heart of what we do
	Lead the way in community power, ensuring individuals and communities have more control over decisions that will affect their lives and more say in what we do and how we do it
	Deliver placemaking and local place plans and build more resilient, fairer, healthier and stronger communities and places
<b>Building a fairer economy</b>	Promote community wealth building and fair work
<b>Tackling poverty and inequality</b>	Understand the impact of the pandemic on services and communities and use learning to mitigate the harm caused.

<b>Improving community wellbeing</b>	Embed a place-based and multi-disciplinary approach to the planning and delivery of community wellbeing programmes, supports and initiatives, including Technology Enabled Care.
	Support communities to address the impact that inequalities have on the health and wellbeing of our residents
	Transform how we support adults and older people through a shared commitment to human-rights based service redesign, delivery and practice
<b>Supporting children and young people</b>	Respect and promote the rights of children and young people and involve them in all decisions made about them by embedding the UNCRC in our policies and practices

Source: East Ayrshire Council Strategic Plan, 2022-27

## The council used the results of recent, prior engagement with its communities to inform its new priorities.

**61.** As the council has engaged extensively with communities about their needs over the last few years it used these views to inform initial development of its new priorities. These priorities formed the basis of a Strategic Plan consultation exercise in May/June 2022. Previous engagement related to:

- Social Renewal Advisory Board (Autumn 2020)
- Vibrant Voices - Budget 21/22 (2021)
- Community Plan Review (2021)
- Health and Social Care Partnership Strategic Plan consultation (2021).

**62.** A key stage in developing the new plan and priorities involved the council setting up a working group made up of key strategic leads across the council and the Health and Social Care Partnership to look at previous intelligence gathered from communities. After the new priorities had been drafted, in June 2022, the council asked for feedback from community organisations and residents on them using the Vibrant Voices platform. They were asked for their views on what the council had set out to do, what else it should be doing and what it could do differently.

**63.** For each of the six priorities in its new strategic plan, the council included a 'What we heard from our communities' section, setting out the views gathered from the June 2022 public consultation. For example:

- Under the Delivering a clean, green East Ayrshire priority, the council noted that communities:
  - are supportive of recycling and the circular economy, but want to see more action on plastic and textile recycling, reusable products and packaging and reuse of items

- support a move to greener and renewable energy sources and are interested in a Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy being examined.
- are concerned about the reliability of public chargers for electric vehicles, with some indicating that there should be financial charges for using public chargers.
- As part of the Tackling poverty and equality priority, the council set out the following feedback:
  - Communities are concerned about families falling below the poverty line and the impact that this has on mental health and sustainability of employment. Some specific concerns were also raised in relation to Universal Credit sanctions
  - Additional challenges are faced by those with disabilities and increases in cost of living can have a hugely disproportionate impact.

**64.** The council used this feedback to inform the key priorities identified under each theme and to inform the action plan developed in October 2022. We were provided with a full set of responses to the consultation. These are not currently easy to access. The council should consider directly linking a summary of feedback received to each consultation on the consultation page of its website.

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## Recommendation 4

The council should maximise the use of its website to provide a summary of the feedback received to consultations.

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## The council continues to effectively support its citizens to be involved in making decisions about services in their communities through its Vibrant Communities Service

**65.** East Ayrshire Council's Vibrant Communities Service was set up in April 2013, over ten years ago, to change the council's relationship with local people. The aim of the service was to move away from the traditional way of working 'for people', to working 'with people'. The service has over 100 employees and works across all council and partner services. Its approach to service development and delivery focuses on empowering members of communities to live happy, healthy, connected and fulfilling lives.

**66.** Members of the Vibrant Communities team empower communities in many ways, including enabling:

- **Community action plans.** People come together to discuss local needs and priorities and then agree actions to improve their local area. Since 2014, the council has supported 29 communities to develop and implement community-led action plans. New Cumnock's community action

plan led to renovation of an outdoor swimming pool and improvement to public buildings and houses.

- **Community asset transfer.** This involves the transfer of the responsibility of an asset from the council to a community group or voluntary organisation. The process presents local groups and communities with opportunities to get involved in running facilities and delivering services, empowering them to help themselves and create a more sustainable future. Since 2012, 61 community asset transfer applications have been approved including community facilities and areas of green space as well as sports facilities for football, boxing and karate.
- **Participatory budgeting.** This is a form of local decision making which invites communities to have a direct say in how public money is spent. As at June 2023, over £350,000 has been awarded through grant making participatory budgeting in East Ayrshire.
- **Placemaking.** Local place plans are part of the Scottish Government's wider work on planning reform and aim to reduce conflict, improve community engagement and build public trust in planning matters. Developing the local place plan involves four engagement meetings, resulting in draft maps and actions being produced and, at subsequent meetings, adjusted by members of the group until an agreed plan is established to go out for informal consultation across the community. Formal public consultation then follows Cabinet approval of the draft plan. Five placemaking maps have been produced by the council to date with more being planned.

**67.** The council has many examples of communities designing and co-producing services. Examples include:

- the role of children and young people in shaping and influencing the council's climate change strategy (Paragraphs 97-102).
- the Children and Young People's Cabinet having a joint session with the Council's Cabinet each year. This has resulted in recommendations for the council budget around providing period poverty pouches in schools and taking action to tackling negative perceptions of young people.
- community asset transfer. In Ochiltree, the community has transformed two rundown buildings which housed a community centre and library into Ochiltree Community Hub, at a cost of nearly £2 million. The hub, which has been up and running for over three years, offers a community facility and community services. It is entirely owned and run by the local community with an active board of local trustees and volunteers.

**The value of citizens' local knowledge and their understanding of the needs of communities became more evident during the pandemic. The council is reflecting on what improved ways of working to retain.**

**68.** In East Ayrshire, the Covid-19 pandemic saw communities coming together to support and help each other in many different ways. For example, volunteers helped the most vulnerable members of communities with shopping or collected prescriptions and sports clubs provided online sessions to children and young people to keep them engaged in physical activity.

