

How Good Is Our Council? 2014

Foreword and Introduction

Welcome to our 2014 summary self-evaluation report.

Aberdeenshire Council is committed to becoming the best council, delivering high performing, quality services that meet the needs of service users and communities. As a result we are driven by an approach of continuous improvement to transform service delivery. I am therefore very pleased to introduce you to a summary of the 2014 council self-evaluation using 'How Good Is Our Council?'

'How Good Is Our Council?' has been adopted as the council's approach to self-assessment and evaluation and promoting performance improvement. It provides us with a framework with which the council is able to evidence outcomes and impact, identifying strengths and opportunities for development which in turn enables learning and improvement to take place. A comprehensive and rigorous approach to self-evaluation can significantly reduce workload and pressure during any external scrutiny process but more importantly it can lead to well designed, focussed improvement activity managed through the service planning process. 'How Good Is Our Council?' supports our improvement journey and ensures we are self-aware and ready for audits and inspection.

Our self-evaluation focuses on six high level questions:

- 1. What key outcomes have we achieved?**
- 2. How well do we meet the needs of our stakeholders?**
- 3. How good is our delivery of key processes?**
- 4. How good is our management?**
- 5. How good is our leadership?**
- 6. What is our capacity to improve?**

Each question is supported by a range of quality indicators which enable specific areas of the council to be evaluated by considering a range of evidence such as performance information, plans, policies, strategies and guidance as well as the views of service users, employees and communities. Based on the evidence, a judgement is made on the performance of the council using the scale:

Excellent (6)	Outstanding, sector leading
Very good (5)	Major strengths
Good (4)	Important strengths with areas for improvement
Satisfactory (3)	Strengths just outweigh weaknesses
Weak (2)	Important weaknesses
Unsatisfactory (1)	Major weaknesses

Colin Mackenzie
Chief Executive

Context

The council covers the fourth largest geographic area and has the sixth largest population in Scotland. The population has seen significant growth over recent years and is predicted to increase by 22% by 2033 to 295,350. The biggest increases will be for those aged over 75 and by 2023 the population aged 75 or older will have increased by 75% to 30,165.

Aberdeenshire has low levels of deprivation, representing 0.4% of the top 20 most deprived areas in Scotland. It also has the second lowest crime rate and the lowest percentage of children receiving free school meals in Scotland.

Over 90% of school leavers in Aberdeenshire move into positive destinations (further education, employment or training) with attainment for pupils in S4, S5 and S6 consistently above the Scottish average.

We have one of the lowest staffing rates per population in Scotland with approximately 36.7 full time equivalent staff per 1,000 of Aberdeenshire residents.

The revenue budget is used to pay for the daily running of services including staffing costs. The total net revenue budget for 2013-14 was approved as £512million. The budget was developed to target resources towards our priorities:

Caring for Communities	31%
Lifelong Learning	46%
Strong & Sustainable Communities	11%
Public Service Excellence	12%

60% of the budget is met from the Revenue Support Grant (from Central Government), 18% of the budget is funded through Business Rates and the remainder from Council Tax.

The capital budget covers spending on fixed assets such as roads, bridges, and street lighting, new builds such as schools, swimming pools and care homes, as well as burial grounds, landfill and waste recycling centres, harbours, council buildings and vehicles. It also covers essential repairs that might increase the market value of the asset or lengthen its useful life. The budget supports the Capital Plan which is a rolling programme of work reflecting our priorities, area needs and capital funding available to spend on fixed assets. From now until 2027, an average of over £110million of projects per annum will be delivered.

Executive Summary

This section of the report provides a summary of Aberdeenshire Council's key strengths and priority areas for improvement.

As a result of this self-evaluation, we know that:

- Generally service users, residents and communities are satisfied with services provided by the council. A range of engagement takes place to involve residents and communities in the development of services but further work is required to ensure feedback is used to identify areas for improvement.
- Positive progress is being made in supporting creativity and innovation in the wider community. In recent months there has been a focus on creative placemaking and its impact will need to be assessed longer term.
- An improvement culture, and an acceptance of change as the norm, is being embedded and services are beginning to look towards those organisations that are 'best in class' to deliver performance improvements however more could be done to support managers with this.
- The majority of employees understand their role and how it fits with the wider strategic direction of the council.
- Senior leaders across the council continue to demonstrate a shared vision and strategic direction for the council with positive working relationships between senior officers and senior elected members.
- Trends over time suggest the council is making steady improvement. Around half of all statutory and local indicators reported to Audit Scotland demonstrate improvement compared to previous years.

These areas are supported with external scrutiny by the Local Area Network, the Council's external auditors and Audit Scotland.

Our self-evaluation has also identified areas for improvement. Some of these are identified below. These areas for improvement will be progressed and monitored through Aberdeenshire Performs. An update on progress with the areas of improvement previously identified is available at Appendix 1.

Improvement Actions 2014/15

- 1) Ensure use is made of comparable/benchmark data available through the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (and other service specific benchmarking clubs) and supported by the benchmarking framework and manager's training.
- 2) Identify how feedback given by residents through the Reputation Tracker or the complaints process, particularly where people are not satisfied, can be prioritised and used to inform improvement activity both at service delivery level and cross council/partners.
- 3) Put in place mechanisms for identifying the impact of placemaking approaches.
- 4) Ensure officers understand the importance of consulting with those who have protected characteristics and accessible guidance is available to support this.
- 5) Consider why a minority of employees continue to believe senior managers do not engage effectively and are not accessible.
- 6) Identify how information sharing between services and partner agencies can be facilitated using technology and core business systems.

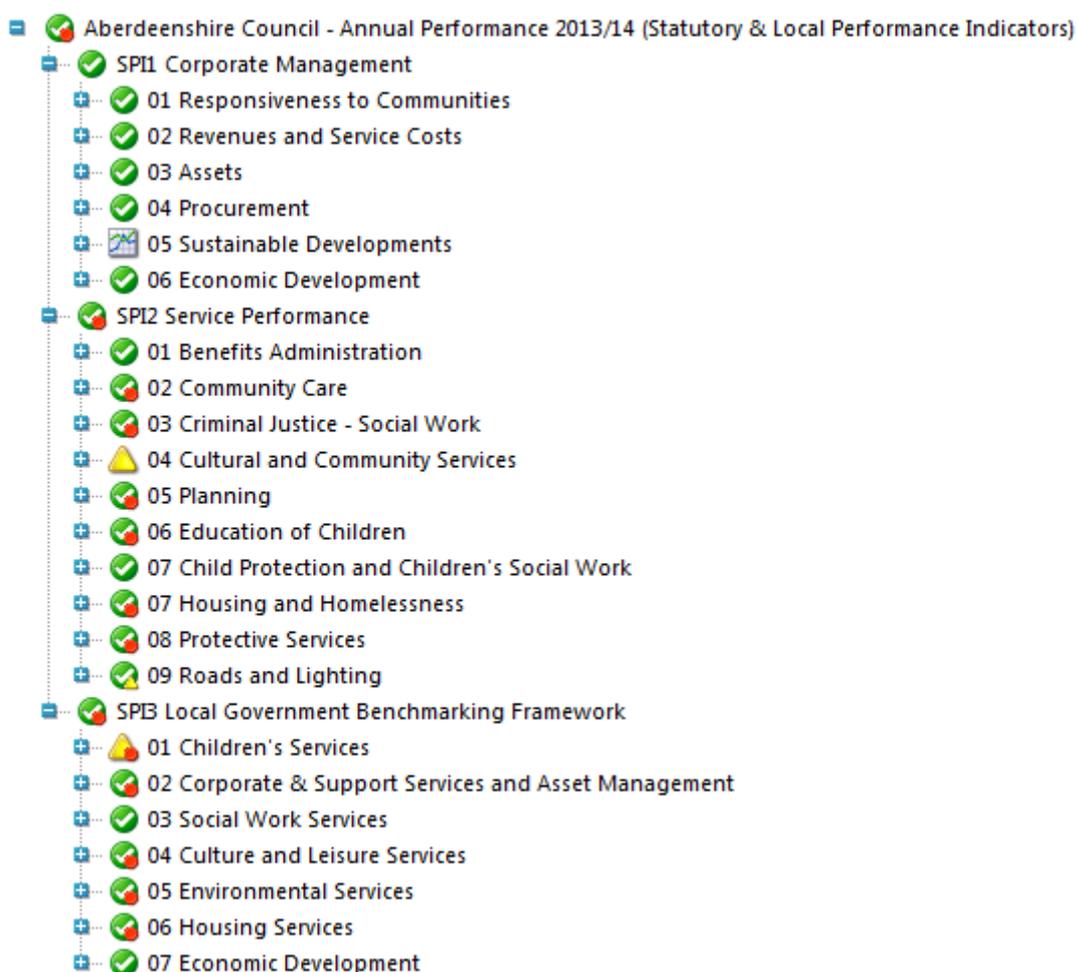
1 What Key Outcomes Have We Achieved?

