

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL
AUDIT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

29 September 2022

Report by Clerk

NATIONAL EXTERNAL AUDIT REPORT – LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN
SCOTLAND OVERVIEW 2022

PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. To provide information on the Audit Scotland report *Local Government in Scotland Overview 2022*.

RECOMMENDATION

2. It is recommended that the Committee considers the report.

BACKGROUND

3. A copy of the Accounts Commission report [Local Government in Scotland Overview 2022](#), published in May 2022, has already been circulated to all Audit and Scrutiny Committee Members. Under the committee's specialisation arrangements, the Member leading the review of this particular report is Councillor Morrison.

4. When national external audit reports of relevance to local government are published, the Clerk is notified and seeks comments from an appropriate senior officer or officers within the Council on the local position relative to the content of report and any recommendations made. On this occasion, the Director of Business Operations and Partnerships has provided comments on the local position and a copy of those comments is attached (see Appendix A).

RECOMMENDATIONS

5. It is recommended that the committee considers the report.

Local Government Access to Information Act 1985

Report Author: Linda Hutchison, Clerk to the Committee (Tel.No.0141 577 8388)
e-mail: linda.hutchison@eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk

Background Papers:-

1. Audit Scotland report *Local Government in Scotland Overview 2022*.

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National External Audit Report:
Local Government in Scotland – Overview 2022

Comments for Audit & Scrutiny Committee on 29 September 2022

Prepared by Director of Business Operations & Partnerships

September 2022

INTRODUCTION

1. This paper aims to provide high level comments on the Council’s position regarding the Accounts Commission report “Local Government in Scotland – Overview 2022”.

REPORT

2. The Accounts Commission published its Local Government in Scotland Overview 2022 in May 2022. This is a wide-ranging report that is effective in summarising the challenging context in which local government is operating: balancing ongoing pandemic-related demands; financial pressures and the prospect of major service reforms. The report opens with 6 key messages, which are pertinent to our own local experience in East Renfrewshire:

- Councils have had a very difficult year
- The challenging context means collaborative leadership is more important than ever
- Pressure on the local government workforce continued
- The impact of the pandemic and service disruption have been felt most strongly by those already experiencing inequality
- The early response showed what could be achieved by working closely with the voluntary sector
- Improvements are needed in data availability, tools and skills to support performance monitoring, strategic decision-making and planning service improvements.

3. The report (p7) gives a set of Key Facts, which have been replicated locally for East Renfrewshire, using broadly the same timescales for comparability – see Annex 1.

RESPONDING TO THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

4. The Accounts Commission’s report covers a broad range of themes including how councils are positioned to address long-term priorities and how effectively the Council is managing recovery and renewal. Members can find more in-depth coverage through the various reports on specific topics at Council, IJB, Cabinet and Committees.

5. Whilst significant, it is impossible to look in isolation at the impact of the pandemic on councils and local communities. As we continue to build back from the pandemic, there are a range of key priorities and important strategic influences including climate change; cost of living/poverty; public service reform and funding; the departure from the EU; and the war in Ukraine. This paper does not set out to address each of these separately and instead focuses on the ‘Organising the Council’ and ‘Meeting Local Needs’ themes of the Accounts Commission’s report.

ORGANISING THE COUNCIL

Leading Recovery & Renewal

6. Throughout the pandemic there have been regular reports to Council and IJB on the impact of the pandemic on local services, most recently to [Council in June 2022](#). These are the best source for Members to get an overview of the key issues for response and recovery locally and the significant and ongoing impact on our services since 2020.

7. From July to December 2020 a Member Officer Working Group, comprised of a cross-party group of elected members and relevant senior officers from across the Council, HSCP and ERCLT met to review and discuss the issues and opportunities around East Renfrewshire's post-pandemic recovery. The group looked at: the extent to which the Council was engaged in response, recovery and business-as-usual simultaneously; the shift to home working by residents; the increased use and reliance on digital technology to connect with people and access services; the economic impact on the wider economy and local businesses; potential entrenchment of existing poverty and disadvantage; positive increases in active travel (e.g. use of cycleways) and challenges with public transport and the shift to more environmentally sustainable travel options; community connections and well-being; impact on mental and physical health; and increasing the overall sustainability of East Renfrewshire as a place.