**69.** In its Strategic Plan 2022-27 the council emphasised the central role communities played in the local response to the pandemic: The benefits of our partnership approach were never more evident than during the pandemic. Our communities were at the heart of our local response and showed us, more clearly than ever before, the value of having local services rooted in local places and local communities. They demonstrated their resilience and capacity to look after each other and their local knowledge and understanding of the needs of communities was vitally important to our response.

**70.** In December 2022, the council approved a new, strengthened approach to locality planning with the aim of strengthening the voice of citizens and communities using a bottom-up approach. Six Place Partnerships are to be co-produced, co-designed and co-led with local communities.

**71.** The Strategic Plan 2022-27 also noted the council is still reflecting on the new ways of working that evolved during the pandemic and which ones should be continued:

*Going forward we will want to build on this and to reflect on where we have developed new and better ways of working, ensuring that successful approaches can be continued.*

**72.** Examples of new ways of working or new approaches resulting from the pandemic the council has continued, include:

- the council simplifying its processes for distributing local grants (Covid-19 Community Support Grant) to ensure a quicker response time and provision of funding within a shorter timescale. On average the process from application to receipt now takes between one and two weeks, with some payments being made within just a few days. It has kept these simplified processes in place for the Cost of Living Support Grant.
- the council's commitment to digital inclusion - access to digital tools and connectivity. The council set out a commitment in its Strategic Plan 2022-27 to ensure that people and families who are vulnerable or socially disadvantaged are digitally included at home or in their community and are supported to access online opportunities safely.
- the council's continued provision of community larders, an alternative to foodbanks, for those who require food and support in East Ayrshire. Community larders aim to support anyone in need for an affordable membership fee. There are currently 14 larder resilience groups. The cost of living crisis has been a further strain on communities and at a point where larders were considering withdrawing services, they are now continuing to ensure that every person who needs support can receive it.

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# Reducing inequalities and tackling climate change

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## The council has set out clear commitments to reducing inequalities and addressing climate change in its Strategic Plan 2022-27

**73.** The Accounts Commission's Local Government in Scotland Overview 2023 report highlights that changing demographics, the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis 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.

**74.** 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.

**75.** As shown in [Exhibit 1](#), the council's new Strategic Plan 2022-27, agreed by the council in June 2022, sets out six priorities for the council and these include:

- **Tackling poverty and inequality** - *We are committed to securing a fairer, kinder and more connected East Ayrshire, working with our communities and partners to tackle the damaging effects of poverty and inequality.*
- **Delivering a clean, green East Ayrshire** - *We are committed to working with our communities and our partners to cut emissions both within the Council and in the wider area, to help build a stronger post-carbon, post-Covid economy, with community wealth building, equality of opportunity and improved quality of life for all at its heart.*

**76.** The council has identified nine 'key priorities' that feed into the tackling poverty and inequality priority. These include taking action to support those most affected by increases in the cost of living, developing high quality new social housing and promoting digital inclusion and increasing digital participation.

**77.** Similarly, the new Strategic Plan includes eight 'key priorities' that contribute to the clean, green East Ayrshire priority. Examples of these include tackling fuel poverty, promoting active travel and reducing, reusing, recycling and recovering waste to improve resource efficiency.

**78.** East Ayrshire's Community Plan 2015 - 2030 provides the overarching strategic context around what it, along with its partners, wants to achieve. It is supported by delivery plans that are renewed every three years that allow

partners to take account of new and emerging challenges. Poverty and inequality and sustainability and the environment were affirmed as priorities for East Ayrshire's Community Planning Partnership (CPP) for 2021-24 when it reviewed its priorities in 2021. Reducing inequalities features heavily in the actions set out in the Local Outcomes Improvement Plan 2021-24.

## **The views of those facing inequalities are reflected in the council's new strategic plan.**

**79.** In its Strategic Plan 2022-27, as noted at paragraph 63 the council included a 'What we heard from our communities' section for each of its six priorities. These views were taken from survey returns in June 2022 from the council's Vibrant Voices platform. Equalities questions were included within the online questionnaire, but some respondents chose not to provide this information and so the characteristics of the respondents are not fully known. In relation to the tackling poverty and inequality priority respondents noted:

- They are concerned about families falling below the poverty line and the impact that this has on mental health and sustainability of employment. Some specific concerns were also raised in relation to Universal Credit sanctions.
- Additional challenges are faced by those with disabilities and increases in cost of living can have a hugely disproportionate impact.

**80.** In addition, when developing the Strategic Plan 2022-27, the council reflected on other recent engagement work that had been conducted. For example, it utilised information from widespread engagement related to the 2021 Community Plan Review with partners, communities, the Equalities Forum, the Children and Young People's Cabinet and delivery plan working groups.

**81.** The Equalities Forum is chaired by the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Children and Young People, Net Zero, Environment, Climate Change and Equalities and Inclusion and comprises individuals and members of groups, representing all of the protected characteristics, elected members, council officers and partner representatives. Examples of its recent work includes providing views on the Strategic Plan 2022-27, the 2023/24 budget and feeding into the Finance Best Value Service Review and Digital Strategy.

**82.** The input of communities and those facing inequalities informed wording throughout the Strategic Plan in priorities and actions in areas including food, employment, digital, mental health, wellbeing and housing.

## **The council agreed an action plan for tackling poverty and inequality in October 2022**

**83.** In October 2022, the council agreed action plans for all six of its priorities, including tackling poverty and inequality. The tackling poverty and inequality action plan sets out actions for the eight tackling poverty and inequality key priorities identified in the Strategic Plan 2022-27 in June 2022. Actions are listed



along with intended benefits, associated timescales and who within the Council Management Team is sponsoring that action.

**84.** For example, one of the key priorities is to 'Take action to support those most affected by increases in the cost of living'. The actions developed in relation to this key priority are:

- utilise cost of living balances to implement proposals to mitigate cost of living challenges for those most in need (2022/23)
- implement a cost of living communications engagement campaign (2022).

**85.** Actions not completed from Covid-19 Recovery and Renewal Plans have been incorporated into the Strategic Plan 2022-27 or service improvement plans. Understanding the impact of the pandemic on services and communities and using learning to mitigate the harm caused is one of the tackling child poverty and inequality key priorities included in the action plan.

### **The majority of equality impact assessments from the last 18 months were completed by the council after the policy or strategy concerned had been finalised.**

**86.** Equality impact assessments (EQIAs) should be carried out prior to implementing strategic decisions, with a view to predicting their impact on equality and are routinely published following Cabinet and/or Council consideration of the proposals so that the assessments can reflect any matters raised by Elected Members. The council has completed seven EQIAs in the last 18 months and at the time of writing (June 2023), none yet in 2023. Four of the seven EQIAs were completed after the policy/strategy had been approved by Elected Members. No EQIA was conducted for the new strategic plan, but the council has acknowledged that any changes proposed to support the council to deliver on its new priorities will be the subject of an EQIA as appropriate.

**87.** There is a commitment to ensure that EQIA's are central to the delivery of individual workstreams' projects within the Strategic Plan. There is also a specific action contained within the Strategic Plan and the Corporate Support Service Improvement Plan '...to impact assess our policies, strategies, functions and plans and take into account the needs, experiences, circumstances and barriers that different people and groups in our communities face'.

**88.** The council has a page on its website that clearly describes the benefits of EQIAs. Detailed guidance on equality analysis written by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in January 2011 is provided on this page along with a tailored toolkit for conducting EQIAs in the council. This is dated February 2011 and does not include any reference to the Fairer Scotland duty. Officers have advised that the Fairer Scotland duty was incorporated into the toolkit in January 2018 and further updates made in August 2023, strengthening the assessment of socio-economic impacts and new training modules and the identification of service-based equality champions are supporting the updated toolkit. This version of the toolkit is on the council's intranet but it would benefit from also being placed on the council's website.

**89.** A separate webpage on the council's website lists EQIAs from the last seven years. A one-page summary of assessment information is provided.

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## Recommendation 5

The council should ensure equality impact assessments are completed at an early stage to inform policy and strategy development. It should also place the most up-to-date information relating to EQIAs on its website.

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### **The council has clearly set out its commitment to taking a human rights based approach to service design and delivery in its new strategic plan.**

**90.** There is legislation which covers human rights. Taking a human rights based approach is about making sure that people's rights are put at the centre of policies and practices and giving people opportunity to realise those rights. Councils should make explicit reference to the work they do to promote this or reflect it as part of their plans to reduce inequalities.

**91.** The council sets out its commitment to human rights in its new strategic plan primarily through its community and wellbeing and children and young people priorities.

**92.** One of ten 'key priorities' under the community and wellbeing priority is to 'Transform how we support adults and older people through a shared commitment to human-rights based service redesign, delivery and practice'. The council discusses making the most of opportunities for collaboration and joint working with people, families and carers to achieve their outcomes and commits to participating in new and innovative local and national initiatives that seek to test new ways of working and collaborative working.

**93.** Under the Supporting children and young people priority, one of nine 'key priorities' is to 'Respect and promote the rights of children and young people and involve them in all decisions made about them by embedding the UNCRC in our policies and practices'. One of the council's equality outcomes is to embed a human rights ethos across schools in East Ayrshire. In 2023, the Shared Equality Outcomes 2021-25 mid-term progress report stated that 33 education establishments are recognised at bronze level for Rights Respecting Schools (mean rights committed) with seven at silver level (rights aware) and five at gold level (rights respecting).

### **The council has adopted an ambitious target to be net zero by 2030. A 24 per cent reduction in emissions has been reported since 2012.**

**94.** 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.

**95.** In October 2021, East Ayrshire Council joined the UK100, a network of UK locally elected leaders committed to cleaner, more powerful and empowered communities and agreed to adopt its ambitious emission reduction targets. This means the council is aiming to reduce council emissions to net zero by 2030 and is demonstrating leadership by working with partners in setting an East Ayrshire area-wide target of net zero by 2045 at the latest. While the council did not formally declare a climate emergency in 2019 when other councils in Scotland did, it set out clearly in Clean, Green East Ayrshire, its 2021 Climate Change Strategy, that it does recognise there is a global climate emergency.

**96.** Like all public bodies in Scotland, the council is required to report annually on its compliance with its climate change duties. It reported in November 2022 that it had achieved a reduction in emissions of 24 per cent in comparison with its baseline in 2012.

### **The council has taken an innovative approach to developing its climate change strategy, led by children and young people**

**97.** One of the recommendations from the Accounts Commission's September 2022 briefing, Scotland's councils' approach to addressing climate change, was to work collaboratively with local communities and ensure that people are able to effectively contribute to the design and delivery of climate change actions.

**98.** In March 2023 the council won a Working Together Award for its approach to developing its climate change strategy with children and young people from East Ayrshire at the UK-wide iESE Public Sector Transformation Awards. Children and young people were instrumental in developing the council's climate change strategy and continue to play an important role in the council's climate change response.

**99.** In October 2019, the Cabinet member for Children and Young People, Net Zero, Environment and Climate Change, Equalities and Inclusion worked with members of the council's Children and Young People's Cabinet to set up and run a Children and Young People's Climate Conference, held in East Ayrshire's Council Chamber. The main outcome from the conference was the plea from the children and young people to the council to look locally to see what changes could be made across all of its functions.

**100.** As a result, the council set up a Members and Officers Working Group which included representatives from the Children and Young People's Cabinet, elected members and officers from every service in the council. A comprehensive review of the council's operations was conducted and the council scrutinised where it was on the journey towards cutting its carbon emissions. The resulting strategy, influenced by the views of the children and young people of East Ayrshire, sets out plans across four themes – energy, waste, transport and the natural environment – to reduce carbon emissions.

**101.** At the second Children and Young People's Climate Conference, which took place as a virtual event in in 2021, the delegates pledged to develop Climate Change Actions Plans for their individual schools and wider communities. That event concluded with a commitment to recognise the achievements of young people in tackling Climate Change with the launch of the Clean Green Education Awards.

