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# HOW GOOD IS OUR COUNCIL? 2015

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Self-assessment using the quality framework *How good  
is our council?*

Report

*10th September 2015*

# Contents

- *Background – How good is our council? framework*
- *Aberdeenshire context in 2015*
- *Approach adopted*
- *Summary of findings*

## Quality indicator **1.1 Improvements in Performance**

- *What did we find?*
- *What do we want to do next?*

## Quality indicator **3.1 Impact on staff**

- *What did we find?*
- *What do we want to do next?*

## Quality indicator **4.1 Impact on the local community**

- *What did we find?*
- *What do we want to do next?*

## Quality indicator **6.1 Policy Review and development**

- *What did we find?*
- *What do we want to do next?*

## Quality indicator **9.2 Leadership and direction**

- *What did we find?*
- *What do we want to do next?*

## Next steps

- *Appendix 1 – overview of evaluation levels*
- *Appendix 2 – links to evidence used*

- *Background – How good is our council? framework*

In July 2011 the **How good is our council?** framework for quality was endorsed as the Council's approach to self-assessment and evaluation. A growing number of local authorities use this model which is rooted in the European Framework for Quality Management. The first Council wide evaluation in Aberdeenshire was undertaken in early 2012 and one has been completed annually ever since. The process is managed through the corporate policy, performance and improvement team.

**How good is our council?** links to an overarching framework, allows us to focus in on particular areas of operation, ensures our reflection is evidence based and uses a six point scale to assist in self-evaluation.

Self-evaluation is a term used to cover the way in which individuals, groups, organisations and partnerships, explore their progress, development and practice to identify what has improved and what still needs to improve. It is a way of using evidence to assess achievements, success and areas that require action. It is never an end in itself but a means to inform action which will lead to increasingly positive impacts on the people and communities we work with. Accurate self-assessment of performance also underpins external scrutiny.

- *Aberdeenshire context in 2015*

At the time of the **How good is our council?** exercise in 2015 a number of significant changes had recently taken place. A new Chief Executive Officer joined the council in February. The Aberdeenshire Council Alliance grouping of elected members was replaced with The Partnership grouping. A number of structural staffing reviews were and still are taking place. Almost all participants in the focus groups identified these factors as contributing to the context in which we were evaluating.

- *Approach adopted*

For the 2015 assessment using **How good is our council?** a different approach was taken. The view was taken that strengthening self-evaluation practice across all levels of operation would build our capacity for improvement.

Expertise from within the wider council staff was sought. In particular the skills and knowledge of staff in Education and Children's Services who are Associate Assessors with Education Scotland were harnessed. One of the Associate Assessors was seconded in to the corporate policy and improvement team to design and deliver a programme of self-evaluation involving a range of council managers. Focus groups were held across Aberdeenshire reaching almost 50 managers with a range of roles within all key Services.

We first looked at what we already know about how we are doing from information on performance over the period 2014/15. We then considered where there would be most benefit in looking further in order to influence improvement. As a result the work done was concentrated on the following areas:

- Impact on staff
- Impact on the local community
- Policy review and development
- Leadership and direction

A detailed picture of the findings is laid out below in sequence.

### *Summary of findings*

The 2015 self-evaluation exercise has identified the following key strengths and areas for improvement. In addition, the report captures a number of other aspects where the council does well, and some where improvement could be further achieved. The learning from the overall approach will inform future evaluation practice across the council.

#### **Key strengths**

- Highly motivated staff providing quality services in line with national priorities
- Staff working positively in collaboration in emergencies
- Many examples of the structures of “Team” underpinning positive local outcomes
- A wide range of mechanisms for engaging local people and groups in the work of the council and many examples of community run services supported to deliver in localities
- Many examples of the council playing a positive partnership role with other agencies to deliver successful outcomes
- Stakeholder groups routinely play a part in the development of major Capital Programmes
- Clear protocols and mechanisms exist for strategic management of the business of the council – underpinning the work of the council in times of change

#### **Main areas for improvement**

- Consider ways in which the views of staff can be more effectively gathered in terms of impact of the Council on them
- Strengthen mechanisms for community engagement to ensure inclusive practice and consider ways of increasing the volume of engagement overall
- Ensure corporate policies are routinely updated in line with a clear framework underpinning the “One Council” message
- Consider greater staff involvement in setting council vision, values and aims
- Improve communication on achievement and success – both strategically, locally and across services
- Clarify better the “golden thread” of connection for staff so that priorities are clear both strategically and at point of service delivery

## Quality indicator 1.1 Improvements in Performance

This indicator is concerned with the evaluation of outcomes from services delivered to those who use them, particularly the extent to which improvements in outcomes have been achieved over time.