8. It was noted that the pandemic had actually had positive impacts on the 2 main themes of 'Vision for the Future', the Council's 10 year outlook, which was last considered by Council in February 2020. With people largely confined to working at home and spending more time in their local areas, there were positive impacts for communities and for sustainability/'green' themes.

9. The Council's Planning for the Future demographic overview was updated during 2022 and can be found [here](#). This provides the agreed source reference for all strategic planning and ensures that the foundational information for our plans and strategies is consistent.

10. A Strategic Planning report to [Council in June 2022](#) summarised the Council's approach to pandemic response and recovery planning. This included the findings of independent research on the impact of the pandemic on the residents of East Renfrewshire; further details can be found [here](#). Our Annual Child Poverty Report was also considered by Council in June 2022 and can be found [here](#). Work is now progressing with the Community Planning partnership to review strategic priorities for the future and refresh our 'Vision for the Future'.

11. The cost of living crisis has brought additional pressures to local residents. In August 2022, Cabinet approved a set of [proposals](#) through the Local Authority Covid Economic Recovery (LACER) Fund, aimed at providing support to our local economy and also local households which had been worst affected by the pandemic. The Council is working closely with a range of partners including the Third Sector, via Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire and the local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) on further proposals around Covid recovery and the cost of living challenge. A cross-party member officer working group is being established and proposals for 22/23 will be brought to Cabinet in October 2022. In addition, there will be a pre-Council briefing for Members, led by our Money Advice and Rights Team (MART) and CAB on 26 October 2022.

Education Recovery

12. In considering the impact of the pandemic on residents, it has been important to evaluate the response and support provided. Regular reports have been provided to Council detailing the response and highlighting the impact of the additional spending or resources. In Education this has included the following evidence being shared with elected members:

- Standards and Quality Report for 2019-20 and 2020-21
- National Improvement Framework – Progress report with Priorities 2020-21
- Report on Quality of Remote Learning – March 2021

13. In the regular Covid reports to Council, the Education Department outlined the increased demand around health and wellbeing.

14. External scrutiny on councils' response to Covid-19 has also been undertaken in some areas by Education Scotland; this has included sharing of good practice to mitigate impacts. e.g. Education Scotland have inspected effective remote learning and undertaken visits to establish effective practice to support recovery:

- <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/supporting-remote-learning/national-overviews/national-overview-of-practice-reports/>
- <https://education.gov.scot/media/nwibvl2q/what-scotland-learned-building-back-better.pdf>
- <https://education.gov.scot/media/mdpiqj3g/local-approaches-to-recovery.pdf>

15. East Renfrewshire has also sought to learn from others, participating in a Collaborative Improvement model with the aim of improving attainment and experiences in numeracy and mathematics. This report was shared with Education Committee in June 2022.

16. During the pandemic, the Accounts Commission also published a [report](#) on how the Scottish Government, councils and partners were improving outcomes for young people through school education and addressing the negative impact of the pandemic. The Scottish Government has responded to this along with the two international reviews carried out by the OECD on Scottish Education and the Muir Review which was published in 2022.

17. The Education Department's Building Back Better and Fairer framework set out the key priorities for schools and services to support children and young people with their learning and wellbeing during 2021-22, complementing the activities set out within the department's Local Improvement Plan (LIP). Purposefully, the framework was designed as a single page, providing a clear simple summary of next steps for improvement. The Local Improvement Plan and [Strategic Equity Fund \(SEF\) Plan](#) also integrated the approach to recovery, addressing excellence and equity in an education context. More widely, a similar approach has been followed with the [review of numeracy and mathematics](#) and the refreshed [Developing the Young Workforce Plan](#).

18. There is a significant amount of work that has been carried out to evaluate the impact of Covid-19, including the financial response, in an education context. In seeking to learn lessons and collect and share findings on response and good practice, it is important that a coherent and coordinated approach is undertaken by Scottish Government and the wider system e.g. Education Scotland.

