

The background of the slide features a large, light blue watermark of the City of Vancouver's coat of arms. The crest is a shield divided into four quadrants. The top-left quadrant shows a city skyline with a diagonal beam of light. The top-right quadrant depicts a stag's head with antlers. The bottom-left quadrant shows a three-masted sailing ship on wavy water. The bottom-right quadrant features a grizzly bear standing on a rocky outcrop. Above the shield is a crown with four maple leaves. A banner at the bottom of the shield contains the motto "A NE FOR A".

Agenda Item 3

Minute

Draft

FALKIRK COUNCIL

Minute of meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held remotely on Thursday 3 June 2021 at 10.00 a.m.

Councillors: David Balfour
Lorna Binnie
Allyson Black
Jim Blackwood
Niall Coleman
David Grant
John Patrick (convener)

Councillors also attending: Joan Coombes
Cecil Meiklejohn
Laura Murtagh
Alan Nimmo
Robert Spears

Officers: Patricia Cassidy, Chief Officer, Falkirk H&SCP
Sophie Dick, Democratic Services Graduate
Douglas Duff, Acting Director of Development Services
Paul Ferguson, Revenue & Benefits Manager
Kenny Gillespie, Head of Housing & Communities
Emma Graham, Resilience Officer
Kenneth Lawrie, Chief Executive
Robert Naylor, Director of Children's Services
Brian Pirie, Democratic Services Manager
Stuart Ritchie, Director of Corporate & Housing Services
Bryan Smail, Chief Finance Officer
Allan Stewart, Improvement Manager
Martin Thom, Head of Integration
Miranda Wilson, Resilience Officer

S8. Apologies

An apology was submitted on behalf of Councillor Goldie.

S9. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made.

S10. Minute

Decision

The minute of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 1 April 2021 was approved.

S11. Rolling Action Log

A rolling action log detailing the status of actions which had yet to be completed was presented for consideration.

Following a question regarding the status on ID 508 Progress Report - Slamannan Primary School Early Learning Class, the convener advised that the process had been delayed due to Covid but assured the committee that the report would be brought to the committee in due course.

Decision

The committee noted the Rolling Action Log

S12. The Corporate Plan 2020-2022 – Council Priorities

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services presenting a summary on the performance of the Council as measured against the priorities of the Corporate Plan - Communities, Enterprise and Innovation.

Specific reports on Communities, Enterprise and Innovation had been reported to Scrutiny Committee over the course of the previous eight months. Further reports were planned throughout 2021/22, with the next report focussing on Communities in September 2021.

The report focused on the period 2020/21, in which the Council had faced the impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic and in doing so had a blend of response and recovery initiatives which had shaped the Council's service delivery models. A number of case studies, highlighting such initiatives was appended to the report.

Performance was illustrated by means of the 5 indicators set out in the Performance Management Framework:-

- Corporate Plan Actions
- Council of the Future Priority Projects
- LGBF indicators
- Local indicators
- Customer Satisfaction indicators

Appendix 2 provided an insight into the current status of the 3 Corporate Plan Priority Actions whilst Appendix 3 summarised Council of the Future Projects. The report is finalised by Corporate Plan Performance Indicators dictated by the Local Government Benchmark Framework (LGBF).

The committee focused on the Customer Perception Indicators, in particular highlighting that the response rate from the People's Panel was 17%. The committee asked for more detail on the geographical makeup of the panel together with the total number of people who had participated. The Director of Corporate and Housing clarified that roughly 1,000 people were on the panel of which 17% had responded. The Council continued to actively add to the panel and looked to advertise to encourage people to join. In terms of area, respondents were spread across the area. As Community Conversations grew, there would be further promotion through local discussions.

The committee followed up by asking if 17% response rate was reflective of the norm for surveys and asked whether it was the same people who were responding. Mr Ritchie stated that for recent consultations this was a typical response rate but it wasn't the case that it was the same people responding. Different people responded to different consultations. On this the committee asked if there should be an expectation that if a person joined the panel then they would actively respond to consultations. Mr Ritchie noted that change in the structure of the panel would be considered in the future if response rate remained low.