It evaluates continuous and sustainable improvement against local and national objectives such as those contained in the Community, Council and Service Plans. Examples of performance data and measures might include measureable outcomes from the Council's strategic and operational plans.

- *What did we find?*

The Council is making **good** progress in improving performance overall. Strengths include high customer satisfaction, examples of positive scrutiny and performance targets successfully reached. The Council Plan is developed to reflect Scottish Government strategic objectives and national outcomes through the Single Outcome Agreement. The Council Plan is rigorously monitored using embedded performance indicators, a scorecard system and an effective visual traffic light system. At March 2015 performance against local objectives was positive with 70% of measures on track. Overall, 87% of actions supporting 2014-17 service plans have been completed and the remainder are on track to finish within timescale. The majority of reported data demonstrates long term improving trends.

Services are contributing positively to the delivery of the council's aims, objectives and targets. Recent resident satisfaction data shows 94% of residents are satisfied with services provided. Whilst initially lower satisfaction reported with roads, this has increased throughout the year by 12%. The most recent employee survey (health at work) highlighted broadly positive views of health in the workplace however issues for further consideration include workload management, absence management including those that are stress related and opportunities to feedback to management. The most recent Leadership, Management and Communication survey also captured broadly positive feedback but with two main areas for further investigation – managing poor performance and employee engagement.

Sustaining and improving quality is an emerging strengthening picture. For indicators reported as part of the Local Government Benchmarking Framework, 27 show year on year improvement which is an increase on last year and 36 show long term improvement. When compared to other authorities however improvement is not consistent. The council is in the top quartile of all 32 authorities for 8 measures, bottom quartile for 16 and sits in the middle quartile for the remaining majority. Environmental indicators are the best performing with 5 ranked in the top 8 of all councils.

The council provides statutory services effectively. The most recent external audit confirmed that our annual financial statements are in line with the requirements of the financial code. Five uncorrected misstatements were highlighted and two

significant disclosure deficiencies were identified and corrected. The council's own Internal Audit has raised a number of graded recommendations, particularly around the non – compliance with financial regulations. Improvement action is underway in this regard.

The council annual Shared Risk Assessment undertaken by the Local Area Network of scrutiny bodies (LAN) consistently indicates no areas of risk. For 2015/16 the LAN has identified a small number of areas that will form part of continued oversight and monitoring. These are leadership and management, future years funding gaps, health and social care, housing and homelessness and education. External scrutiny in the period has provided constructive improvement recommendations including in services for older people and school inspections and a joint inspection report of children's services is expected to be published shortly.

- *What do we want to do next?*

1. Consider further the council's impact on communities through benchmarking to other local authorities
2. Explore ways of improving the results and the volume of engagement in Council staff surveys
3. Harness leadership and direction further to explore areas identified during the shared risk assessment
4. Consider further the current approach to strategic policy and planning, exploring areas likely to be identified in findings of joint children's inspection and in the inspection of services for older people

### **Quality indicator 3.1 Impact on staff**

This quality indicator relates to the impact of the Council on staff, as well as their views of the quality of service delivery within the Council.

This exercise particularly looked at theme 2 of the indicator which deals with the views of staff as reported in responses to questionnaires, surveys, focus groups and in unsolicited comments. For this self-evaluation we identified the following aspects to focus on:

- Peer and line management relationships, including team working
- Communication and opportunities to express their views and to shape and improve services

- *What did we find?*

The impact on staff within the council is **good** overall. Staffing structures and job descriptions support appropriate deployment of staff across services. The routinely conducted staff satisfaction survey is a major source of information. The picture is mixed from the findings however and it is unclear if the information is always used

well by managers to inform improvement. Workforce management systems are in place such as Employee Annual Review, exit interviews, absence management recording and training uptake but these are impacting to varying degrees across services. The council in house training programme, ALDO delivers a wide range of opportunities for staff. All services have mechanisms for specialist Continuing Professional Development. The implementation of flexible working arrangements have benefitted many staff and are seen as a valuable aspect of working for this council by many employees. Success in CoSLA Awards and celebrations such as Inspiring Aberdeenshire, indicate a positive picture of the quality and effectiveness of the work delivered by council staff.