This question focuses on the overall performance of the council in relation to its aims and objectives, and the extent to which it achieves continuous improvement in performance. This helps the council to evaluate its success in delivering measurable outcomes as specified in legislation, the Single Outcome Agreement and the Council Plan.

Overall the performance of the council in relation to our aims and objectives, the extent to which we achieve continuous improvement and our adherence to and delivery of statutory duties is **GOOD**.

How do we know?

Trends over time suggest the council is making steady improvement. Half of all statutory and local indicators reported to Audit Scotland for 2013/14 demonstrate improvement compared to previous years.



Key:	
	At least 50% of measures in this outcome are significantly below target (red)
	At least 25% of measures in this outcome are slightly below target (amber)
	The majority of performance measures are on target

Comparative data with other councils is currently available up to 2012/13. In relation to indicators that form part of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework, the council is in the top quartile for 20% of all indicators which is a decrease compared to the previous year. 60% of indicators are in the middle quartiles. The council performs better than the national Scottish average in more than half of all measures. The majority of measures also demonstrate long term improvements in performance since 2010/11, the first comparable year of data for the framework. However despite showing improvements, almost a quarter of measures are in a lower quartile than previously suggesting other councils are improving at a greater rate.

All Service Plans identify a range of measures and actions supporting the key objectives and priorities for the service. The majority of measures were on target (green) and just under half of the comparable measures demonstrate improvement when compared to previous years. The majority of key projects and actions supporting the plans were completed or progressing within timescale.

The Citizen's Panel indicates increased satisfaction with the council as a provider of local services. However the council does have the lowest satisfaction ratings of the main public sector organisations within Aberdeenshire (Police Scotland, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, NHS Grampian).

Quality of services as a whole is good. Resident satisfaction with the council in relation to service provision, value for money, efficiency and reputation has improved significantly over the 12 months to March 2013 based on the Reputation Tracker. Over 90% of the 150 residents sampled each month respond positively to statements on the key areas. This is supported by external scrutiny indicating that council services are generally performing well and demonstrating improvement.

“Education continues to perform well. Whilst findings from inspections reveal a positive and improving picture overall, scope for improvement is also evident.

Registered care services provided by the council continue to demonstrate strong performance - most services continuing to receive 'good' or 'very good' grades in relation to the four quality themes.

Improvement is also apparent in attendances at pools, indoor sports and leisure facilities and performance in relation to roads is also relatively positive - both in terms of condition and cost.”

(Assurance & Improvement Plan 2014-2017)

2 How Well Do We Meet The Needs of Our Stakeholders?

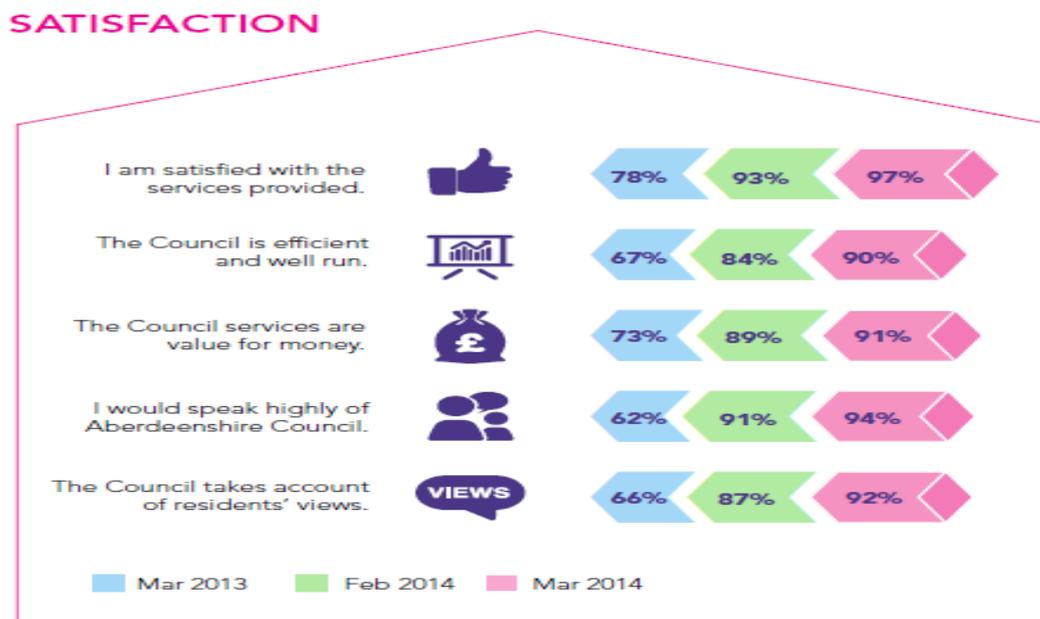
This question considers the impact of the services provided by the council on important groups of stakeholders, including council staff. It considers issues such as processes for communicating with and involving stakeholders, and impact on the local economy.