**102.** Since then, 21 schools have developed their own action plans and these include 217 individual action points which the children and young people have implemented. These actions and behaviour changes will help the council meet its net zero targets. The Clean Green Awards are designed to encourage action across the key themes of the climate change strategy and schools can aim for Bronze, Silver and Gold accreditations in recognition of their journey towards achieving net zero.

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# Alignment of delivery plans

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## **The council will demonstrate its delivery of the Strategic Plan priorities through the Service Improvement Plans**

**103.** 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.

Service Improvement Plans are in place for the period 2021-2024. The improvement plans were approved at meetings of Cabinet in August and October 2021. The plans reflect the needs and priorities of each service and its customers and were developed to support improvement activity within each service. The mid-point review of these plans concluded in March 2023 and provided an opportunity for key actions from the 2022-2027 Strategic Plan to be incorporated into the relevant service plan. As outlined at paragraph 26-27, there are plans to develop 2024-27 Service Improvement Plans in 2024 which will be aligned to the strategic plan priorities.

## **The council has developed a medium-term financial strategy 2022-27. This outlines the scale of future financial challenges and incorporates financial resilience measures to inform and support elected members in decision making.**

**104.** The Accounts Commission's Local Government in Scotland Overview 2023 says that councils should be more transparent with the public about scale of service demand, the extent of backlogs and changes to eligibility criteria necessary to ration access to services and any impact this has on unmet need. In this context, demonstration of how finances are aligned with locally set priorities is important.

**105.** In previous years the council has delivered balanced budgets by identifying, agreeing and delivering savings plans. An update to the previous medium-term financial strategy in February 2022 highlighted that the 2022/23 to 2026/27 cumulative budget gap was £57 million. The projected funding gap will require the council to identify new and innovative ways to achieve significant recurring savings for the medium to longer term.

**106.** In preparing the medium-term financial strategy 2022-27, the assumptions within the February report were updated to reflect the most recent available data at that time. This included incorporating grant funding levels based on the Resource Spending review.

**107.** The strategy acknowledges the need to review underlying financial and budgetary assumptions on an ongoing basis. This is due to the level of economic uncertainty in long term financial forecasting and the increasing complexity in determining budget gaps. Officers have committed to preparing strategy updates at specified points to update the resultant budget gap.

**108.** Based on the underlying assumptions and risk scenarios within the strategy, the budget gap forecast for 2023/24 to 2026/27 has been calculated on a low, medium and high-risk basis. The budget gap has been calculated based on the weighting of assumptions towards the best, average and worst-case scenario. The Medium-Term Financial Strategy is progressing on the basis of the medium risk scenario which anticipates a budget gap of £39m between 2023/24 and 2026/27.

**109.** In recognition of the extent of challenges faced and to ensure that the council remains financially sustainable in the medium to long term the strategy notes that a suite of resilience indicators will be developed. Proposed indicators will provide information on available resources including level of reserves and proportion of reserves that are earmarked. There will also be indicators focussed on capital financing, investment and borrowing and these will focus on the proportion of revenue streams which are used for financing costs. The indicators will be presented to members at key points during the year and will provide financial and trend information. This will provide members with relevant additional information to support their decision making.

### **The revenue budget 2023/24 is aligned to the Strategic Plan 2022-27 and feedback from the public consultation exercise impacted final decisions reached**

**110.** Council approved the 2023/24 revenue budget in February 2023. This provides the detail for the 2023/24 revenue budget.

**111.** As detailed above the medium-term financial strategy highlighted an estimated budget gap of £39m for the period 2022-27 and set out the areas where savings and cost reductions would be taken in order to balance the budget annually and over the five-year period.

**112.** The council engaged with the public on the 2023/24 revenue budget and the options for reducing service expenditure between 18 January and 1 February 2023. A web form was available for key stakeholders and members of the public to submit their views online via the council website. Meetings also took place with various stakeholders including Trade Unions, the Young People's Cabinet, the Equalities Forum and the Parent Council Steering Group. Sixty-seven submissions were received from the consultation include the following key areas:

- Invest in town centres, and support businesses and community wealth building initiatives
- Provide support to tackle the cost-of-living crisis and energy bills

- Improve community wellbeing by supporting community initiatives and tackling anti-social behaviour
- More investment is required in education and schools as well as children and young people's mental health and wellbeing
- Work to reduce fly tipping and litter should be undertaken.

**113.** The minutes of the Council budget meeting from February 2023 noted revisions to the proposed budget presented. These included several additional measures that had been agreed on a one-off basis:

- Mental Health & Wellbeing Support aligned with the priorities of the Young People's Cabinet, providing sustainability by linking to routes for future investment over the lifetime of the Scottish Parliament and activities within partner agencies particularly the Integration Joint Board
- Funding to provide half price school meals from primary six through secondary school.
- Civic Pride Initiative to include deep cleans, power washing, graffiti and chewing gum removal, etc. across the Council for 2023/24
- Community safety and wellbeing initiative to tackle the condition of roads and pavements.

### **The council needs to take an innovative approach when considering how services will be delivered in the future.**

**114.** A recommendation within the [Best Value Assurance Report](#) was for the council to examine how its approach to reducing demand for services, for example the development of its "front door" services could be extended to other areas of its work. The previous auditor concluded in their Audit Dimension and Wider Scope report that this model continues to inform service redesign and the Strategic Plan will build on current arrangements and set out how services are to be delivered by the Council over the next five-year period, aligning to the strategic priorities of the Community Plan and linked to Service Improvement Plans.

**115.** The strategic framework strategies outline the council's awareness to the changing environment. The workforce strategy recognises a need to baseline staff skills and to identify opportunities for future staff development and re-training. The digital strategy outlines ambitions for further digitalisation of services and changes to the method of interaction with customers. Paragraphs 141-142 of this report outline the innovative Caring for Ayrshire initiative. This is an example of a transformational change programme aimed to redesign health and social care services with a commitment to ensuring that the right care is available as close to home as possible.