Performance data, where understood and identified with, underpins staff morale. The Aberdeenshire picture is a sustaining and improving one where services are concerned but not all staff or managers relate to this or use the available information for improvement purposes in this regard. There are many anecdotal examples of staff at various levels contributing time to working groups across all services which is a strength. The lack of coherent data on this, however, makes it difficult to use this confidently as an indicator of motivation. Where participation of managers in national groups exist there is a good flow of information both in and out of the organisation.

One to one support and supervision time is used constructively in services within Communities. Team structures are used effectively at operational level across all services and are valued by staff. In the Roads Service, teams now exist in all areas and the benefits of this mechanism are beginning to be felt. Information is almost always shared well through the avenue of “operational team”. Line management structures secure reporting relationships at all levels.

Collaboration with other partner agencies is a strength in this authority and results in positive outcomes for local communities – in for example the 2015 Ballater Station Fire incident. Working with partners extends the sense of team for many staff. Some services are using *How good is our team?* as a tool to monitor effectiveness – particular examples exist in Social Work and Housing services within Communities.

The Employee Assistance Programme is accessed without barriers and is seen as an effective support service. The centralised travel team provide very good and efficient support to staff and similarly Legal and Governance have been highlighted for their role. Some support services, for example ICT, use customer feedback to inform improvement but there is not a coherent pattern for this across the council. In some cases the new recruitment system is seen as cumbersome and a poor use of manager time. Efficiencies in new systems are not always fully understood.

Some operational teams have created their own vision statements, aims and values. It is not clear if these all link to the over-arching vision for the council. This would merit a further look. The mechanism of the Leadership Forum and related communication reinforces key messages on vision and operation for cascading through staff teams, however, managers report a greater identification from staff with the service vision than the corporate one. Both require to be clear.

Where council service reviews have taken place staff are often but not always well engaged in purpose and common agenda although there are some examples of staff contributions to the process achieving change. Devolved educational management processes are described by some managers as utilising skills and contributing to corporate ownership. The communication of change is not always clear, efficient and effective. Where benchmarking is used it successfully underpins approaches to improvement, however, this is not common practice at all levels of management.

- *What do we want to do next?*

1. Strengthen the engagement of staff in the council staff satisfaction survey process to increase participation and improvement
2. Improve the effectiveness of the Employee Annual Review process in order to inform improvement
3. Explore how well managers at all levels use available data - eg staff sickness records, EAR, uptake of CPD – to drive improvement
4. Consider ways of capturing a picture of the positive commitment of staff to working groups – both local and national
5. Consider ways of strengthening communication between staff at all levels within and across Services
6. Examine more closely whether feedback from staff in central support services is informing improvement

### **Quality indicator 4.1 Impact on the local community**

This quality indicator relates to the impact of the Council on individuals, groups and organisations in the community, focussing in particular on their current experience. It deals with the views of members of the community as reported in responses to questionnaires, surveys, focus groups, and in unsolicited comments. For this self-evaluation we identified the following aspects to focus on:

The extent to which members of the community report that the council:

- engages with and supports organisations in the community
- contributes to supporting community influence and representation
- understands the needs and aspirations of communities

- *What did we find?*

Aberdeenshire council works very well with its communities creating **good** and at times **very good** impact. Feedback from participants in resident groups, community planning groups and with community partners delivering services gives a confident and positive picture. In addition external reports such as those from Education Scotland on the strength of communities through learning and development consistently identify good or very good outcomes. The Area structure in



Aberdeenshire allows elected members to work through both the local and strategic structures in their representative role.