Overall we are making **GOOD** progress meeting the needs of our stakeholders

How Do We Know?

Service Users and Residents:

Evidence demonstrates service users and residents are largely satisfied with the quality of services provided, although levels of satisfaction do vary. Satisfaction levels are generally supported by external scrutiny findings (e.g. Care Inspectorate, Education Scotland). However, based on the biennial Scottish Household Survey, Aberdeenshire residents do appear to be less satisfied than residents living in other council areas for some aspects of service delivery.



The council is able to demonstrate that it actively engages and involves residents in the development of services. There is a programme of community engagement events across Aberdeenshire including a specific youth event as well as focused engagement on specific service delivery areas which has included school term dates, school zoning, the Registrars Service, day services for adults with disabilities, public transport needs, flood protection and the opening hours of leisure facilities. Services such as Communities also work on an individual basis with service users to develop services to reduce unmet need and enable self-directed support. Services use surveys, and the Citizen's Panel, as a way of reaching a range of individuals and groups.

The council must comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty to ensure services users are treated equally and fairly and since the Equalities Mainstreaming Report and Equality Outcomes were approved in April 2013, considerable work has been taken forward towards the integration of equalities into the Council's structure. The positive

progress being made by the council was highlighted during the 2014 Shared Risk Assessment.

Our Staff:

Our staff generally feel that they are supporting the aims of the council and communities through their role and that they work effectively both inter- and cross service with examples including the workspace initiative, improvement events and integrated children and adults' service delivery. Our Area Management Teams reflect a cross service approach to considering council wide issues and the impact at local area level (last evaluated 2012, next evaluation due 2015).

The Wider Community:

The council has been recognised externally for good practice in relation to community engagement. However there continue to be challenges in ensuring those who wish to participate and engage with the council have the opportunity to do so.

Promoting social justice continues to be a priority for the council and we are committed to addressing the barriers to social inclusion and to achieving social justice for our communities. We have taken actions to improve social housing, encourage the development of more affordable housing, and tackle issues such as homelessness and fuel poverty. There are a range of projects on-going to improve health and community care as well as a range of economic and environmental regeneration projects particularly in Fraserburgh, Banff and Macduff.

We have a role in supporting social and economic development and the economic indicators that are available for Aberdeenshire show that the area is performing better than most areas in Scotland. In particular, our Economic Development Service has a key role in supporting the local economy e.g. through the Support to Aberdeenshire Business Scheme (SAB), through the provision of advice and information to businesses and through the support to communities provided by Community Economic Development. Area Initiative Budgets, distributed via Area Committees also provide support to local communities and there is evidence to show the value of additional funds levered by communities where they have been successful in gaining even small sums of money through LEADER and the Area Initiative Budgets.

Through active participation in Professional bodies and networks, calls for evidence and building positive relationships with statutory bodies, the council is increasingly able to influence policy and practice at Scottish, UK and European levels.

3 How Good Is Our Delivery of Key Processes?

This question focuses on the delivery of services by the council and evaluates the quality and effectiveness of processes for delivering and improving services. These include the processes for developing, managing and improving partnerships with service users and other stakeholders. It also covers inclusion, equality and fairness.

The quality of processes for delivering services is generally **GOOD**. We have in place processes for ensuring equality and improvements to services are driven by internal and external scrutiny.

How do we know?