The committee then asked how the members of the panel were selected and if the panel could be renewed to which the Director of Corporate and Housing explained that people volunteered. Furthermore, engagement had been established through Community Conversations. Mr Ritchie concurred with member's concerns over the response rate. He added that the size of the panel would not be capped therefore non-participating members would not be stopping additional individuals from joining.

Following a question in regard to the number of places that had been provided as part of the employability priority project, the Acting Director of Development Services explained that the Young Person's Guarantee and Kickstart scheme were in early stages and undertook to provide the information to members following the meeting.

A question was asked about indicator SHSN5 – 'Percentage of council houses that are energy efficient', specifically on how this was quantified and if any improvements could be made. The Head of Housing & Communities stated that the indicator was measured by analysis of heating, property build and additional climate measures such as loft insulation. These factors were reviewed annually and used to identify areas of improvement - the goal was to meet the highest standard of efficiency. Any changes, such as heating systems, were updated on an existing database and informed the Housing Capital Programme going forward.

The committee sought clarification on the number of participants that had taken part in the 20 Community Conversations and suggested that in some areas constituents had not been able to participate. Mr Gillespie undertook to provide this information following the meeting.

The committee then turned to indicator SECON1 – ‘% Unemployed People Assisted into work from Council operated/funded Employability Programmes’ noting that there had been a large decline from 2017/18 where the value was 22.12% to 14.45% in 2019/20. Mr Duff explained that Falkirk Council was dependent on employers coming forward and offering positions and this had not been happening as much in recent years, and particularly after Covid-19. The number of places available was dependent on the number of placements offered by employers and this had been impacted by Covid-19. Programmes were now being reshaped by the Employment Training Unit to kickstart were offering were changing due to the pandemic.

The committee turned to the responses to the People’s Panel Survey noting that across the 9 indicators perception of the Council was poor (below 55% in all cases) and asked if the respondents were spread across the whole Council area and if each of the 9 Council wards was represented. Mr Ritchie stated that it was area wide and not broken into ward areas. Following a further question, he confirmed that the surveys were completed online. The committee asked if this approach excluded potential participants from taking part for example those facing social and economic deprivation and people without digital access. The Director of Corporate and Housing assured the committee that this survey was not the only way in which public opinion is ingathered - citing for example the tenant survey which used surface mail. The committee noted that nonetheless perception was generally low and asked whether the Council was getting its message across. Mr Ritchie stated that the Council needed to work harder to get its message across in regard to the good work that is undertaken and the vital services that are provided. The Council performed well in the LGBF standings, often in the top quartile and perhaps should look at different avenues to get its message out. The committee concurred, adding that in order to move forward the public had to know that the Council represented value for money and spent money effectively. Indicators showed that this was the case, but, still, perception was low.

The committee returned to Community Conversations – the report initially referred to 20 community groups and 8 community conversations and asked if there had been differentiation between groups and individuals. The committee also asked what processes had been in place to ensure that the voices of all people were heard and how was this measured to ensure. The Head of Housing & Communities stated that from the outset the Council had been aware that there were hard to reach individuals and groups and that it was important that their voices were heard. The Council had worked with the 3rd sector to that end. Because of the pandemic, communication was limited to online but it was anticipated that as restrictions eased there would be an opportunity for face to face meetings. He would be able to provide a list of the groups that had participated in the conversations. It was suggested

that in some cases language could be a barrier. Mr Gillespie confirmed that interpreters had been used previously and could be used again. He recognised that there was an element of fatigue within communities as a result of the efforts of 2020 but repeated that the Council was keen to engage and learn. Mr Ritchie outlined the 8 conversations that had been held in 2020 adding that these were in regard to the development of the Corporate Plan and had involved around 100 people – these conversations had been previously reported to Council. There had been a further recent 20 conversations which had focused on the new Falkirk Community Plan.

Members turned to end-to-end digital telecare service. Falkirk Council had been the first Scottish Council to go live with this service - members asked if the data collected thus far had been used to establish more positive outcomes and whether the service would be shared across Scotland. The Chief Officer Health & Social Care Partnership explained that there was a dialog between the Council and Falkirk HSCP to define and develop an offer for other authorities – other areas had shown interest in the service.

