

S6. Local Government Benchmarking Framework 2015/16 Update

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services presenting a summary of the Local Government Benchmarking data from 2015/16.

The Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF), had replaced Audit Scotland's Statutory Programme Indicators performance information and had been compiled by the Improvement Service. The Local Government Benchmarking Framework data was a national benchmark which compared Scottish Local Authorities with the aim of improving performance in key areas. It consisted of:-

- a suite of common performance indicators, and
- family groups which look at areas of service, what are the differences across a number of Councils with regards to performance and what lessons can be learned from best practice to improve service provision.

The LGBF was a key element of Audit Scotland's statutory performance reporting framework to review Council's focus on improvement. The data relied upon:-

- Councils preparing information and data returns in a consistent way;
- national data sets being statistically significant in each Council area, and
- the Local Finance Return from each Council being consistently prepared.

It contained 80 indicators covering service cost, service delivery and customer satisfaction and included information on Council's priorities and concerns. It showed where there had been improvement or deterioration together with a comparison against Scottish Local Authorities.

The report highlighted and provided commentary on:-

- indicators by Service;
- comparison to the national average for 2015/16;
- Services' position relative to quartiles.

In addition to the report provided analysis on:-

- corporate indicators;
- Children's Services performance;
- Corporate and Housing Services performance;
- Development Services performance;
- Adult Social Work performance;
- Falkirk Community Trust performance.

The respective performance information relating to Adult Social Work and Falkirk Community Trust was presented but would be considered by the

Scrutiny Committee (External) as part of its scrutiny of the Integration Joint Board and Falkirk Community Trust.

The Committee discussed the benchmarking figures for Children's Services. Members asked whether they showed deterioration of performance. The Director of Children's Services referred to indicators CHN 1-3 which showed the cost per pupil at primary, secondary and preschool respectively and contended that there was a question over the process by which the Improvement Service had compiled the figures. They appeared to indicate a deterioration in performance, with costs increasing on 2014/15 although comparable to the national average. Previously the costs had been amongst the lowest in Scotland. The fact that the figures suggested a significant increase in cost cast doubt over the collation of the figures and therefore in their value. In regard to indicators CHN 4-6 which showed the percentage of pupils gaining 5+ awards, the Director of Children's Services stated that the percentage was improving year on year and that attainment was improving. He highlighted CHN 8A which showed an increase in gross cost of looked after children in residential based services. Children's Services was currently looking to reduce the number of children placed outwith the authority and negotiating with care providers in relation to commissioning rates. This would bring the costs down. He also noted that the costs could fluctuate widely depending on the needs of the pupils and the intake in a given year. Members sought further clarification in regard to the costs per pupil set out in indicators CHN 1-3. The Director of Children's Services stated that he could not explain how the costs were compiled by the Improvement Service and had no confidence that they were accurate. They did not however in themselves give cause for concern. Centrally held performance information showed that the authority was not out of step with the rest of Scotland.

In response to a question as to why the report stated that a decrease in adult satisfaction with local schools would be more likely to reflect the sample of the Scottish household survey rather than from parental satisfaction surveys, the Director of Children's Services stated that the household survey included adults with no children.

In regard to CHN3, cost per preschool registration, the Director of Children's Services stated that, in his view, it was inconceivable that the cost had increased by £1900 and again questioned the methodology for compiling the figures.

Members commented on 12 new indicators, grouped within indicators CHN 13-16 which related to achievement levels in reading, writing and listening and responding. These were "experimental" and relied upon teacher judgement. Members asked if sufficient guidance was available to schools in order to carry this out consistently. The Director of Children's Services explained that he had confidence in the teachers' judgement and explained that the judgement process would develop noting that that support from the centre would provide assurance to assist teachers. In reviewing the data, the Director of Children's Services stated that the authority was performing in line with expectations.

Members of the committee sought assurance that the authority was performing well, in particular in the context of decreasing budgets. The Director of Children's Services advised that, in recent years, attainment had been improving.

Members asked for clarification on the cost per planning application, indicator ECON2, which at £11,421 was the highest in Scotland. The Director of Development Services stated that the cost provided by the Improvement Service may be incorrect. The planning application process was currently being reviewed with a view of improving efficiencies – nonetheless, the cost provided was not correct.

The committee then discussed the data relating to Corporate and Housing Services. In response to a question on HSN3 (percentage of dwellings meeting Scottish Housing Quality Standards) and in particular the Council's ranking of 20 out of 32, the Director of Corporate and Housing Services stated that there were a number of authorities in a cluster in terms of score and so the relative position was misleading. There had nevertheless been improvement since 2015/16 and the percentage was now 93%.

In regard to CORP2, the cost of the democratic core per 1000 population (which had increased to £21,336), the Director of Corporate and Housing Services confirmed that the costs related to supporting the democratic core and not in providing direct services to the public.

In regard to indicator ENV6, which measured the percentage of total household waste arising that is recycled, members noted the slight decrease from 54.3% to 53.9%. Members asked if the dip was due to mixed contamination, and whether the figure measured what is actually recycled from household waste or simply the waste in totality. The Director of Development Services stated that it was the global figure of that is collected which was used and the figures show the percentage of this which is recycled. The dip reflected the challenges faced in separating mixed recyclates and the level of contaminants therein. These were significant challenges ahead, for example no household waste could be put into landfill post 2020.

Members asked whether the average time (hours) between the time of a domestic noise complaint being made and attendance at site, CORP5B2, which was 8.6 hours, was a cause for concern. The Director of Development Services stated that the figure of 8.6 hours compared well with the national average of 58.9 hours but stated that such a difference suggested that there was an inconsistency in how authorities collated the data for the survey. However the figure of 8.6 hours was accurate and attributed this to the changes in how the noise nuisance service. However the key factor was how the Council deals with noise rather than by these distinctions. The Director of Development Services suggested that the 2017/18 figures would show a different response time due to staffing losses in the statutory noise service.

In regard to Children's Services, members asked to provide an explanation for the authority's ranking of 25 in indicator CHN12B (average total tariff SIMD quintile 1). The Director of Children's Services stated that the focus

was on closing the attainment gap. However, there was also a focus on closing the gap in the most disadvantaged areas, referencing the Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) as an example. Over the last 10 years attainment has risen locally and nationally. Interventions which apply to all pupils will result in attainment improving across all pupil groups. While this is positive, the gap between the top and bottom groups will remain largely the same. Following on, members asked who would be at fault if the Pupil Equity Fund intervention did not result in the gap closing. The Director of Children's Services responded that if some schools could use the PEF to close the gap while others couldn't then there would be questions asked of how the funding had been used. However, if nationally the funding did not result in the gap closing then there would be a question over the system itself. There were issues over how this is measured (for example, for P1 there is no national standard for measuring the gap) with the only concrete measure being at the point pupils leave school.

Decision:-

The Committee noted:-

- (1) Audit Scotland's increased focus on the use of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework indicators as a means to drive improvement;**
- (2) the 2015/16 Local Government Benchmarking Framework refresh data for Falkirk Council and Falkirk Community Trust;**
- (3) the indicators improving and deteriorating from 2010/11 (or the first year of reporting) 2015/16 in Appendix 1 of the report;**
- (4) the indicators that compare better and worse than the national average, in Appendix 2 of the report and**
- (5) the indicators that are in the top and bottom quartiles in Appendix 3 of the report.**