19. Particular examples include:

- [Evaluation report on the impact of 1140 hours](#)
- Impact of the development of West of Scotland – online learning available for children and young people across Scotland – [See WP Improvement Plan and Evaluation Report](#)
- High quality Career Long Professional Learning (CLPL) for staff (much of which takes place via online learning)

20. Previous reports to Council have outlined the Education Department's continued focus on customer delivery throughout the pandemic, for example through the digitisation of

admissions processes and other applications. Whilst significant progress has been made, and importantly ensured service continuity throughout the pandemic, it is essential we evaluate and engage with customers to continue to make improvements in our service delivery. For example, the ongoing improvements to early learning and childcare applications, future consideration of EMAs, etc.

21. There are specific examples of customer focussed redesign for example, the shift to hybrid parents evenings, remote participation in parent council meetings, requests to the Scottish Government for hybrid approaches to consultation public meetings. These are all about ensuring greater accessibility and building on the increases in participation that were possible throughout parts of the pandemic.

22. In terms of disruption to education services throughout the second year of the pandemic (see Exhibit 8 of report), this evidence has regularly been presented through the reports to Council and Education Committee. For example:

- [ELC – Impact on developmental milestones](#)
- Curriculum for Excellence Attainment and widening of the gap – [See report](#)
- Health and Wellbeing of Learners – See [Council paper, para 49](#) and report to Education Committee in [March 2022](#)

23. The Education Department has also developed a Strategic Equity Fund Plan, this will help address the impact of the pandemic on learners and their families.

East Renfrewshire Culture & Leisure Trust (ERCLT) - Libraries

24. Exhibit 10 of the Accounts Commission report highlights the impact of Covid-19 on libraries. ERCLT have provided some comments below on the impact to provision in East Renfrewshire.

25. East Renfrewshire libraries were among the successful bidders for Scottish Government to help libraries reopen. The funding has been used for a temporary project officer whose focus is on the library at Barrhead Foundry as it had been demonstrated that recovery was slower in that site than in other libraries. This post's focus is on raising awareness and promoting the library and its services in Barrhead, working with local groups and individuals, and bringing people back to the library again. It is funded until April 2023.

26. The proven positive impacts of library services include tackling poor health and wellbeing, social isolation and loneliness and promoting digital participation and inclusion. Exhibit 3 of the report notes the change in expenditure in recent years, with libraries particularly affected. Locally in that period library staff numbers, opening hours and resources have reduced, in line with the national picture, but staff continue to deliver valuable local services.

27. In February 2022 East Renfrewshire libraries reopened broadly back to pre-COVID operating hours for book lending and limited PC use. Events and activities for both adults and children did not return until Q1 of 2022/23.

28. Exhibit 10 looks at the change in library opening hours since Covid-19. In terms of East Renfrewshire, there was a very slight reduction in Barrhead Foundry library hours to bring it into line with the rest of the building. The -16% figure quoted for East Renfrewshire in the report is reflective of broader issues not related to the pandemic (e.g. Mearns library was closed at that time due to repairs to its heating and ventilation). In general terms East Renfrewshire libraries were further along the road to fully restoring opening hours than most at the time.

Managing Resources

29. In common with other councils, East Renfrewshire Council and the Culture & Leisure Trust experienced significant reductions in income in 2020/21 as a result of the pandemic. Income streams affected included sports and leisure, school meals and waste. These losses were covered by additional Government COVID grants, and by income from the NHS for utilisation of Council/ERCLT premises as vaccination/ test centres.

30. The Council's total usable reserves rose from £44.222m in 2019/20 to £60.278m in 2020/21, however £12.815m of this was due to COVID grants. The vast majority of our total reserves are ring-fenced or earmarked for specific purposes, leaving only £11.670m of general non-earmarked funds at 31 March 2021. Since then, figures have been further updated to take account of the £0.107m improvement in the unaudited position at the end of 2021/22, and the Council's decision to utilise £5.253m of general reserves to balance the budget for 2022/23. Assuming that the Council can absorb the current inflationary pressures and operates within budget in the current year, this would bring the forecast non-earmarked general reserve position at 31 March 2023 to £6.524m.

31. In line with the national position, our core budgets have reduced in real terms in recent years, with the Council having had to apply savings of £55.5m between 2013/14 and 2020/21 in addition to utilisation of reserves and Council Tax increases.