### **The council have an asset management strategy which underpins the development and refinement of capital investment plans.**

**116.** The Asset Management Framework was approved by Cabinet in May 2019. It was developed as a baseline to underpin the development of future capital investment and has been reviewed annually as part of the Capital Investment Programme. The 2022-27 strategic plan builds on the themes of the previous Transformation Strategy 2017-22.

**117.** A Property Management Plan progress report was presented to Cabinet in April 2023. This provided details of asset condition, utilisation and suitability at September 2022. The property review concluded that:

- 175 of the council's total of 298 assets were rated as performing well;
- 104 were raised as performing as expected but requiring action in respect of one of more criteria and
- 17 properties deemed to be under-performing.

**118.** The Council's capital investment strategy includes a component renewal budget of £6 million across the next three years. The total priority demand over this period is £12.775 million. The council recognise in the Cabinet paper that there will be a need to prioritise spend based on strategic priorities. Key areas of spend will include fire safety and security improvements, external fabric and structural components; drainage and groundworks; mechanical, electrical and lighting upgrades, window replacement and other external fabric improvements, boiler plant replacements and improved energy management.

**119.** The Property Pledge has been established to facilitate good working relationships between the council, property users and visitors. This aims to give everyone who visits or uses the property an opportunity to make a positive commitment to maintaining the buildings and their environment. The Property Pledge Awards provides an opportunity for Facilities and Property Management staff to identify any subsequent repair and maintenance requirements.

**120.** The council have developed Clean Green Education Awards. These aim to explore opportunities to maximise the benefit of engaging with young people and finding collaborative ways and a shared approach to promote the council's commitment to Net Zero ([paragraph 102](#)).

### **The capital investment strategy is linked to strategic priorities.**

**121.** The council established a 10-year rolling capital investment plan in 2009. The strategic plan builds on the themes of the previous transformation programme and is aligned with the overall aims of the asset management framework. The capital plan is aligned to deliver investment to meet the six-strategic plan aims:

- **Building a fairer economy** – Council agreed the Local Development Plan 2 in December 2022. Council also agreed the Community Power, Place and Partnership approach and the Kilmarnock Strategic Vision. These documents along with the Ayrshire Growth Deal, the successful Levelling Up bid for Kilmarnock and projects aligned to roads investment and place-based investment support the fairer economy agenda.



- **Tackling Poverty and inequality** – Support to tackle poverty and inequality cuts across investment priorities and support is directed to lower SIMD areas. Housing investment continues.
- **Improving community wellbeing** – Culture and community assets enhance local environments and create positive local destinations. Recent and planned investment of over £70 million is planned for Dean Castle, the Infinity Loop, Palace Theatre and the Galleon. Community investment is supported by the Town Centre Fund and the Place Based Funding.
- **Supporting children and young people** - The School Estate Management Plan has managed improvement in the learning estate through new and refurbished schools and early year's facilities over the past ten years. Further investment is planned for Doon Campus, Stewarton and St Sophia's and these are all at design development stage.
- **Delivering a clean green East Ayrshire** – investment is committed to energy savings measures across the estate along with investment in fleet, active travel, waste services, natural environment and environmental improvements.
- **Financial sustainability and resilience** – The council's approach to capital investment and project management focuses on the effective use of resources and incorporates ongoing investment in existing assets.

### **A local affordability prudential indicator has been set and the plan has been reviewed and projects re-prioritised based on the affordability indicator.**

**122.** The Medium-Term Financial Strategy approved in October 2022 includes a recommendation to review the affordability of the capital programme in light of the revenue implications of the capital programme in terms of increased debt charges and the financial pressures from increased interest rates and higher build costs.

**123.** Following this, officers from Facilities and Property Management and Finance and ICT have reviewed and modelled a suite of treasury indicators to determine the future affordability of the capital plan. This led to the Treasury Management Strategy approved by Council in February setting a local affordability prudential indicator linked to the proposed capital expenditure spending profile in the capital plan. This limited the gross debt charges to a maximum of 8% of the Council's General Fund Net Revenue Stream. This was considered to be affordable. The borrowing required of £249.683 million outlined within the capital investment update report approved by Cabinet in February 2023 is within the 8% limit, however there will be no scope to increase the level of borrowing or to add further projects to the capital investment plan.

**124.** A Capital Investment Programme Update paper was presented to Cabinet in February 2023. This outlined the national economic position and ongoing pressures and reflected the affordability criteria. On this basis, the capital programme had been reviewed and projects prioritised within the investment

plan based on the affordability indicator and the council's future capital plans. The proposed re-profiling of the capital investment programme was approved.

### **The council has a digital strategy and plans to demonstrate how its digital infrastructure supports delivery of service priorities.**

**125.** The council's digital strategy 'Our Digital Strategy: Our digital journey to 2027' forms part of the overarching strategic framework and was approved by Council in October 2022.

**126.** Its overall vision is "to re-imagine our public services and digital infrastructures; to deliver data driven digital services which are innovative, accessible, adaptable and customer-centric; to be better integrated and better connected; providing better outcomes for everyone within a thriving digital workforce, economy and community".

**127.** The digital strategy supports the Council's Strategic Plan and is aligned to the medium-term financial strategy. It will be a key driver to delivering future service based digital savings and efficiencies. The strategy has been developed incorporating the rapid pace of technological changes, the increasing reliance on digital solutions and reflection on experiences from the pandemic including the importance of digital inclusion and managing inequalities.

**128.** The digital vision for the council is based on five key themes:

- A digital customer – accessible online services which are so simple, quick and easy to use that they are the preferred way for residents and businesses to interact with the us.
- Digital Council - A digital first approach will ensure we are agile, adaptive, efficient and innovative as we connect devices, networks, data and people across a safe and secure infrastructure and make informed decisions on future service based digital efficiencies and wider Council investment.
- Our Digital Services - digital services should be delivered with a community-based focus on key essential services ensuring our communities have safe and secure access, are supported and informed and can benefit from learning opportunities.
- Digital Communities - ensure everyone has the opportunity and capability to be digitally included as we connect residents, business, partners and technology and promote thriving digital communities and digital investment across East Ayrshire.
- Digital Culture - ensure our key principles are embedded in everything we do.