Engagement methods are appropriately used to good effect. All capital build projects involve stakeholder groups as routine practice. The Ellon new build community campus has been identified as best practice for the engagement element. Staff roles are used to positive effect to engage harder to reach residents although this could be strengthened. Partnership is used well to the benefit of Aberdeenshire communities as can be seen from the impact of bodies such as the Marr Area Partnership. Focus groups and ward forums have a very local reach and there is evidence of the influence of participants in the work of the council.

The web site for Community Planning in Aberdeenshire is regularly updated with both local and strategic information keeping the public up to date with progress. Aberdeenshire Council is a subscriber to the National Standards for Engagement which are used to keep practice focussed effectively. These are being updated and attention needs to be paid to this development. Community Planning Groups provide a strong mechanism for the involvement of local representatives who work with agencies, including the council, to improve their communities. Their responsibilities include planning and evaluation together with others. There would be benefits in including schools in these groups. Ways of identifying needs in communities by partners could be clearer leading to more precision in targeting resources.

Staff in the Communities Service work with tenants groups to strengthen their involvement in affairs that concern them. Some of these groups have a scrutiny role for property alongside council officers and they are well supported to carry this out. Focus groups and public meetings are routinely created to engage members of the public where change to service provision is imminent. Community Councillors benefit from ongoing council training and also one to one sessions as new inductees in order to deliver on their voluntary statutory role. Feedback is positive on these aspects of support.

Aberdeenshire Youth Council is the only one in Scotland which brings the youth voice directly to the table at the strategic Community Planning Partnership. As a result young people can channel their messages effectively. The Older People's Charter in Aberdeenshire is a unique example of older people being critically involved in shaping their own future.

Aberdeenshire council has many positive examples of working with local groups and organisations to devolve service delivery and secure them in local settings. The Stonehaven Outdoor Pool, The Westhill Men's Shed, The Mearns and Coastal Healthy Living Network, Community Kitchens, Dial a bus schemes, summer bedding plant schemes and working with Early Years partner providers are all examples of this in action. Service Level Agreements are deployed routinely with safeguarding and monitoring arrangements built in. There would be benefits in capturing success stories to share more widely in the council and in communities.

- *What do we want to do next?*

1. Strengthen mechanisms of community engagement to ensure inclusive practice and consider ways of increasing the volume of engagement overall
2. Strengthen prioritisation through partnership to target resources more effectively
3. Extend the use of social media to reach Aberdeenshire communities with council information
4. Examine the consistency of approach in passing responsibility from council to community – for example with Community Asset Transfer – recognising the requirements of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act
5. Success can be under recorded – consider greater use of simple case study methods and the highlighting of particularly successful engagement exercises
6. Inspire greater representation from young people in key groups / bodies

### **Quality indicator 6.1 Policy Review and development**

This quality indicator focuses on approaches to policy review and development. A successful, modern Council will have a systematic and well documented approach to management. This will be supported by a range of effective policies and advice that inform and impact on practice throughout Services and which in turn are linked to the wider policies of the Council. These policies provide clear strategic direction and help to ensure consistency in practice across the Council and improved outcomes for service users.

- *What did we find?*

The Council's performance in relation to policy review and development is largely **good** but with some elements of practice which were found to be **satisfactory**. A mixed picture exists at this time. The structures for policy making at a strategic level are in place with committees agreeing and setting policy in accordance with statutory and council requirements. Work overall is directed successfully in tune with national direction. However, a formal framework for policy development is not clearly identifiable for managers and staff. Work overall is directed successfully in tune with national direction but this is less by policy design than coincidence.

Human Resource policy is recognised as becoming increasingly coherent and consistently applied. The Communities Service has a legislative framework supported by a systematic policy development approach and in Infrastructure Services there are staff who report that policies do support their work. The policy framework for Local Development Planning is in place and adhered to – public engagement in relation to this is rigorously undertaken. Estates procedures are renewed on a rolling basis with different team members taking the lead strengthening management involvement in shaping services. There are also some examples of service users contributing to policy shaping – with housing tenant groups for example.

The policy arrangements in Education and Children's Services are currently being refreshed which is welcomed by staff. ICT services have effective guidance notes to support delivery but the roots of these are not clearly traced in policy. The difference

between policy and procedure should be clearer to staff responsible for their design and implementation.