Further concerns were raised about the lack of participation of the People's Panel Survey stating for example a lack of awareness of an event which led to the event subsequently being cancelled and asked how the Council intended to engage more effectively. Mr Gillespie repeated that during the pandemic communities had worked hard together and with others – there had been a lot of good work but he also acknowledged that there was fatigue. He stated it was essential that trust was built and that there was transparency in regard to the role and impact of the public. The limitations of digital engagement was apparent – participation would increase with face-to-face interaction. Mr Gillespie emphasised the problems of trying to carry out such engagement during a pandemic and acknowledged that the Council could do better.

The Director of Children's Services responded to questions surrounding the Falkirk High School Takeaway Scheme by stating that while similar schemes were under consideration the data from Falkirk High needed to be analysed before any decisions are taken.

Members returned to the People's Panel Survey and asked if the results were due to the pandemic. Mr Ritchie explained that this was conducted during the pandemic and would become the benchmark survey going forward – the impact of the pandemic could not be excluded but there was hope that participation would increase in future surveys. He stated that Customer Satisfaction figures in the LGBF for all Councils were in the bottom quartiles. He noted that, for example street cleaning and museums tended to score low in public perception yet conversely other indicators showed that they offered a good service.

The Head of Housing & Communities disagreed with the statement that a large percentage of housing stock was of low quality within excess of 97% of stock deemed to be high quality as defined by Housing Standards. However, Mr Gillespie concurred with the committee that expectations of housing had

altered. The Local Housing Strategy (and others) had master plans to adapt to these expectations and this was evidenced in the Councils Housing Investment Programmes.

The Committee turned to indicator SECON6 – ‘Cost of Economic Development & Tourism per 1,000 population’ which showed a significant reduction in Falkirk’s spending in comparison to that for Scotland (Falkirk at £54,822.22 compared to £103,193.67 nationally). The committee considered that there was opportunity to do more in the area but acknowledged that there were limited resources within the Service. The Acting Director of Development Services stated that while additional resources would be welcome, he recognised the budget constraints faced by the Council. Funding had been allocated by Council - £300,000 in 2020 and 500,000 in 2021 to aid economic recovery. He added that the Council continued to look to secure external funding. He concurred with the committee that the tourism section secured significant investment for a small team. The section had been extremely proactive during the pandemic, for example producing videos and on social media. The key was the preparatory work for the bounce back. The area offered great facilities and at the current time with restrictions in place there was a focus on ‘local’.

The committee asked if the Connected Falkirk digital learning roll out of Wi-Fi in all 58 schools by September 2021 was on track. Mr Ritchie explained that delays had been caused by Covid-19 guidance, but as non-essential contractors were now allowed to enter, work would begin. It was too soon to state if work would be completed by September, but updates would be provided to committee in future reports.

In regard to Council of the Future – Communities Project ‘Communities Shaping Falkirk’s Future’, elected members wished to know what the ‘cross-council community empowerment group’ was and who was involved. Mr Gillespie explained that it was a group of officers who worked, in any capacity, with community engagement. The aim was to include two officers from each of Falkirk Council’s divisions, two from Falkirk HSCP and some officers from Falkirk Community Trust. The aim was to share with and learn from colleagues to ensure the Council better listens to its communities.

The convener suggested that, in light of the earlier discussion on this subject that the committee request a follow up report on SECON1 – ‘% Unemployed People Assisted into work from Council operated/funded Employability Programmes’.

Decision

The Scrutiny Committee:-

- 1) noted the update on the Corporate Plan;**
- 2) noted the update on the Performance Management Framework;**
- 3) that separate reports will continue to be submitted to Elected Members on each of the Council priorities through 2021/22; and**

- 4) requested a report on what actions are in place to increase the % of unemployed people assisted into work from Council operated/funded Employability programmes (indicator SECON1).

The committee adjourned at 11.10am and reconvened at 11.20am with all members present as per the sederunt.

S13. Corporate Risks - 2021/22 Deep Dive Plan

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which presented a deep dive plan for 2021/22 for approval.