The evaluation in 2014 focused specifically on the area of 'Improving the quality of services to stakeholders'.

Throughout the council there is a strong commitment to quality assurance and improvement. External scrutiny confirmed that the council has a good awareness of where it needs to improve and supports a culture of continuous improvement amongst staff. It also found that the council's own self-assessment and evaluation was a fair evaluation of its strengths and showed good awareness of the areas for improvement. The council's approach to self-assessment and evaluation forms part of the council's performance improvement framework 'Aberdeenshire Performs'. Through Aberdeenshire Performs, the council has a clear cycle for planning and improvement and ensuring that improvement is linked to the priorities identified through planning with the importance of reporting and monitoring supporting improvement. An Improvement Strategy and framework is in place to support managers and officers embed improvement into their roles. Whilst benchmarking has previously been an area that required further scrutiny by Audit Scotland, a recent Scrutiny & audit investigation confirmed that benchmarking is being done within all services however more could be done to learn from others that are 'best in class'.

“Being part of a committed team trying to improve the service we bring to our customers or clients.”

(Comment from employee when asked to identify a good thing about working for the council, Employee Survey March 2014)

Outcomes for service users, residents and communities are evaluated internally and externally. Generally service outcomes are positive and this is reflected in the most recent AIP and feedback through the Reputation Tracker, Citizen's Panel and service's own feedback mechanisms. Feedback and stakeholder views (e.g. employee surveys) are incorporated into self-assessment and evaluation however it is not consistently evident that improvements made as a result of feedback are fed back to stakeholders.

The Scrutiny and Audit committee challenges the performance of service delivery and governance and accountability and has the remit for monitoring internal and external scrutiny. Through the use of reports, workshops and investigations the committee considers performance and recommends improvements. The committee receives

regular updates on the outcomes of internal audits and the annual audit undertaken by the council's external auditors

There are a range of mechanisms in place to report performance to stakeholders using both electronic and non-electronic means. For example, all services regularly report performance to area and policy committees, including monitoring of service plans and performance in relation to other key plans and strategies (e.g. educational attainment). The quarterly service plan monitoring reports are published on the council's website. It is acknowledged that there are very few 'hits' on the performance webpages. Quarterly performance reports are available in hard copy at all locations that hold printed copies of committee papers. Stakeholder feedback is published monthly via the Reputation Tracker online. Citizen Panel survey results are also published along with the outcome of specific consultations.

92% of residents believe the council takes account of residents' views
(Reputation Tracker March 2014)

4 How Good Is Our Management?

This key question focuses on the management activities necessary to ensure effective service delivery and deliver best value. These activities include processes for developing and updating policies, for involving stakeholders, for operational planning, for managing staff, finance and resources and for developing productive partnerships. Strengths and weaknesses in these areas will affect the quality of services delivered, impact on stakeholders, and our performance in achieving key outcomes.

Overall our management is **GOOD**. Our management activities ensure effective service delivery and deliver best value. These activities include processes for developing and updating policies, for involving stakeholders, for operational planning, for managing staff, finance and resources and for developing productive partnerships.

The evaluation focused on the council's approach to 'Participation of service users and other stakeholders, deployment (of staff) and team work and information management'.

How do we know?

The council builds on the statutory requirements for involving service users and other stakeholders in the design of policies and services. Large scale public consultations using a mix of approaches such as open meetings, 121 'surgeries', weekly press, social media, open and targeted surveys online, by post and by phone are used for issues such as the Local Development Plan, redesigning day services for adults with disabilities, flood prevention, regeneration of town centres and budget strategy. A number of functions are particularly good at involving stakeholders in the development and design of policies and services. For example, Community Learning & Development have a focus on engagement locally with adults and young people, Housing have a good tenant structure that is used to determine priorities for the development and direction of the service and use a 'mystery shopper' approach, and Social Work routinely involve service users, carers and families in the design of services.

Appropriate deployment of staff and a positive approach to team working continues to be the standard across the council. Employees generally feel they work well within and across teams, although they may not always be clear on their responsibilities when working cross service/agency. The majority of employees understand their role and how it fits with the wider strategic direction of the council and the strategic planning framework does support employees but not consistently. A comprehensive communications toolkit enables communication across the council on both wider and more focused topics although a minority of staff still feel they are not able to hear or read about council news or take part in team meetings. A minority of staff also believe the council does not take account of their views when making decisions that affect them.