The council web site does capture the links between policy and planning but it is unclear if this information is reaching all staff. The vision and values of the council are not wholly reflected in policy – they are implicit rather than explicit. Staff in the ICT service have created their own values to sit alongside the council vision but the corporate values are not fully recognised. The Leadership Forum is valued as a positive mechanism where this may be addressed.

Irregularity in implementing policy can occur across the geography of Aberdeenshire meaning the same services are not always delivered consistently. This issue should be further investigated. Arcadia – the council’s main communication network, is not easily navigated when policy search is done. This is a commonly held view.

There are good examples of partnership policy interfacing well with that of the council – the Marr Area Partnership for example and the recently established Strategic Learning Community Partnership. Policy review and evaluation is undertaken routinely in some but not all services and is not scheduled in a coherent way across services. There is a sense of responding to policy improvement need in a reactive rather than routine way. The connections between service and corporate policy are not always clear – this creates challenges for those delivering services and weakens the “One Council” approach. The capacity for improvement in this regard however is positive.

- *What do we want to do next?*

1. Ensure corporate policies are routinely updated in line with a clear framework underpinning the “One Council” message
2. Ensure policy is implemented consistently across all areas of Aberdeenshire
3. Ensure clarity of both Corporate and Service policy and the links between them and also with budget setting arrangements
4. Consider greater staff engagement in setting Council vision, values and aims
5. Involve stakeholders more routinely in the development of policy

## ***Quality indicator 9.2 Leadership and direction***

This quality indicator is fundamentally about strategic planning for future sustainability. It focuses on the mapping out of future developments which are challenging, realisable and sustainable. This indicator also relates to the success of senior managers in linking the Council’s vision to strategic deployment of resources to deliver services, secure Best Value and work towards contributing and promoting the promotion and achievement of sustainable development. Significant current and planned organisational activities will take place within a culture which supports and enables risk management.

This indicator should demonstrate effective leadership throughout the council, clarity of roles for senior elected leaders and senior officers as well as the roles and responsibilities of scrutiny functions.

- *What did we find?*

Leadership and direction is **satisfactory** with elements of **good** practice emerging. There has been considerable political change in the council recently and focus group participants were encouraged to reflect on the timescale prior to recent change for evaluative purposes.

This council is well regarded at CoSLA and the reputation tracker provides a positive picture. Best Value reports consistently report that this is a well run council. Evidence exists demonstrating The Alliance and opposition have frequently worked well together to achieve best outcomes for individuals and communities. Strong leadership from elected members is present in the Area Committees with effective chairing often provided. Developing relationships with Aberdeen City are under way and focussed on regional benefits. Mechanisms such as the Scrutiny and Audit Committee perform an effective and transparent monitoring and improvement role. Work under way with legislation on Community Asset Transfer is a good example of developing new approaches. Consistently good financial management brings budgets in effectively on target. Capital plans are well managed and fit with the vision of the council.

Generally positive relationships exist between elected members and officers of the council. Effective communication between elected members and officers are well supported by arrangements such as the weekly meetings between the Co-leaders and the Chief Executive. Leadership forums are providing an avenue for greater consistency in shaping direction and delivery. However, recent changes in service structures have not always been communicated well. Amalgamation of services and the volume of change has been a pressure point for officers. Confidence in change management has reduced and needs to be strengthened. The overall vision for the council is well articulated but it is not always linked to delivery. A mixed picture of leadership culture continues to be captured in the staff satisfaction surveys.

A positive picture of career progression exists in services with many available examples. Policy is in place to support effective staff succession planning but this is not impacting fully in practice.

A strategic planning framework exists threading together vision and high level plans. Communication on direction of travel does not always reach front line delivery staff. Mechanisms exist for reporting on success and achievement but staff do not always identify with this which has an impact on morale. Performance is well managed and reported routinely and service plans almost always meet targets set however key performance indicators are not always seen as constructive by staff.

Risk assessment is built routinely into project planning in services and staff are mindful of risk in their practice. Service Level Agreement procedures ensure risk management in relevant settings. The culture does not always encourage pro-active

approaches to risk and can lead to a sense of curtailment. Data sharing agreements exist within and across services but data sharing does not consistently happen or lead to improved understanding of needs. The emphasis is often more on inputs and outputs and less on outcomes.

