

## **S5. Local Government Benchmarking Framework 2020/21**

The committee considered a report by the Director of Transformation, Communities and Corporate Services which provided an update on the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) data for 2020/21.

This report showed the impact of the first year of the pandemic on local government services. As Council's reacted independently to the operational challenges presented by the pandemic, gaps in data existed. The data results that were presented reflected the challenges of working through the pandemic.

Available on the Falkirk Council website was the 'My Local Council' portal which allowed for public scrutiny on the LGBF data.

The LGBF was based on several overall service groupings which covered the major public-facing services provided to local communities and the support services. These groupings were:

1. Children's Services (Education and Child Care)
2. Adult Social Care
3. Environmental Services
4. Culture and Leisure
5. Housing
6. Corporate Support Services
7. Economic Development and Planning
8. Financial Sustainability
9. Tackling Climate Change

The Chief Executive explained that whilst this approach may receive some criticism, it was a great improvement from the statutory performance indicators previously used. He noted that it was not a simple comparative tool as differences had to be considered, such as scale, geography and deprivation. He stated it was a tool which enabled discussion about relative performance. Whilst a number of indicators were included, Falkirk Council were taking the approach to focus on ones that were most important to the Falkirk Plan. Performance had improved over the 11 year period of the LGBF, however, both the LGBF Board and the Accounts Commission noted that due the financial constraints on the Council, this would be unlikely to continue. A key focus area for the LGBF Board was to improve the speed of reporting – work was ongoing to create the 'Online Data Portal' which would make the gathering and reporting of data automatic.

Members sought for assurance that each Council was gathering data and measuring indicators in the same way to ensure that comparisons were accurate. Mr Lawrie explained that the consistency of measurement was very high due to clear definitions of indicators and extensive work to ensure consistency. He explained that great progress had been made since issues were previously raised about consistency and greater clarity had been provided partly due a joint-working approach between Councils.

The committee gave thanks to the frontline services and their continual hard work throughout the pandemic as well as external partners who facilitated in the efforts.

57% (47) of Falkirk Council Performance indicators were deteriorating which was higher compared to the year before (36%). Members asked if this suggested performance had generally worsened and if any mitigations were in place to improve performance. The Chief Executive explained that it was correct to state that a decline in performance had occurred in the 2020/21 period, but this was a pattern seen across other Councils. He highlighted that the pandemic had created an inevitability in decline as it altered the way services were provided. Mr Lawrie noted that it would be most beneficial to focus on individual indicators to understand why they had declined; if this was seen across other Councils or if there was a particular reason for its decline. The reasoning behind the general decline was partially due to the pandemic, as well as financial constraints. A decline in performance due to finances was predicted by the Accounts Commission and it was important for the Council to identify what indicators were most important and focus resources there.

46% (41) indicators performed below the national average which had increased from the year prior (29%). The committee asked if this was due to the same reasons given in the previous question. Mr Lawrie confirmed that Covid-19 and financial constraints were key factors. He noted that these could be described as general factors which impacted all Councils and therefore it was important to focus on individual indicators to identify Falkirk-specific reasons. He referred to indicator 'SC&L1 – Cost per attendance of sport and leisure facilities (including swimming pools)' which showed Falkirk had a value of £81.44 per visit whilst the Scottish average was £40.36 – this was also higher than the 2019/20 period which had an average of £3.89 per visit. He explained that Falkirk had historically performed poorly in this indicator due to the number of leisure centres in the area and the relatively low usage of each. In terms of the 2020/21 period, many other Councils utilised their leisure centres for Covid-19 responses, such as testing centres, therefore maintaining footfall. This example highlighted how the pandemic directly disrupted an individual indicator.

The Leader of the Council noted the importance of utilising the LGBF data in improvement plans. She stated that the data presented positive elements, such as the improvement in school attainment rates, and that these positive indicators should be maintained.

Following a question on what lessons had been learned from achieving 50% of indicators performing better than the Scottish average, the Chief Executive noted that learning was about improvement and change in services relating to individual indicators. He referred back to indicator 'SC&L1 – Cost per attendance of sport and leisure facilities (including swimming pools)' which he explained provided an insight into the number of buildings and quality of services and in turn, their ability to attract members of the public. He noted that other Councils had successfully improved this indicator through their investment in leisure centres and Falkirk wished to do so as well – this indicator would be considered in the Falkirk Plan. In terms

of school attainment, the Council performed well but it would still be included in the Falkirk Plan as prospects for young people was reliant upon their school attainment. Many of these indicators were supported by a number of officers who liaised at a national level and tried to replicate performance which had proven to be successful. In terms of progressing with the LGBF data, he highlighted the importance of identifying the key indicators and focusing resources on them. This approach was supported by the Accounts Commission which expected Councils to have a clear understanding of which indicators were important as the Accounts Commission recognised the financial strain placed on Councils.

Members sought for clarity on what indicator 'SCHN1 - Cost per primary school pupil £' referred to. The Director of Children's Services explained it covered the expenditure per primary school pupil by calculating the total expenditure divided by the total number of primary school pupils. This indicator highlighted that the primary school sector was running efficiently. In terms of what was included in 'total expenditure', Mr Naylor clarified that it included the cost of teachers, support for learning assistants, cleaning, heating and more. In essence, all elements that went into running a primary school.

The committee made reference to indicator 'SCORP03b – The percentage of the highest paid 5% of employees who are women' which showed Falkirk attained 49.84%. It noted that this figure remained relatively unchanged in comparison to previous years (2018/19 at 49.33% and 2019/20 at 48.55%). It asked what was being done to address this topic and what mechanisms were in place to attract women into these jobs. The Director of Transformation, Communities and Corporate Services explained that the target for this indicator was 50%, which the Council had achieved. She recognised that an imbalance of either gender was to be avoided. At the time of the meeting, the Council was sitting at around 53% female and 46% in the highest 5% paid. Ms Algie noted that recruitment practices were central to this – the Council was unable to recruit only females but were able to ensure that recruitment practices were gender neutral and be fair as possible in following equality legislation.