32. In May 2022 the Scottish Government provided a three year funding outlook for councils as part of its Resource Spending Review. Whilst the multi-year approach is greatly welcomed, the announcement of a flat cash position for councils for the years 2023/24 to 2025/26 represents a huge financial challenge for the Council at a time of high inflation, particularly in view of the cumulative savings that have already been applied since 2013/14.

33. The Council updates its [long term financial plan](#) each year. The revision for March 2023 will take account of our plans for recovery from the pandemic, in addition to reflecting any further options arising from the ongoing development of a fiscal framework to provide more transparency on future Council funding.

34. As a result of ring-fencing and protection of certain service areas, East Renfrewshire has experienced a similar pattern of savings to the position reported in Exhibit 3 of Accounts Commission's report, with the largest proportionate service reductions in recent years impacting on Environment and central support services.

35. Recent Cabinet reports have also flagged up the pressures on our capital plans as a result of COVID delays, materials shortages and rising inflation. With capital budgets again largely flat cash in recent years, projects are being reviewed, savings sought and lower priority projects delayed.

36. The Accounts Commission's report highlights the importance of transformation programmes to help councils deliver future savings and reduce costs. In East Renfrewshire, our approach to digital transformation is through 3 programmes:

- Customer Experience – providing a consistent, efficient customer experience, designed with the user at the heart.
- Business Systems & Processes - efficient and effective business systems and processes enabled by digital technology and optimised across the Council.
- Workforce Productivity - increasing the productivity and effectiveness of our workforce, enabled by Office 365 capabilities and better use of data.

37. Cabinet considered an [update](#) on the digital transformation programmes in June 2022 and noted that, despite a continued focus on pandemic response and recovery, and delays in some areas, our services had made substantial progress across 2021/22 to progress our

digital transformation ambitions, make efficiencies, improve customer service and modernise the way we work.

Managing the Workforce

38. The Council's workforce plan recognises that our people are our greatest asset and the need to invest in our workforce, seek their feedback and ensure they are able to work efficiently and effectively.

39. Our priorities are:

- Empowered, resilient and engaged employees at all levels of the organisation
- A diverse, skilled workforce
- A flexible workforce that embraces change, innovation, digitalisation and delivers end-to-end customer focused services.

40. Over the last two years there has been significant impact on the workforce as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic with changes in delivery methods and additional funding provided from Scottish Government to support new tasks and requirements. The last year has continued to be challenging with the workforce supporting ongoing tasks required as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic including isolation support, humanitarian support for vulnerable/shielding residents, business grants, lateral flow testing in schools and additional staffing for schools, health and social care and cleaning, Mass Vaccination Centres and Asymptomatic Testing Centres. At times, it has been challenging getting the appropriate resource in place and services have supported with higher than normal levels of recruitment activity.

41. Following a prolonged period of response, our workforce planning activity is now beginning to refocus on some of the longer term requirements of the workforce, recognising that in some services pandemic-related demands persist and are being delivered alongside business as usual and recovery. In June 2022 the Corporate Management Team considered an update to the Council's workforce plan for the period 2022-25 and IJB also considered the HSCP's Workforce Plan.

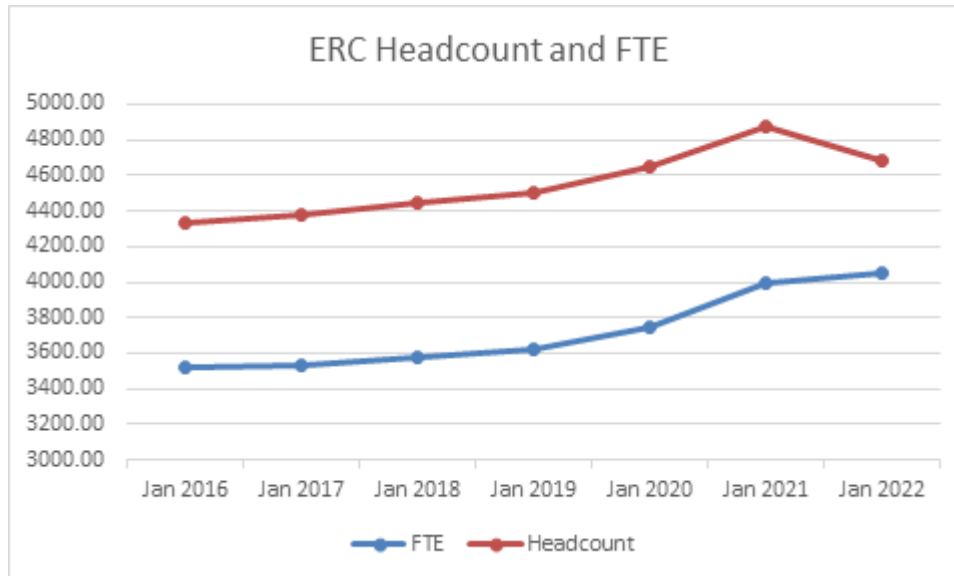
42. The Accounts Commission acknowledge that "the pandemic has made workforce planning both more difficult and more necessary", with the need to manage short-term pressures with building longer-term resilience in our workforce and many councils updating their workforce plans to reflect greater flexibility, more remote working and a focus on wellbeing.

