

**WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL****Report by Chief Officer – Resources****Audit Committee: 10 August 2022**

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**Subject: Accounts Commission report: Local government in Scotland Overview 2022****1. Purpose**

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Committee with information on a national audit report which has been received from the Accounts Commission.

**2. Recommendations**

2.1 The Committee is invited to note the attached report together with the key messages and recommendations as detailed at 4.1 and 4.2 below.

**3. Background**

3.1 The Accounts Commission report: Local Government in Scotland Overview 2022, published on 25 May 2022, is the second in the series of reports that reflects the evolving and long-term nature of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The report considers the second year of the pandemic from March 2021 to February 2022 and builds on last year's overview report.

3.2 This report assesses the impact of Covid-19 and Councils' progress towards recovery and renewal, how Councils are positioned to address long-term priorities including climate change, inequality and public service reform and how effectively Council leadership is managing recovery and renewal.

**4. Main Issues**

4.1 The report contains a number of key messages:

- **Councils have had a very difficult year** - Alongside the ongoing response to the pandemic, councils have faced challenges in recovering services, dealing with increased demand and backlogs, and meeting community needs and expectations. This has taken place against a backdrop of long standing pressures such as increased demand from an ageing population and rising poverty.
- **The challenging context means collaborative leadership is more important than ever** - Councils are operating in a difficult and uncertain strategic context and face longer-term financial pressures, a lack of certainty and flexibility over long-term funding, and the prospect of major service reforms. This challenging context needs local government leaders skilled in effective strategic thinking, decision-making and collaborative working, and

able to learn lessons from new ways of working. Collaborative leadership is more important than ever as Councils work with partners, communities, and citizens to support recovery and improve outcomes.

- **Pressure on the local government workforce continues** - Councils are continuing to experience high absence levels. Impacts on staff wellbeing and skills shortages, particularly in front-line workers, have also been noted. A resilient workforce is critical to the ongoing response to Covid-19 and the recovery of services. Workforce plans will need to be updated, considering lessons learned from new ways of working. Wellbeing support for the workforce must also continue.
- **The impact of the pandemic and service disruption have been felt most strongly by those already experiencing inequality** - Councils have worked hard and adapted to maintain service delivery but not all services are back at pre-pandemic levels so those most in need of support are still being affected. Councils must evaluate these impacts so that recovery and renewal supports those most affected and addresses inequalities. Recovery and renewal should also reflect the wider ambitions of the public service reform agenda.
- **The early response showed what could be achieved by working closely with communities and the voluntary sector** - This momentum may be lost if communities and the voluntary sector are not involved in shaping recovery. Flexible governance and decision-making structures will be needed, as will opportunities for more local participation.
- **Improvements are needed in data availability, tools and skills to support performance monitoring, strategic decision-making and planning service improvements** - Data has been important in guiding the response to the pandemic but there are key areas where a lack of data could hamper recovery, such as unmet needs, service demands and backlogs. Data is a key tool in tackling inequality but there are gaps in equality data, particularly at a local level.

4.2. The report contains a number of recommendations which are listed under two headings, Organising the Council and Meeting Local Needs.

| <b>Organising the Council</b>  |
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| Councils together with their partners and communities should revise their strategic plans, including Local Outcomes Improvement Plans to realign priorities and provide a roadmap for recovery and renewal. They should also consider how this contributes to the national recovery strategy set out by the Scottish Government. |
| Elected members and senior managers need to work together to drive change, make decisions and deliver recovery and renewal.  |
| Councils should consider the leadership skills needed for now and in future. This includes clear succession planning   |
| Councils' governance arrangements should ensure that their elected members have sufficient information to support the scrutiny and decision-making needed for recovery and renewal.  |
| Councils need to clearly set out how they are evaluating new service models and learning lessons from the response to Covid-19.  |

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| Councils should have a clear plan for developing the use of data in their Councils, this includes data skills, data standards and data tools.  |
| Councils must ensure that financial plans and overarching recovery strategies and actions are clearly aligned, including funding to deliver on their duty to address inequalities.   |
| Councils must have clear plans for management of reserves.   |
| Councils should update their workforce plans to build on lessons learned, address skills gaps and build a resilient workforce for the future. This will include monitoring the wellbeing of the workforce, and the effectiveness of health and wellbeing initiatives.  |
| <b>Meeting Local Needs</b>   |
| While some progress has been made in improving the use of data in decision-making, Councils need to have a clear sense of where increased demand and service backlogs exist so that they can identify areas of high risk and direct resources accordingly. This information also needs to be more transparent and publicly available.                            |
| A key priority for Councils' recovery and renewal is assessing the impact of the pandemic and service disruption on the most vulnerable and learning from this to inform how they support those most affected and address inequalities. This will need better local data to improve understanding.   |
| Where Councils plan to continue with the changes made to services during the pandemic, they need to conduct impact assessments and consult the community. With the expansion of digital services, Councils need to assess and mitigate the impacts of digital exclusion.   |
| Councils need to ensure that partnership working forged in the pandemic with their communities, partners and the voluntary sector remains in place. They also need to learn what made it work and harness this to transform future engagement. The momentum and energy from communities may be lost if public bodies don't capitalise on what has been achieved. |

4.3 A representative from Audit Scotland will be in attendance at the meeting.

## 5. People Implications

5.1 There are no direct people implications arising from this report.

## 6. Financial and Procurement Implications

6.1 There are no direct financial or procurement implications arising from this report.

## 7. Risk Analysis

7.1 There are no direct risk implications arising from this report.

## 8. Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)

8.1 There are no equalities issues arising from this report.

## 9. Consultation

9.1 This report has been subject to consultation with appropriate Chief Officers.

## 10. Strategic Assessment

10.1 The report is for noting and, therefore, does not directly affect any of the strategic priorities.

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**Laurence Slavin**  
**Chief Officer - Resources**  
**Date: 15 July 2022**

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**Appendix:** Appendix 1: Accounts Commission report: Local Government in Scotland Overview 2022

**Background Papers:** Accounts Commission report: Local Government in Scotland Overview 2021 – June 2021 Audit Committee

**Wards Affected:** All Wards