Following a question on indicator 'SHSN5 – Percentage of council houses that are energy efficient', Ms Algie explained that the work included in this indicator referred to a number of projects such as heating systems and new windows/doors contract. The rendering of houses was also included as it focused on how houses could retain heat.

Members referred to indicator 'SCHN3 – Cost per pre-school place £' which showed the value as £9,426.68 in 2020/21 and was higher than the year before (£6,891.41). The increase in value aligned with the Scottish average of £9,254.90. They noted that this increase in expenditure related to the expansion of nursey provision and asked if there was any financial support from the Scottish Government to aide with this. The Director of Children's Services confirmed that the increased expenditure did relate the move to 1,140 hours entitlement for every pre-school child. The expansion of Early Years provision was funded by the Scottish Government through ringfenced funding which was expected to continue until the next year.

The committee referred to indicator 'SHSN2 - % of council rent that was lost due to houses remaining empty' which showed the value had increased to 1.58% from 1.31% in the previous year. It asked how this was being tackled. The Director of Transformation, Communities and Corporate Services explained that additional arrangements and contracts were in place to address the issue of void properties. Ms Algie agreed to refer back to committee with more information.

In reference to indicator 'SHSN4b – Average time taken to complete non-emergency repairs', members noted that the figure had increased to 13.88 from 5.55. They asked what mechanisms were in place to resolve this issue. The Director of Transformation, Communities and Corporate Services explained that during the pandemic, a number of restrictions were implemented which impacted on the delivery of the service and presented an inability to provide the repairs to a full extent. During this period, the service prioritised emergency repairs and focused on statutory requirements such as homelessness. As a result of this, a backlog of roughly 7,000 non-emergency repairs was created which the Council were committed to resolving. Ms Algie explained that our assurance to resolve these issues differed from other Council who removed outstanding repairs from the system. Ms Algie stated that only around 400 repairs remained outstanding from the initial 7,000 and expected to have all outstanding repairs completed by next month.

Members referred back to indicator 'SC&L1 – Cost per attendance of sport and leisure facilities (including swimming pools)' which was high in value prior to the pandemic at £4.21 in 2018/19. They sought for information on an improvement plan to resolve this. Mr Naylor agreed that the cost per visit was high prior to the pandemic which he explained was due to the overprovision of swimming pools. He noted that other Councils only had public swimming pools in some wards. He explained that since the Falkirk Community Trust had returned to the Council and sport and leisure came under Children's Services, a review of the totality of that provision would be undertaken. Mr Naylor emphasised the importance of reviewing and resolving this issue.

The committee further discussed indicator 'SCHN3 – Cost per pre-school place £' and noted that the Falkirk 2020/21 value was above the Scottish average. The Director of Children's Services explained this was due to Falkirk Council including all children in the pre-5 setting – the Council operated 2 centres that children between 0-2 years old attended which incurred significant costs and very few Councils carried out this work. Therefore, increasing the overall value for Falkirk.

Mr Naylor responded to a question about a timescale for a report in relation to the future of swimming pools in the area. He explained there were no planned proposals at the time of the meeting, however, confirmed evaluations of existing swimming pools were being undertaken which considered their attendance and revenue. Benchmarking with other Councils was also ongoing. He assured committee that proposals were forthcoming

to improve indicator 'SC&L1 – Cost per attendance of sport and leisure facilities (including swimming pools)'.

Mr Naylor clarified that any decision to close swimming pool facilities would be made by the Council and recognised that closures were a possibility.

Indicator 'SC&L2 (in plan) – Cost per visit to libraries' showed that Falkirk's value was £24.79 which was higher than the Scottish average of £2.88, members noted that the Council's value prior to the pandemic was still higher than the national average. They asked what plans were in place to increase footfall in libraries. The Director of Transformation, Communities and Corporate Services explained there was ongoing work to pull together a range of actions which would be presented to Council at the meeting on 28 September 2022 for consideration. As part of this work, a 5-year plan for libraries was included to address some of the issues. Aside from this, work currently in place included the introduction of Hubs into libraries which had proven to be positive as it increased footfall as well as enable other avenues for support whilst in the library.

Members referred to indicator 'SCLIM01 (in plan) – CO2 emissions area wide per capita' which highlighted a decline in Falkirk's value from 14.76% in 2018/19 to 13.28% in 2020/21, but despite efforts to reduce it was still higher than the Scottish average of 4.62%. They asked what the reason for this was and what measures were being undertaken to continue the reduction. The Director of Place Services noted the inclusion of Grangemouth in this indicator, which was the largest hubs for industry and biggest emitter of carbon in Scotland. He recognised that companies such as INEOS had made commitments to move towards a carbon reduction model which would positively impact this indicator. In terms of what the Falkirk Council could control, the emissions per capita was at a much better rate. Mr Bennie explained that many of the largest emitters were private companies and therefore the Council was unable to enforce any regulations upon them, however, many of these companies were moving towards greener energy.

Following a request regarding what steps large private companies were doing to reduce their carbon emissions, Mr Bennie stated a briefing would be submitted to members on business commitments.

The committee referred to indicator 'SECON2 – Cost per planning application' which showed an increase in value in the 2020/21 period (£5,810.09) despite few applications being processed due to the pandemic. Mr Bennie stated he would refer back to committee with more information.

## **Decision**

**The Scrutiny Committee noted the report.**