43. As at 1 April 2022 the Council's employee Full Time Equivalent is 4056.1 FTE which is an increase of 311 FTE in the last 2 years – 62.8 FTE in 2021/22 and 248.2 FTE the previous year 2019/20 (Graph 1 and Table 1). The Council delivers a range of services within the five departments with the FTE distributed as per Table 1. The HSCP figure includes only council employees with the HSCP workforce plan reporting both council and NHS workforce numbers. These figures do not include casual posts or any vacant posts in the process of recruitment.

Table 1: FTE per department

Department	FTE (Apr 19)	FTE (Apr 20)	FTE (Apr 21)	FTE (Apr 22)
CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S OFFICE	52.8	52.2	53	49.5
BUSINESS OPERATIONS & PARTNERSHIPS	302	302.8	304.3	301.4
EDUCATION	2308.5	2395.9	2585.2	2581.9
ENVIRONMENT	480.5	483.1	503.5	527.7
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE PARTNERSHIP	492.3	511.1	550.5	595.6
	3636.1	3745.1	3996.5	4056.1

Graph 1: ERC Headcount and FTE Profile



44. The highest FTE increase is in Education followed by HSCP. In Education this has been driven by the impact of the pandemic and the additional funding provided by Scottish Government to support response and recovery in particular for teachers, Pupil Support Assistants (PSAs and Child Development Officers (CDOs). In HSCP the Care at Home workforce also increased due to increased funding and the successful recruitment campaign to meet increasing demands within the service given the growth in older population.

45. The Education Department has seen significant turnover of senior posts over the last 2 years, particularly Head Teachers in secondary schools. Effective succession planning is in place, with high quality support for staff at senior levels. This includes HT induction programme and Aspiring Heads leadership programme. Support is also available through the West Partnership. The impact of this support in the secondary sector can be measured by very strong levels of performance in the 2022 SQA examinations.

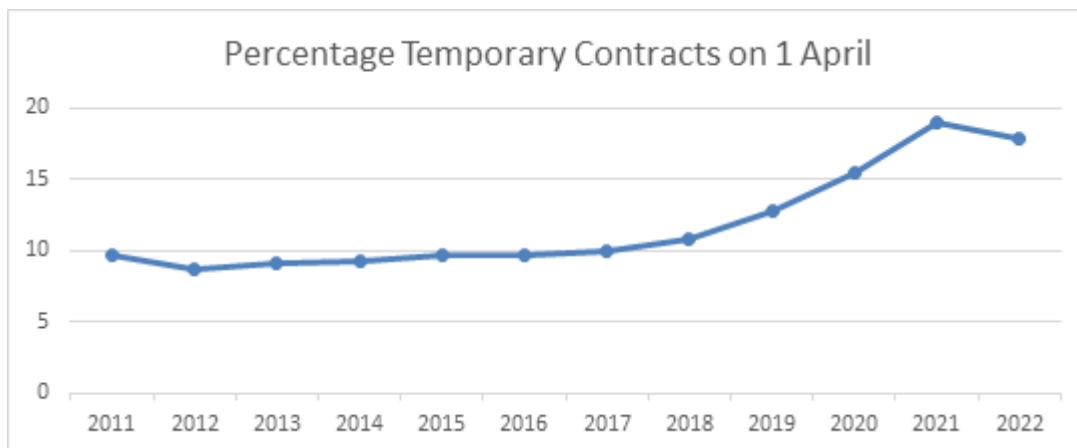
46. Environment has seen FTE increases in Roads & Transportation, Housing, Maintenance Services and Regeneration & Economic Development. These increases are mainly attributed to Scottish Government initiatives, like the Government backed employability schemes including the Young Person's Guarantee Scheme and new legislation such as the new Footway Parking legislation.