**129.** The digital strategy is a high-level framework which sets out the vision for digital technology, innovation, services and infrastructure. It will be reviewed annually to ensure it remains relevant.

**A council-wide workforce strategy is in place and options are being explored for growing and developing employees however work is still required around establishing baseline information.**

**130.** A recommendation was made within the [Best Value Assurance Report](#) for the council to develop an organisation-wide workforce plan that includes details of the numbers, cost and skills of the current and desired workforce and how changes will be made to the workforce. Following the publication of the BVAR, the council developed a workforce plan over 2018/19 and the final plan was approved by Cabinet in May 2019 and covered a three-year period from 2019-2022.

**131.** A workforce strategy has been developed for 2022-27 and forms part of the strategic framework. The workforce strategy incorporates details on the profile of the workforce including age, gender, pay.

**132.** The workforce strategy identifies three main challenges:

- recruitment challenges
- workforce absences
- workforce development

**133.** A Workforce and Future Skills team has been established to co-ordinate the current apprenticeship programme and review employment and career pathways for new and existing staff. As part of the service review process, individual services will consider a range of options to 'grow their own'. Consideration will be given to expanding the range of career development pathways available and identifying further opportunities for staff to re-train or learn new skills.

**134.** The council's Workforce Planning Board includes representation from People and Culture, Finance, Corporate Support, Health and Social Care Partnership, Heads of Service and Senior Managers. The information from this forum is fed into the Council Management Team and East Ayrshire Performs People statistics.

**135.** The 2022-27 Workforce Strategy Action Plan includes actions to review and develop workforce data. The development of workforce data includes data to support service delivery and redesign but also data around future workforce projections, identification of skills gaps or recruitment challenges.

**136.** The council should establish a baseline understanding of its workforce's skills, learning and experience. This data can then be used to inform people, workforce and learning and development plans and strategies in the future.

**137.** At the time of the workforce strategy being approved work was being undertaken to scope a virtual learning platform which would identify skills, learning and development needs.

**138.** The workforce strategy reflects a continuing focus on employee wellbeing. The strategy outlines absence management interventions and wellbeing information and support available including awareness raising programmes and online support through the People and Culture Vivup App.

### **The council demonstrates collaborative working with partners.**

**139.** The [Best Value Assurance Report](#) concluded that the council had maintained the strong performance that we reported in previous Best Value reports in 2006 and 2010. Such performance has been achieved against substantial socio-economic challenges in East Ayrshire. It is based upon a record of effective community planning and partnership working, underlined by a genuine commitment by partners to work with and empower local communities.

**140.** Community planning arrangements are well established in East Ayrshire. Two new priorities were identified in the latest community planning cycle 2021-24. The Ayrshire Grown Deal as outlined at paragraphs 17-19 and the Caring for Ayrshire Transformational Change Programme. The innovative Caring for Ayrshire transformational change programme sets out a framework for the redesign of health and social care services with a commitment to ensuring that the right care is available as close to home as possible.

**141.** As a partnership, there will be continued focus on developing community facing multi-disciplinary locality teams to support community wellbeing and collaboratively working with partners to have the maximum positive impact. The Doon Valley Community Campus development in Dalmellington will be a shared services building which will host the health centre, civic and community space, office accommodation for local public services including social services, housing and police services. The project aims for collaborative working between NHS Ayrshire and Arran, East Ayrshire Council Education, East Ayrshire Health and Social Care Partnership and East Ayrshire Leisure Trust.

**142.** This project reflects the councils commitment to place based multi-agency service delivery. The integration of services is part of a partnership focus on wellbeing and population health with the aim of transformational change through a shift from 'diagnose, fix and treat' approach to a broader all-encompassing approach to wellbeing, which is based on preventing illness where possible, self-management support to achieve the best possible outcomes for people living with long-term conditions.

**143.** Within the [Best Value Assurance Report](#) a recommendation was made for the strong relationships between the Council, the IJB and the NHS to be used to help resolve issues around resourcing and the shift of relevant hospital care services into a community setting. The Integration Joint Board latest strategic plan 2021-30 is the framework for planning, commissioning and delivery of health and social care services in East Ayrshire. The Plan outlines the role of the health and social care partnership and its delivery partners in meeting health and social care needs of communities.

**144.** The IJB strategic plan is reviewed annually. The most recent review was undertaken by the Strategic Planning and Wellbeing Delivery Group in February

2023. The review considered the findings from 'local conversations' held during February 2023. These public events provided the opportunity for the Partnership and delivery partners to engage directly with local communities and the people who use services and their carers.

**145.** The group reflected on feedback from the local conversations, progress of against the Strategic Plan and whether amendment or refresh of the plan was required. They concluded that the commissioning intentions set out in the Strategic Plan are appropriate and should remain stable.

**146.** The council have continued to identify opportunities across its services to support better health and wellbeing outcomes for individuals. The Council's Strategic Housing Investment Plan 2023-28 was approved by Cabinet in November 2022. The plan outlines a focus on the provision of affordable housing and a target of 10% of properties being wheelchair accessible. The council in their partnership with CCG (Scotland) Ltd will also aim to deliver wider community benefits through upskilling the workforce and supporting new starts, existing apprenticeships, and work placements within construction.

**147.** Furthermore, the strategy outlines affordable housing sites being a mix of general housing and community care needs housing. This is with the aim of delivering housing to support the needs in East Ayrshire and to have provision of housing that meets the requirements of older people, those with disabilities and people with particular needs.

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# Leadership

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**The elected member and officer leadership has been effective in setting clear priorities in the Strategic Plan 2022-27. Progress against delivery of the priorities now needs to be demonstrated.**

**148.** 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. Councillors should show a commitment to agreed council priorities and work together to achieve them.

**149.** In May 2022, local government elections were held across Scotland. Thirty-two councillors were elected to represent the nine wards of East Ayrshire Council. A minority SNP administration was formed. Prior to the election an SNP minority administration was in place.