Focus group members are very aware of the likelihood of increased cost savings in their services alongside a desire to maintain quality and efficiency. They identify strongly with the need for focussed, informed, strategic and local leadership in tune with this agenda. They are also able to identify improvement priorities. The overall capacity for organisational change is good.

- *What do we want to do next?*

1. Improve communication on achievement and success – both strategically, locally and across services
2. Consider one council style of “case study” to better share success and practice across the wider organisation
3. The “golden thread” of connection needs to be more understood by staff so that priorities are clear both strategically and at point of service delivery
4. Improve use of available data to inform decision making in and across services
5. Consider ways of taking succession planning further forward where needed
6. Identify delegation / responsibility levels for leadership, balancing direction and consequence
7. Communicate vision for the Council and for Services more prominently
8. Seek consistency of message from elected members between strategic and ward priorities and strengthen the understanding of roles of elected members alongside managers

### *Next steps*

In order to aim for continuous improvement in our service delivery and to maintain the momentum built through previous assessment approaches the following actions are proposed:

- Feedback the report and findings to all participants in the focus groups from the 2015 ***How good is our council?*** exercise
- Bring together the facilitators involved in the focus groups to reflect on the learning from our practice in using the model
- Create an improvement plan reflecting the aspects identified for improvement in a realistic, challenging and robust way
- Report on the self-assessment on the council web site
- Refresh the ***How good is our council?*** standards framework, taking into account progress made with contemporary frameworks by Education Scotland

- Work with Education Scotland, who use the **How good is ou** model both strategically and locally in their scrutiny and support work, to make best use of the learning and materials developed so far.
- Build our organisational capacity for improvement through an approach to self-evaluation which invests in developing skills and knowledge at all levels and harnesses in-house expertise to support this
- Strengthen our effectiveness in self-evaluation by involving a greater number of stakeholders – for example the elected members, the partners we work with and those whom we deliver services to.
- Ensure that we can effectively and securely answer the question – **How good is our council?**

*Appendix 1 - overview of focus group evaluation levels 2015*

*Appendix 2 - links to evidence used*

## HOW GOOD IS OUR COUNCIL? 2015

- Appendix 1 – Overview of focus group evaluation levels using the **Education Scotland** six point scale

Quality Indicator	Focus Gp 1	Focus Gp 2	Focus Gp 3	Focus Gp 4	Focus Gp 5A	Focus Gp 5B	Focus Gp 6A	Focus Gp 6B	Focus Gp 7	2014	2013	2012		
1.1 Improvements in performance <span style="background-color: #f4a460; padding: 2px;">4</span>										4	4	4		
3.1 Impact on staff	4	-	4	4	3	-	4	4	4	-	4	4		
4.1 Impact on the local community	-	-	5	5	4	-	5	5	-	5	-	4		
6.1 Policy review and development	-	-	4	4	4	5	2	4	4	3	2	3	2	
9.2 Leadership and direction	3	-	3	4	4	3	3	4	4	3	4	4	-	4

<b>6</b> excellent	<b>5</b> very good	<b>4</b> good
<b>3</b> satisfactory	<b>2</b> weak	<b>1</b> unsatisfactory

- *Appendix 2 – links to evidence used*

[How good is our council? – Arcadia](#)

[2014 HGIOC? Assessment](#)

[Aberdeenshire Council Plan](#)

[Sottish Government Strategic Objectives](#)

[Reputation Tracker \(Resident Satisfaction data\)](#)

[Employee Satisfaction Surveys](#)

[Local Government Benchmarking Framework](#)

[Shared Risk Assessment](#)

[ALDO link](#)

[CoSLA Awards Aberdeenshire](#)

[Reports on Learning Community inspections](#)

[Marr Area Partnership](#)

[Aberdeenshire Community Planning web link](#)

[National Standards for Community Engagement](#)

[Community Council](#)

[Aberdeenshire Strategic Learning Community Partnership](#)

[Aberdeen City Regional Deal](#)

[Scrutiny and Audit Committee](#)