

S6. Local Government Benchmarking Framework 2019/20

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services presenting the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) data for 2019/20.

The Local Government Benchmarking Framework was a national approach to preparing, comparing and improving the performance of Councils in Scotland. This had replaced the previous 'Statutory Performance Indicators' required by Audit Scotland and was compiled by the Improvement Service, on behalf of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE).

It was intended that the LGBF data would be embedded into the Council's performance framework, with the indicators linked to the Corporate Plan priorities. The next report on the Corporate Plan, in June, would provide an overview of all 3 priorities – Communities, Enterprise and Innovation with the LGBF indicators.

There were 97 indicators in total, 80 of which had been published. The remaining 17 would be reported later in the year.

The report summarised performance as follows:-

- Performance compared with 2018/19
- Performance compared to the Scottish average
- Performance compared to other Scottish Local Authorities
- Performance of Corporate Plan priorities compared to Scottish average

The committee noted that in terms of the number of days people (aged 75+) spend in hospital when they are ready to be discharged (SSW8) the Falkirk value was 1020.14 compared to the Scottish average of 773.78. (per 1,000 population). This placed Falkirk in the bottom quartile nationally. Patricia Cassidy explained that the data was for 2019/20 and that she expected a much lower value for 2020/21. She cited as an example the Home First initiative which had been introduced in September 2020. Since its introduction, the Health & Social Care Partnership had noted positive results which she expected to continue. She added that readmission was a challenge (again the Falkirk value of 122.07 days was higher than the national average of 104.69 days). Again there had been improvements in performance over the course of 2020 and it was anticipated that the introduction of reablement next year would see significant improvement.

Following a question in regard to indicator SHSN2 (% Council rent that was due to houses remaining empty) which had increased from 1.04% in 2018/19 to 1.31% in 2019/20 and which was higher than the Scottish average of 1.07%, Stuart Ritchie stated that a new void standard had been introduced. Falkirk Council carried out a lot more work than some Councils in terms of the standard of the void lets. This meant that the turnaround time was now longer. Prior to Covid-19 the service had looked at its processes with a view to making them more efficient, for example by undertaking more pre-inspection work, and it was intended that this work would resume post-Covid

with the aim of shortening the turnaround time (which also increased the rents due for a property).

The committee noted that gross rent arrears (all tenants) as a percentage of rent due for the reporting year (SHSN1b) was 8.42% compared to the national average of 7.31% and that the figure had increased each year since 2017/18. The Director stated that a report to the next meeting on the Council's debt collection processes would pick up this issue in more detail. Mr Ritchie stated that early engagement with the tenants was key to rent management. Prior to Covid, Housing Officers made early contact with tenants to establish a plan before their arrears built up. Mr Ritchie added that Universal Credit had also had a significant impact on arrears and he anticipated a further increase in 2020/21 due to Covid. This was a national trend. The Council had, he added, introduced a hardship fund of £200,000 to support tenants.

The committee noted that in terms of the % of the highest paid 5% employees who are women (SCORP3b) the Council value was 48.55% compared to the national average of 56.74% which placed Falkirk Council in the bottom quartile nationally and asked what the Council was doing to enable women to move through the grades to reach the most senior positions. Karen Algie stated that the indicator covered a relatively small group of officers and small movements could have large impacts on the % - in the last two years a number of women had left senior positions and had their posts had been filled by men which had impacted on the indicator. Nonetheless she took the point being made and agreed that the Council should and would not be complacent – there were a number of means to encourage and support women to move through the ranks to the top – for example through more flexible working arrangements if required for caring responsibilities and the flexibility to promote a better work/life balance. Home working had helped generally but not in all cases (for example when the schools were closed due to lockdown). The Service was continually reviewing policies and procedures to offer different working styles and different contract styles to ensure that the flexibility was in place to create a level playing field.

The committee then turned to indicator SECON9, town vacancy rates. This was 14.38% compared to a national value of 11.71% which placed the Council's performance in the bottom quartile nationally. Douglas Duff acknowledged that as the value presented was for 2019/20 it could be predicted that it would increase in 2020/21 due to the impact of the pandemic. It was the case that the town centre had a significant amount of vacant floorspace, however a large proportion of it was privately owned which limited the Council's ability to impact on the vacancy rate itself. However it had developed a Town Centre Action Plan which aimed to introduce new uses for town centre property and repurpose the town centre with for example the introduction of town centre housing. New ventures were forthcoming – clearly however the Council's decision in regard to the Headquarters/Arts Centre project could be instrumental in the repurposing of the town centre.

The committee then noted that the % of adults satisfied with refuse collection (SENV7a) was 62.63% compared to the national average of 74.30%. This placed Falkirk in the bottom quartile nationally and was a value which had decreased since 2017/18. Douglas Duff responded that this indicator was based on information from the Scottish Household study which used a relatively small survey sample and as a result produced 'patchy' information. The Service was acutely aware and sensitive to concerns over refuse collection. Falkirk had been one of the first to resume after the lockdown and managed to sustain a high level of performance. Complaints however were acted upon and the Service did attend to missed bins.

Decision

The Scrutiny Committee:-

- (1) approved the report and acknowledge progress by Falkirk Council in meeting Council LGBF priorities; and**
- (2) noted that a report would be provided to Members in June on a review of the Corporate Plan to date.**