**150.** The Council is supported by the following main committees:

- Governance and Scrutiny Committee
- Cabinet (Executive function)
- Local Government Licensing Panel
- Grants Committee
- Appeals/Recruitment Panels
- Ayrshire Shared Services Joint Committee
- Ayrshire Economic Joint Committee

**151.** The Chief Executive has been in post since January 2021 and is supported by the Executive Management Team which includes the Depute Chief Executive, Director of the Health and Social Care Partnership, Chief Governance Officer (Solicitor to the Council and Council Monitoring Officer), Chief Education Officer/Head of Schools, Head of Children's Health, Care and Justice Services (Chief Social Work Officer), Chief Finance Officer and Head of Finance and ICT. The Executive Management Team has been consistent over this time.

## **There is effective collaborative working between members and with members and officers towards the achievement of the priorities.**

**152.** Effective leaders 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.

**153.** Cross-party working is facilitated through the Sounding Board. This is an open forum for informal cross-party discussions. It provides an opportunity for emerging policy or operational issues with potentially significant impacts on the Council or East Ayrshire as a whole, to be discussed. The board consists of representation from each of the three main political party groups within the council. The leader and depute leader from each of these parties form the board's membership.

**154.** The council's scheme of delegation outlines the boards terms of reference as being a flexible and informal forum to allow appropriate discussion and timely and effective planning in respect of emerging policy or operational matters which may have a significant impact on the Council or the East Ayrshire area. The board aims to establish commonality and identify differences in the parties' respective views on particular issues which can then be used to inform future policy development and the preparation of proposals which can then be presented to Council, Cabinet or other appropriate committees for formal approval.

**155.** From attendance at Governance and Scrutiny Committee meetings throughout 2023 we have observed members and officers demonstrating mutual respect, trust, honesty and openness and appropriate behaviours.

## **Committee pre-agenda processes are well established.**

**156.** The council have established arrangements around committee reports and pre-agenda meetings and timetables. The Council Management Team have recently reviewed and updated the report writing guidance. This provides details of the committee report process which is designed to support the council's governance and decision-making structures.

**157.** Democratic Services receive reports for committee in line with established lodgement dates outlined in the committee meeting calendar. The agenda and papers are then issued approximately a week before the committee date. Pre-agenda meetings take place prior to the issue of the formal agenda. Arrangements are in place and papers are issued to the committee Chair and Vice Chair in advance of the pre-agenda meeting which they will attend along with officers who have reports to be presented to the meeting itself. This provides an opportunity for the Chair and Vice-Chair to hear from officers in advance of the agenda and papers being issued, on any issues that might need to be highlighted.

## There is an ongoing programme of training and development for elected members.

**158.** Leaders need to be skilled in effective strategic thinking, decision-making and collaborative working and able to learn lesson from new ways of working. Councillors and officers must be clear on their roles in setting the vision and planning for its delivery.

**159.** There was a significant change in elected members at the 2022 local government elections with half of the newly elected members being appointed for the first time. The appointment of new members and leaders resulted in an induction programme and training and development programme being implemented.

**160.** The induction programme was developed by drawing on national guidance from the Improvement Service. Training provided in May and June 2022 focussed on conduct, governance, and roles of elected members. Presentations were delivered from each council service to give an overview of the council and its services, key roles and the responsibilities of members.

**161.** The induction programme was delivered as a mix of face to face and online training. Member training continued following the summer recess. Training covered a wide variety of topics including community power, place and partnership, civil contingency, winter resilience and vision for Kilmarnock as well as elected member role specific training including chairing meetings and media and skills training.

**162.** Elected Members are engaged on a quarterly basis around topics for Councillor Conversations. These sessions focus on topical issues and provide members with information on a time relevant basis. This ensures members have access to current and topical training and that learning can be put in place to respond to elected members training needs.

## The council's leadership continues to invest in self-evaluation and continuous improvement activities in relation to both its services and its governance.

**163.** The Accounts Commission's Local Government in Scotland Overview 2023 says councils have never faced such a challenging situation. Radical change, achieved through greater collaboration, is urgently needed if councils are to maintain services. This needs to be driven by a structured approach to self-evaluation in councils.

**164.** The council's 2018 [Best Value Assurance Report](#) reported that the council had a long-established culture of self-assessment and improvement. It continues to be the case that the council has robust arrangements in place to secure Best Value and has a clear understanding of areas where it can improve. The council's leadership continues to prioritise this. In 2022/23:

- the council assessed itself at a corporate level, completing a **council-wide strategic assessment** – this was based on the Best Value criteria and undertaken in 2022/23 as part of the work to develop the council's new



Strategic Plan 2022-27. A number of actions were developed as a result of this exercise including maximising the use of the electronic performance management system, further strengthening public performance reporting arrangements, delivering commitments in the climate change strategy and mainstreaming the use of the equality impact assessment tool.

- the council has developed and implemented a **bespoke approach to service-level self-assessment**. The in-house East Ayrshire Self-Assessment Model (EASAM), introduced in 2021/22, is a framework based on the Best Value criteria against which services can assess improvement activity. The council uses it to highlight the strengths and achievements of individual services, and to identify where improvements are needed. Improvement actions identified through the process, e.g. the development and launch of an online housing application by the Housing and Communities Service, have been included in the respective updated Service Improvement Plan action plans.
- the council implemented an **extensive programme of Best Value Service Reviews** applying the EASAM methodology. Ten Best Value service reviews or service redesigns have been taken forward during 2022/23. These covered areas including facilities and property management, people and culture, finance and ICT and members' services.
- the council conducted its **annual review of its local code of corporate governance**. The council's local code of corporate governance follows the seven principles set out in the CIPFA /SOLACE Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework 2016. The council's annual review of corporate governance arrangements results in the council each year adopting a new local code of corporate governance, agreeing an Annual Governance Statement of Assurance and a new improvement action plan.
- the **Governance and Scrutiny Committee undertook its third annual self-assessment**. The requirement for the Committee to undertake an annual self-assessment is now included in the Committee's terms of reference. An action plan was compiled in May 2023 and the Chief Governance Officer will report back to the Committee in early 2024 to update on progress. Actions included develop and implementing mechanisms for obtaining feedback on the performance of the Committee from the wider external environment and implementation of arrangements to facilitate the Committee in pro-actively identifying service related aspects requiring detailed scrutiny.
- the **Community Planning Partnership Board undertook a self-assessment**, facilitated by the Improvement Service, in June 2023. This was focused on the CPP Board's functioning and effectiveness. The results were very positive, e.g., over 90 per cent of members agreed that the CPP had clear leadership, governance and accountability. Improvement actions were also identified relating to how Community Planning Partners align resources to support the delivery of the outcomes identified in the LOIP and to develop coordinated, consistent and