In 2019 both the Audit Committee and Executive were advised that a programme of 'deep dives' in regard to corporate risks would be developed and introduced to allow Members to better scrutinise the process for assessing and mitigating against areas of risk. Deep Dive reports would be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee and any recommendations arising from the scrutiny will be reported to the Executive.

Decision

The Scrutiny Committee agreed the 2021/22 Deep Dive Plan set out at appendix 1 to the report.

S14. Coronavirus Update

The committee had, in October 2020 requested a report on the Council's response to the covid-19 pandemic. This report had been delayed due to the second lockdown which had occurred shortly thereafter. The committee considered a report by the Chief Executive which summarised the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Falkirk area and the work of the Council to mitigate these through its actions on the response and recovery.

The report captured the impact that the pandemic had on the Council and its efforts and the initial lessons learned. The changes brought by Covid-19 were detailed in case studies. The report provided a breakdown of the response by services such as Children's Services, Falkirk HSCP and Housing & Communities and evaluated the impact and continuing demands placed on services.

The report also set out the lessons learned.

Members of the committee each commended the Council's employees - whether at the front-line or at the centre - for their hard work and endeavour during what was a particularly difficult time. Members acknowledged the efforts across Services to ensure that key services were maintained, and that the Council was able to respond to the pandemic. The committee sought and asked whether support had been put in place for staff in light of the

unprecedented circumstances. The Chief Executive stated that throughout the pandemic HR and all managers had provided ongoing support to staff for example in wellbeing through email, the intranet and social media, with many WhatsApp groups having been established. The majority of staff had worked from home since March last year and to support them a range of IT had been provided. Additionally, employees were able to purchase a desk and chair for homeworking. Following a question, the Chief Executive confirmed that an allowance was available towards the cost of desks and chairs and information was available on claiming tax relief for electricity and heating costs when working from home. The challenges presented by Covid-19 were expected to remain and therefore Mr Lawrie recognised the need to maintain this level of support. The Director of Corporate and Housing Services added that a significant volume of information was available for employees and managers have looked to support employee wellbeing during the period.

Members then asked for more information in regard to the deep dive for Resilience and Water Quality. The Head of Planning and Economic Development confirmed the initial survey had been carried out by Council officers but a company called HBE Ltd had been appointed to carry out the work.

Members recognised that the pandemic had had a huge effect on communities and acknowledged that communities in the area had come together, with support from the Council, to respond to the impacts of the pandemic, particularly the vulnerable and the hard to reach, through for example the provision of food. There was a need to build on this going forward and also to manage expectations for example in regard to funding. The Chief Executive concurred in regard to managing expectations, he anticipated that the impacts of Covid-19 would continue to be felt for some time and that disruptions would continue. The Corporate Plan recognised that the Council would be at the centre of the recovery phase and that there was a need to strike a balance between to ensure that the Council managed support while ensuring it was available to those who needed it. He also agreed with a comment that carers had had a particularly difficult time. Martin Thom added that engaging with carers was a priority for the H&SCP – it was vital to engage with carers about the support they needed and to develop new ways of working. A new model for delivering day care had been developed as part of the transformation of services and implementing this would be a massive challenge and could not be done without the support of carers. It was vital therefore that they were supported. He added that the service wouldn't have been able to cope with the impacts of the pandemic had it not been for the work of carers.

Following a question, the Chief Executive confirmed that public conveniences had been closed during the pandemic due to the restrictions in place.

The committee returned to support for employees and asked whether the support purchase a desk and chair had been adequate. Stuart Ritchie advised that £100 had been available. A number of staff had returned to their

workplace to collect their own office equipment so some had purchased their own furniture for home working and some had used their office equipment or a combination of both. A proof of purchase had been required before the allowance could be issued. There was a recognition that employees had different environments in the homes in which to work. Some had dedicated space while others had temporary arrangements. He added that offices were starting to open and staff could return, in accordance with guidance, to the workplace if it was not suitable or convenient to work from home.