*96% of employees understand the needs and priorities of their customers
(Employee survey, March 2014)*

The council has a wide range of information systems and core business systems exist to support all services. Some of the larger systems have dedicated teams for support and are able to provide advice and training for day-to-day use and most systems have the ability to provide a range of data to assist managers with the day-to-day

management of service delivery, as well as assisting with strategy and development planning and improvement. The ability to share information across services is closely linked with the integration of systems and there is some evidence of improvements in this area. Generally however information sharing continues to be based on more 'traditional' approaches such as joint meetings, co-location, etc. and good practice examples have been identified in relation to the GIRFEC agenda, the Community Safety Hub and the Police and Fire Services. It is evident that technology and systems will support rather than replace the existing strong working relationships but there are concerns about how systems can effectively support large scale integration of services such as health and social care integration. The ICT Service underwent a major review in 2011 and a range of recommendations were made, including the establishment of a revised governance structure, a new approach to information management, a structural review and a review of all ICT contracts. The recommendations were approved by Policy & Resources Committee in November 2011 and many actions arising are ongoing or completed. There continues to be some scrutiny from the council's Local Area Network of external scrutiny bodies in this area to ensure outstanding actions are completed.

5 How Good Is Our Leadership?

This question considers the strategic leadership and direction of the council in delivering services. It considers the corporate purpose and the expression and delivery of the vision and council priorities through strategic planning with partner agencies and the community. It considers the quality of leadership at the strategic level and examines the involvement of elected members in leading the Council.

The quality of strategic leadership and the overall direction of services are GOOD .

How Do We Know?

The 'council is developing a strong senior management team that is improving strategic leadership. Senior managers have an inclusive and visible management style and promote good communication in the workplace.'
(Shared Risk Assessment 2014)

Senior leaders across the council continue to demonstrate a shared vision and strategic direction for the council with positive working relationships between senior officers and senior elected members. The council has recently developed a vision to 2050 to support the existing strategic planning framework that is underpinned by the Community Planning Partnership 10 year Single Outcome Agreement.

More emphasis is now being placed on prevention and working alongside communities to meet priority outcomes. The Visioning 2050 document places more emphasis on working with communities and the resilience that communities need to develop rather than relying on public sector agencies to deliver. Place and place-making is an approach the Community Planning Partnership and the council are developing through the Early Years Collaborative and the Total Place pilot in Fraserburgh however it is far too early to determine the impact or success of these approaches.

A wide range of communication methods are used to inform, engage and consult with staff including the use of blogs, webinars, newsletters, team meetings and sessions with senior officers however a small minority of staff continue to feel that senior managers are not accessible or do not engage effectively.

A revised approach to managing large scale transformational projects is helping to ensure resources are deployed effectively and the management of risk is considered regularly by senior officers although risks are not necessarily aligned to the council's priority outcomes. In response to the savings required over the four year period 2015/16 - 2018/19 and an increasing demand pressure, the council is adopting a policy led budgeting approach for 2015 and beyond built on a framework of the four core outcomes and 20 associated priorities in the council plan.

6 What Is Our Capacity to Improve?

To answer this question, a forward looking judgment is made based on the evidence and evaluation of the preceding five questions. When answering this question, the council must review past practice in leadership, planning and improvement whilst taking account of contextual issues such as changes in structure, retirement/resignation of senior staff, and financial challenges. Consideration is also given to the council's ability to respond rapidly to change, and to be creative and innovative in the pursuit of excellence.

"The council is confident that the evidence and evaluation to date indicates that overall:

Progress continues to be made in achieving positive outcomes for service users, residents and communities. Stakeholders are consulted and involved with the design and improvement to services and satisfaction with the council remains consistently high.

Senior leaders provide clear direction and a shared vision for the council and priorities for the council reflect national and locally agreed outcomes. There are robust policies and strategies to direct service delivery and effective systems in place to support managers in their role. Employees generally understand what they do and how they contribute to delivering the strategic outcomes for residents and communities. There continues to be a commitment to improving the quality of services and staff, service users and other stakeholders are involved in the identification and prioritising of improvement activity to deliver outcomes.

The council recognises that further improvements can be made and, having demonstrated a capacity and capability to deliver improvements, is confident it will continue to improve."