innovative approaches across partners to engaging and capacity building with communities. An improvement plan for the CPP is to be considered in August 2023 by the CPP Executive Officers Group.

## **The council has continued to demonstrate good progress on the five recommendations reported in the 2018 BVAR.**

**165.** The 2018 BVAR concluded that the council has strong leadership and a clear vision for what it wants to achieve and is fully committed to empowering its residents. The council were helping communities develop the skills and confidence to deal with local needs and priorities. Overall performance was improving and residents were satisfied with the services the council provides and the council had a long-established culture of self-assessment and improvement.

**166.** In response to the BVAR the council approved a Best Value Improvement Plan. Progress of the improvement plan was reported to the Governance and Scrutiny Committee annually until 2021. Progress was reported in the Local Code of Corporate Governance report to the May 2021 Governance and Scrutiny committee. Three of the five recommendations were complete and the other two recommendations were continuing and had made good progress.

**167.** The previous auditor also reported progress annually against the BVAR recommendations in their Audit Dimensions and Wider Scope reports.

**168.** This report covers all areas covered by recommendations in the BVAR and demonstrates good progress against the improvement actions:

- Transformation strategy – the council should put in place appropriate arrangements to support, monitor and deliver the expected outcomes (paragraph 32-35).
- The council should develop an organisation-wide workforce plan (paragraph 130-138).
- Strong relationships between the Council, IJB and the NHS should be used to help resolve issues around resourcing a shift of relevant hospital care services into a community setting, recognising that this is a national issue (paragraph 143-147).
- The council should examine how its approach to reducing demand for services, for example the development of its “front door” services could be extended to other areas of its work (paragraph 114-115).
- The council should develop a council-wide plan for working with the business sector. This should build on the Community Planning Partnership’s (CPP’s) delivery plan for economy and skills and the Council’s “Invest in East Ayrshire” initiative, specifically how much work will take place in each relevant service area, and how the Council will co-ordinate and monitor activity (paragraph 28-31).

# Appendix 1

## Improvement Action plan

Issue/risk	Recommendation	Agreed management action/responsible officer/timing
<p><b>1. Strategic plan progress reporting</b></p> <p>The strategic framework and action plan to monitor progress against the strategic plan were approved in October 2022. The first report to elected members outlining progress against the Strategic Plan will be presented to elected members in October 2023.</p>	<p>The council should ensure arrangements are established to report regularly to elected members and the public on progress against the Strategic Plan 2022-27.</p> <p><a href="#">Paragraph 37</a></p>	<p>Arrangements for reporting regularly to elected members and the public on progress against the Strategic Plan will be set out in a report to the full Council in October 2023.</p> <p>Chief Executive December 2023</p>
<p><b>2. Performance targets should be specific and measurable</b></p> <p>Targets set out in the Strategic Plan Action Plan tend to be high level, rather than specified numbers. Only two targets include a specific percentage.</p>	<p>The council should ensure the performance targets it sets are specific, measurable and aligned to the Council's benefit realisation model.</p> <p><a href="#">Paragraph 42</a></p>	<p>The performance targets for measuring progress against the key actions in the Strategic Plan will be included in future reports to elected members.</p> <p>Chief Executive December 2023</p>
<p><b>3. Performance reporting</b></p> <p>The council ensures a lot of performance information is made available on its website but does not have a document describing its overall approach to performance management. Performance information tends to be dispersed across a number of documents. It would be beneficial to have one source which helps users to form an overall view. The council has not yet reported progress against the priorities</p>	<p>The council is committed to publishing a performance management framework on its website and should ensure its performance information is linked to its new strategic priorities, is up-to-date, clearly set out and easily accessible.</p> <p><a href="#">Paragraph 48</a></p>	<p>Strengthened public performance reporting arrangements, building on existing practice and improving the availability of performance information will be developed over 2023/24. Initial work will focus on improving existing content with further work to explore opportunities for increased use of new digital technology.</p> <p>Chief Executive 2023/24</p>

it set out in its Strategic Plan 2022-27, published in June 2022. There are a few instances where information on the council's performance webpages is not up to date.

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#### **4. Providing access to the outcomes of consultation exercises**

Responses to consultation exercises run by the council are not easy to find on its website. The council's consultation webpage does not currently include links to the outcomes of each completed consultation.

The council should maximise the use of its website to provide a summary of the feedback received to consultations.

#### **Paragraph 64**

Strengthened website content relating to consultation activity will be developed using a new engagement platform purchased by the council in August 2023.

Chief Executive  
2023/24

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#### **5. Equality impact assessments**

The majority of equality impact assessments from the last 18 months were completed by the council after the policy or strategy concerned had been finalised. Information on how EQIAs are conducted on the council's website is out of date.

The council should ensure equality impact assessments are completed at an early stage to inform policy and strategy development. It should also place the most up-to-date information relating to EQIAs on its website.

#### **Paragraph 86 and 88**

Proposals to strengthen arrangements for systematic and routine completion of EQIAs were approved by the Council Management Team and Corporate Equalities Strategy Group in August 2023 and will be implemented over 2023/24.

Chief Executive  
2023/24

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## Leadership of the development of new local strategic priorities East Ayrshire Council

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