Members asked how the pandemic had impacted on the attainment gap in schools and if there was any correlation between a widening gap and home schooling. The Director of Children's Services responded by recognising for some children, lockdown would have been a challenging period. Schools were working to identify and reclaim any loss of education during that period – there was no evidence yet to any widening of attainment gap. This would be hard to recognise due to another change in exam system from previous years. Participation in remote learning had been generally good, although, Mr Naylor noted it had been extremely difficult for some. Feedback from students had suggested that remote learning had been positive in some ways, particularly for those who struggled in the school environment. Elected members then emphasised their desire to see any differences in the attainment gap be presented to committee in the coming months.

The pressures of working from home was further highlighted by the committee as an issue and asked if there had been dialogue with employees on their anxieties. Mr Ritchie concurred with the committee that transitioning to homeworking had been challenging and gave details of a 'pulse' survey conducted prior to Christmas, the aim of which was to examine and analyse the anxieties and stress of employees. The outcomes of the survey had formed the basis for an action plan. Not all issues had been related to Covid-19 as concerns had been identified about communication generally.

Following a question, the Head of Housing & Communities explained engagement with tenants had been carried out during the pandemic online. Although this had been a different experience the same wellbeing questions had been asked. The service had worked closely with Revenue and Benefits to identify issues relating to finance, for example rent arrears.

Following on from a question about poverty and widening inequalities, the Head of Housing & Communities explained that a report presented to Executive on 11 May 2021 fully outlined the equality findings with relation to issues such as digital exclusion, food and sustainability. Communities had been helpful at identifying where inequalities lay whilst a 'One Council' approach had adopted. Where inequalities had been identified, work would continue to be carried out to ensure resources were in place to minimise them.

Decision

The Scrutiny committee:-

- a) **noted the report on the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic;**
- b) **noted the work undertaken to debrief on the Council's response, to identify lessons learned and the 'deep dive' reports undertaken for resilience and water quality in relation to the response to Covid-19;**
- c) **agreed to forward the report to the Executive for consideration; and**
- d) **agreed to receive a follow up report by December 2021.**

S15. Digital Progress in Local Government

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which gave an overview of the 'Digital Progress in Local Government' report published by the Accounts Commission in January 2021 together with a summary of the work being undertaken within the Council to build on our own digital ambitions.

There were clear synergies between the Commission's report and the work being undertaken by the Council to achieve a positive outcome for the Council's digital ambitions. The Council was committed to maximising the use of digital technologies across its Services as set out in the Digital Falkirk strategy. The strategy was a key component of the Council's business plan and comparisons with work undertaken across other public sectors was vital in helping to shape the transformation of services.

The report by the Accounts Commission identified the 6 clear characteristics for a digital Council together with examples. The characteristics were grouped under:-

- Progress and impact of Covid-19
- Becoming a Digital Council
- Citizens at Heart
- Workforce and Skills
- Data and Technology
- National Leadership and Collaboration

The report concluded that more work was required to ensure digital exclusion was tackled and that support was required to build skills and resources to allow access to public services within Councils. It was key that the journey was not simply a technological one but one which placed customers at the heart of designing service objectives. Cultural change was key. It also concluded that the Covid-19 pandemic had acted as a catalyst to cultural change and accelerated the deployment of digital technologies and connectivity amongst communities.

The report set out the Council's position in regard to each of the 6 characteristics.

The committee noted that 'the involvement of elected members in digital leadership was not well developed' and asked what work had been put in place to remedy this. Allan Stewart explained that updates were provided to members through updates from the Council of the Future Board updates such as the Make It Happen updates and in various committee reports.

The Committee noted that insufficient staff capacity and digital skills were the most significant barriers to progress and asked if staff working from home had contributed to these as a barrier. Mr Stewart acknowledged that this may be the case but added that the Council had invested significantly in providing technology such as laptops to employees. The issue was more to do with how staff use the available technology. The introduction of 365 had been a steep learning curve for staff but training and support had been put in place through both inhouse and external sources. Additionally, further outreach had been undertaken with community training to ensure no citizens were left behind during the digital transformation.

The committee commended the use of social media such as Facebook but suggested that it was unhelpful that the option to message the Council appeared to have been disabled on the Facebook page. Mr Stewart confirmed that the Council had a heavy social media presence and work was underway to establish chatbots to assist users on queries. There was a caution around opening the Facebook and Twitter pages to comments due to the potential derogatory comments that may appear. Nonetheless comments could be made and these were monitored by a member of staff who was able to respond or pass on queries. Mr Stewart undertook to look into the particular issue raised in regard to messaging.

