

The Highland Council

Audit and Scrutiny Committee – 18th June 2015

Agenda Item	11
Report No	AS/15/15

Audit Scotland National Reports

Report by Head of Audit & Risk Management

Summary

This report provides details of the most recent National Reports issued by Audit Scotland and the action taken within the Council to address the report findings.

1. Background

- 1.1 All National Reports issued by Audit Scotland are reported to the relevant strategic committee who should consider what action should be taken to address the report findings. Thereafter this is reported to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee who should satisfy themselves that the appropriate action is being taken by the strategic committee. In addition it should be noted that progress in addressing the National Reports by individual councils is monitored by Audit Scotland.

2. National Reports Issued

- 2.1 There are 2 recent reports which have been issued and which have been considered by the appropriate strategic committee:

- Community Planning- Turning Ambition into Action (*presented to the Community Safety, Public Engagement and Equalities Committee on 25/03/15*)
- Audit Scotland National Report – Overview of Local Government in Scotland in 2015 (*presented to the Highland Council on 14/05/15*)

The Committee minutes are provided in Section 3 below. The original reports which include a link to the National Report can be accessed on the Council's website.

3. Minutes of Meetings

3.1 Audit Scotland Report: Community Planning - Turning Ambition into Action

There had been circulated Report No. CPE3/15 dated 17 March 2015 by the Head of Policy and Reform summarising the key findings from the national Audit Scotland report into community planning. It identified the implications for the Highland Community Planning Partnership (CPP) and provided an update for Members on the views of the CPP in taking forward the recommendations in the audit report.

Members generally welcomed the report and emphasised the importance of grass roots/community input to community planning, and, supported by the Local Senior Officer for Fire and Rescue, highlighted the need to avoid duplication and address gaps, and to have a clear understanding of who did what. It was acknowledged that learning to work together was taking time but

positive progress was being made and results were being achieved. Ward forums had been found to be a useful way to bring partners together locally but, given the breadth of some issues such as health, there might also be benefits from holding longer sessions. The forthcoming review of Area Committees and local community planning arrangements would help to progress arrangements in Highland.

The Committee **NOTED** that:-

- i. for some areas the Highland CPP could demonstrate it had made good progress, particularly around leadership and challenge in the CPP and the ability to absorb national structure changes into our CPP processes;
- ii. the CPP Board recognised it needed to continue to work on the CPP priorities around joint resourcing and performance reporting as set out in the SOA Development Plan;
- iii. the CPP Board had agreed that new work would focus on local community planning and how that influenced and reflected the SOA priorities. This would include consideration of the issues in paragraphs 3.5 to 3.7 of the report over the period to 2017/18;
- iv. the review of Area Committees locally agreed at the Council meeting on 12 March offered opportunities for improving local community planning arrangements. This could be in broadening Member scrutiny of partner services locally, in streamlining meetings and reporting, in providing better information for Members in their local decision-making, scrutiny and problem-solving roles and in encouraging more community participation;
- v. there was no planned audit or inspection of the Highland Community Planning Partnership for 2015/16; and
- vi. the Audit findings would also be considered by the Council's Audit and Scrutiny Committee.

3.2 Audit Scotland National Report – Overview of Local Government in Scotland in 2015

There had been circulated Report No. HC/16/15 dated 30 April 2015 by the Director of Finance which presented the Overview Report of Local Government in Scotland 2015, highlighted the key messages and considered how the Council was responding.

In this regard, the Audit Scotland Report (Annex 1) had been circulated separately.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- in acknowledging reference in the report to the fact that all Councils had reduced staff numbers to help make savings, there was a need to review the current arrangements for employing external contractors in order to examine whether in-house staff could undertake such work instead and thereby provide efficiencies for the Council as a whole;
- it was crucial that further emphasis was placed on scrutiny and governance in future and this was improved wherever possible;
- this report and the recommendations within it represented the job description of the Councillor of the future and as such governance,

- scrutiny and performance monitoring were crucial aspects of that role;
- there was a need to systematically embed governance and performance improvement within the systems of the Council;
 - it would be helpful if the current operation of the Community Challenge Fund could be re-examined to ensure that it was working efficiently;
 - it was recognised that constraints were placed on the Council in terms of future forward planning because of the way that the financial settlement was dealt with and it would be helpful to be able to explore options for influencing this wherever possible in future;
 - there were concerns about the potential effect of staff reduction on future efficiency and performance improvement;
 - there was a need for more training for Members on financial issues and the decision making process;
 - best value from services had to be obtained in order to be able to provide the best outcomes for and with communities;
 - the long term financial planning which had been undertaken in recent years by the Council had been beneficial for the Highlands and this compared well with other areas; and
 - there was a need to improve the dissemination of information to the public wherever possible;

Decision

The Council **NOTED** the findings of the National Overview Report of Local Government in Scotland in 2015 and the response set out to the main recommendations as outlined in Paragraph 2.2 of the report.

It was also **AGREED** that Members of the Council had to address their personal training requirements in light of the issues raised by the report.

4. Implications

- 4.1 There are no Resource, Resource, Legal, Equalities, Climate Change/ Carbon Clever, Risk, Gaelic or Rural implications arising from this report.

Recommendation

Members are invited to consider the action being taken by the respective Committees to address Audit Scotland's National Reports and whether this provides sufficient assurance that appropriate action has been taken to address the report findings.

Designation: Head of Audit & Risk Management

Date: 9th June 2015

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Background Papers: