

S29. Cost per planning application- Local Government Benchmarking Framework LGBF Indicator

The committee had considered Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) performance information on 17 August 2017 (ref S6) and had asked for a further report on indicator ECON2, the cost per planning application. The LGBF data had shown that Falkirk Council's cost was the highest of the 32 local authorities in Scotland and the committee had sought clarification on whether the indicator was accurate.

The committee had determined, on 30 November 2017 (ref S21) that subject to consideration of the report (which had been asked for in August 2017) that it would recommend to Council that this item was a potential item for inclusion on the 2018 Scrutiny Plan. Council had noted the position on 6 December 2017 (ref FC57) when considering its Scrutiny Plan.

The committee considered a report by the Director of Development Services which provided analysis of the Services' ECON2 performance indicator.

Following assessment of the information provided to the Improvement Service for 2015/16 it had been found that there was an inconsistency on how the costs are compiled across local authorities. Falkirk Council's submission had included £1.912m of costs attributable to roads maintenance. Had these been stripped out the cost per application would have been £7543, not £11,421, which would have placed Falkirk Council 25 out of 32 Scottish Local Authorities. For 2016/17 the cost was £7618, placing Falkirk Council 28 out of 32.

The Head of Planning and Economic Development explained the elements of cost which comprised the overall cost – planning, environmental initiatives, countryside recreation and management and Parks and Open Spaces.

Nationally the methodology used by Local Authorities was not consistent and it could be argued that the costs which Falkirk include should be attributed to other LGBF indicators. On a like for like comparison with other authorities of a comparable size showed that Falkirk's costs were broadly in line.

Members discussed the report at length. In response to an assertion that in fact Falkirk Council's costs were significantly higher than comparable authorities, the Head of Planning and Economic Development agreed that on the figures presented it looked this way but stated that if the cost element associated with environmental issues was removed the costs would be in line. This, he argued, illustrated that the costs for 'planning' placed Falkirk Council mid-range across Scotland. The indicator was not a reliable guide given the inconsistent approach taken by Scottish Local Authorities to its calculation.

Members remained unclear as to the elements which should properly be included in the cost per planning application and requested a comparison, for each element, against all 32 Local Authorities. Similarly if costs associated with the indicator were stripped out and attributed elsewhere then there would be a consequential impact on other performance indicators. Given this the committee asked for further contextual information. In response to a statement that the planning process was streamlined, members asked for information setting out the Council's planning process.

During the discussion members acknowledged that statistics in themselves can be misleading and asked whether the indicator took cognisance of Falkirk's unique economic environment, citing major applications at, for example, the Grangemouth complex as unique in Scotland. The Head of Planning and Economic Development stated that the cost of major applications were not included in the ECON2 costs. The indicator reflected local and household applications. He referred to a recent review by Audit Scotland on how the Council dealt with major planning applications which had concluded that the Council has shown major improvement.

Having considered the report and having had regard to the discussion the Committee considered that further information was required to allow it to determine whether the issue should be subject to scrutiny as part of the scrutiny plan.

Decision

The committee requested a further, detailed report, to the next meeting.

The report to include:-

- (1) detail on the component costs which make up the indicator;**
- (2) comparative information for all Scottish Local Authorities;**
- (3) contextual information and information to show recent costs and the trend;**
- (4) detailed explanation of the planning process (including timescales) and why the costs appear comparatively high; and**
- (5) overview of Audit Scotland audit of major planning applications together with the AS report.**