Areas for Improvement

A number of areas for improvement have previously been identified as a result of self-assessment and evaluation. An update on the progress of these is provided below.

We said we would:	We have:
<p>Explore methods that can be used to provide meaningful feedback to stakeholders, beyond formal reports to committee. We need to make it clear that we are listening to our customers and communicate to them what our areas for improvement are and why we are dedicating resources to them.</p>	<p>Made increasing use of social media and the council's website to keep residents and communities informed and updated. As part of a wide consultation on community facilities in Banff and Macduff, the council arranged several consultation sessions, culminating in a final community meeting to confirm the final proposals and explain how feedback had influenced the proposals. Newsletters and updates were emailed to any resident or community group that asked to be kept updated and regular updates were posted on the council's website. The approach has been independently reviewed as good practice.</p>
<p>A council-wide clear and simple policy framework needs to be developed to standardise processes and scheduling for policy reviews. The framework should also address issues like who has responsibility for reviewing policies and establish standards to ensure policies are properly understood and consistently applied. Clarity should also be provided of the difference between policies and procedures. Any framework should reflect national, partnership, corporate, service and area priorities as far as possible.</p>	<p>Developed a policy framework that will be presented to Aberdeenshire Council in November 2014 for approval. The policy framework provides a clear process for developing and reviewing policies and a governance structure. The framework reflects the priority outcomes of the Council Plan 2013-2017 and will include policy statements aligned to the outcomes.</p>
<p>All services must undertake Equality Impact Assessments as per guidance and ensure the results are made available publicly. Monitoring of EIAs and associated action plans should be undertaken by the Corporate Equalities Group or delegated to service groups.</p>	<p>Supported services to undertake Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) on all aspects of the 2013/14 budget. Prepared revised guidance to support services embed the process of EIAs into their day to day planning and policy development. EIAs are published on the council's website. Approaches for monitoring EIAs and aligned action plans are being considered and options will be presented to the Corporate Equalities Group by March 2015.</p>
<p>Improve financial information contained within service and business plans to enable clearer links between budgets and the priority outcomes identified by the service.</p>	<p>Incorporated financial information into Service and Business Plans. Further work is required to enable explicit links between budgets and the council's priority outcomes identified in the Council Plan 2013-2017. This is being progressed as</p>

	part of the budget strategy developing the budget for 2015/16 onwards.
Improve access to e-forms and i-Procurement to further support officers to manage their financial responsibilities appropriately and reduce errors.	Provided additional training and guidance to all officers with financial responsibilities to help them understand financial regulations and agreed processes for procurement, raising purchase orders and payment of invoices.
Development of a council wide preferred programme management approach for change projects to minimise impact on teams of large scale transformation projects.	Developed 'Aberdeenshire Projects' which is a project management approach for small, medium and large scale projects. Once approved, all projects will have consistent project plans, business case and benefit realisation monitoring as a minimum. The approach includes guidance to help managers identify project scale and required documentation and governance. A Business Transformation Board oversees all large scale projects and considers impact and interdependencies as well as monitoring benefit realisation. Ongoing monitoring of this area of improvement will undertaken.

Key Evidence Portal

The Key Evidence Portal helps you to find a range of background information which supports the results of our self-assessment and evaluation process. The hyperlinks below take you straight to the document or the relevant webpage.

Performance Information:

- [Public Performance Reports](#)
- [Statutory and Local Indicators](#)
- [Service Plan Performance Monitoring](#)
- [Reputation Tracker](#)
- [Citizens' Panel](#)

External Scrutiny:

- [Audit Scotland Assurance and Improvement Plan](#)
- [Annual Audit Report](#)
- [Targeted Best Value audit work 2012/13](#)
- [Education Scotland](#)
- [Scottish Housing Regulator](#)
- [Care Inspectorate](#)

Key Plans and Strategies:

- [Community Plan 2011-2015](#)
- [Single Outcome Agreement](#)
- [Council Plan 2013-2017](#)
- [Service Plans](#)
- [Corporate Asset Management Plan](#)
- [Local Community Plans](#)
- [workSPACE](#)
- [Transport Strategies](#)
- [Housing and Social Work](#)
- [Economic Development](#)
- [Education, Learning & Leisure](#)
- [Revenue and Capital Budgets](#)
- [Risk Management](#)

Other:

- [Equalities](#)
- [Consultation](#)
- [Committee Reports](#)