

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by Chief Executive

Council: 26 August 2009

Subject: Best Value Audit Report

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report presents the final published version of Audit Scotland's Best Value Audit Progress Report – including the Accounts Commission's findings.

2. Background

- 2.1 Audit Scotland carried out fieldwork for its 2009 Progress Report in March 2009; presented its report to the Accounts Commission on the 17th June and formally published the integrated findings on 9th July. A full copy of the document was circulated to all elected members on the publication date. The report is also available in members' offices, and on the Council's website through a link on the home page (<http://www.wdcweb.info/council-and-democracy/news/features/wdc-best-value-audit/>)
- 2.2 The Audit Scotland report was considered by Council on 24th June prior to the Accounts Commission findings being made available. Council agreed a response to Audit Scotland and also agreed that, following meetings of the Improvement & Efficiency Executive (I&EE), planned for 24th July and 4th September, a first draft improvement plan would be presented to Council in August with a final version submitted to the September Council meeting.
- 2.3 While it is fully accepted that immediate action is needed to address the findings of the Accounts Commission report, the I&EE meeting scheduled for the 24th July was subsequently postponed. The reason for this was to ensure that the I&EE had a clear set of prioritised proposals to discuss. Officers are currently finalising the draft of a revised Best Value Improvement Plan (BVIP), and are also reviewing the operation of the 5 current workstreams to allow for robust recommendations on the best mechanism to develop the work. This will allow a full set of prioritised options to be presented for discussion at the next meeting of the I&EE. A full draft of the revised and prioritised BVIP, along with proposals for revised implementation mechanisms, will be considered by the I&EE on 4th September and presented to Council at its September meeting as previously agreed. This process will allow both the I&EE and Council to ensure that the revised BVIP has a clear focus and that it fully addresses the concerns expressed in the Accounts Commission findings.

2.4 Following the publication of the Accounts Commission findings, a meeting took place on 16th July which allowed a group of elected members and the Corporate Management Team the opportunity to discuss the findings in more detail with some members of the Accounts Commission. These discussions will help to inform the development of the revised BVIP. The meeting also allowed Council representatives to provide feedback to the Accounts Commission on the experience of the audit process. These meetings are now a standard part of the Accounts Commission's practice following the publication of reports.

3. Main Issues

- 3.1** The Commission recognises that a number of services continue to demonstrate good levels of performance. These include education, social work and benefits administration. The Commission also recognises that some progress has been made in other areas, including improved corporate working and increased capacity at senior officer level. This performance demonstrates the positive commitment of council staff.
- 3.2** The Commission did find, however, that the council has made insufficient progress against key improvement priorities identified in the 2008 progress report. These are member officer relationships, competitiveness of services, financial planning and community engagement.
- 3.3** The Commission believes that the slow rate of progress is as a result of the relationships between elected members and that the nature of the political conflict among elected members is having a negative effect on the operation and development of the council. The report comments that elected members across the political spectrum have not demonstrated the corporate leadership required.
- 3.4** The Commission concludes that there has also been limited progress in developing working relationships between elected members and senior officers. These issues are inhibiting improvement and, until they are resolved, the council will not achieve the necessary shift in attitude and focus required to deliver best value for the people of West Dunbartonshire.
- 3.5** The Commission recommends that the council secures appropriate external support from peers (both members and officers) and others to address these problems. Initial meetings of Senior Officers and Elected Members have taken place with COSLA and the Accounts Commission to explore what form that this external assistance might take. This support, combined with an emphasis on clear prioritisation and focus of activity, will be key to addressing the comments made by the Commission. This, in turn, will support an increase in the pace of change.

3.6 The Commission requires a further progress report from the Controller of Audit in early course. No date has been yet set for this.

4. Personnel Issues

4.1 There are no immediate personnel issues.

5. Financial Implications

5.1 There are no immediate financial implications.

6. Risk Analysis

6.1 Unless the Council demonstrates improvement there remains the risk of further significant reputational damage.

7. Conclusions and Officer's Recommendations

7.1 The Best Value Audit Progress report concludes that although we have some good services we have not made sufficient progress in delivering Best Value and that we need to focus on improving strategic leadership through an improved political climate and better member-officer relationships together with an increase in the pace of change.

7.2 Council is requested to consider and provide comment on the Best Value Audit report.

7.3 Council is requested to note that, following discussion by the Improvement & Efficiency Executive, a detailed draft improvement plan will be submitted to Council in September 2009. This will include clear proposals for a prioritised approach, and will address the need to increase the pace of change.

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pp **David McMillan**
Chief Executive
Date: 12 August 2009

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Background Papers: Report to Council - 24 June 2009

Wards Affected: All