Members raised some concerns over the performance of their technology in regard to 365 performance -specifically in regard to using 365 on their phones. Mr Stewart undertook to investigate the issues raised.

Decision

The Scrutiny committee noted:-

- 1) the details of the Accounts Commission report.**
- 2) the brief update supporting the Council's approach to the key characteristics.**
- 3) that a more comprehensive report on progress with the Council's Digital Strategy would be submitted to Members after the recess.**

S16. Irrecoverable Debts

The Executive had, in March 2021 referred the area of debt recovery to the committee following its consideration of a report on the Council's Irrecoverable Debts.

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services which provided an overview of the debt recovery process highlighting the key features of the Corporate Debt Recovery Policy - the aim of which was to maximise income collection to the Council and to minimise the cost of collection, while maintaining and improving the customer experience through collection and recovery.

There were 6 income streams detailed separately in the annual Irrecoverable Debt report:-

- Council Tax
- Housing rent
- Housing Benefit Overpayments
- Non-Domestic Rates
- Sundry Accounts
- Temporary Accommodation

Each stream had its own challenge in terms of collection and recovery. In 5 of the 6 categories the volume of debts approved to be written out of accounts by Chief Finance Officer significantly exceeded those where member consent was required. This was because vast majority of irrecoverable debts within these 5 income streams fell well below the £5,000 threshold. The exception to this was Non-Domestic Rates. Overall while the volume of debts was material it represented less than 1% of the total amount billed.

The report set out benchmarking data which demonstrated that for example in regard to House Rent the debt written off was consistent with comparatively sized Councils.

Following a question as to why the authorisation threshold was set at £5,000 Paul Ferguson explained this had been the limit for over 20 years and had been set by Council. The lower threshold meant that members would have a better insight into the debts which could not be recovered. In other areas across Scotland, the threshold was £10,000. Mr Ferguson considered that the lower thresholds allowed for greater scrutiny. With the current lower threshold elected members scrutinised and determined the debts of around 100 cases annually out of roughly 3,500 individual accounts.

Members stated that often the same names reappeared each year in the Irrecoverable Debt reports and asked whether steps could be taken – for example by Economic Development and Finance to prevent repeat instances of failure to pay debt. Mr Ferguson confirmed that the Scottish Government was looking to tackle this by implementing the avoidance

legislation which would force private tenants to pay their rents. In terms of collecting debt, issues arose when the individual did not have any assets which forced the Council to declare the money as written off.

The discussion then focussed on the non-payment of Council Tax and Housing Rent – members suggested that this created a negative impression of the Council and that the Council would not be seen as being tough on non-payment of debt. Paul Ferguson stated that while this could be the case, he hoped that this report would provide assurance to members and the public. Mr Ferguson reiterated that the number of these incidents was less than 1% of the total tax debts. Debts weren't written off every year -it was only after all avenues had been explored and options exhausted that a debt would be considered for write off. He explained that debts were written off for two main reasons: firstly, the tenant had left the residence and it became clear the Council would be unable to recover the historical debt, or secondly, the tenant declared bankruptcy.

The committee then turned to overpayments. Mr Ferguson clarified that overpayments only related to Housing Benefits – and since the introduction of Universal Credit these were reducing. The report stated that 103.1% of Housing Benefits overpayments was raised but this was due to the collection of historical debts. There was a statutory fixed deduction of £19 from benefits, set by Department for Work and Pensions, regardless of the value of the benefit income.

The committee then asked if Universal Credit had had any impact on rent arrears. Mr Ferguson confirmed that it had created a challenge due to the lag in payments when moving onto Universal Credit and this could readily compound. However, the Council could obtain payment direct from benefits. and enabled an opportunity for some to resolve their rent arrears. This produced more work for the Housing team and Corporate Debt team as more one-to-one management was needed with tenants.

Decision

The Scrutiny committee noted the existing arrangements in place to recover debt and minimise irrecoverable debts.