Part Time and Temporary Posts

47. 72.9% of the workforce is full-time with the remainder working part-time hours and this has been fairly consistent over the last few years. The number of temporary employees has been recognised as a concern and it has been acknowledged that some of this has been

driven by the impact of budget pressures as a way of planning for future savings. There are 17% temporary employees which is a decrease of 2% since last year and further steps are being taken to transition some other roles from temporary to permanent. A number of restructures are now in the final stages to support the digital transformation work where there have been a number of temporary posts. High turnover in these areas has impacted programme and project timelines and it is hoped permanent structures will bring more stability and allow more retention of talent.

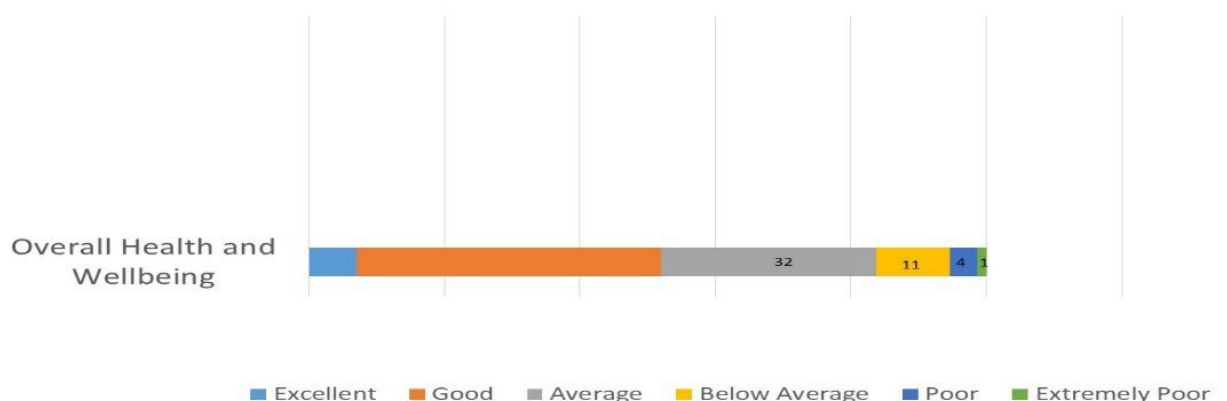
Graph 2: Percentage of employees on temporary contracts



Employee Health & Wellbeing

48. During the pandemic and lockdown periods employee health and wellbeing has continued to be an area of concern. Regular communications were issued using different ways to encourage staff engagement and mental and physical activity with signposting to external organisations being promoted. In December 2021 a pilot Health & Wellbeing Survey was undertaken of non-teaching Council staff. In the pilot survey 479 staff rated their overall health and wellbeing as: 7% excellent, 45% good, 32% average, 11% below average, 4% poor and 1% extremely poor.

Figures shown are detailed in % responses



49. Overall experience of working for the Council was scored between 0 and 10 and showed: Detractors 11% (score 0 – 4), Passive 48% (score 5 – 7) and Promoters 41% (score 8 – 10). The key themes coming through in the open question related to workload, management, flexibility/working hours, values, development, ERC policies, communication, equipment, buildings and facilities. A Health and Wellbeing action plan is addressing some of these areas and results will be monitored in a follow-up survey to be undertaken later this year.

Absence

50. Covid-19 absence monitoring has been actively managed. As new variants of Covid-19 have emerged peaks in absences have been experienced and although there has been impact on a number of services the Council has continued to deliver essential services throughout. The Council has supported Scottish Government and Public Health Scotland guidance throughout and has promoted working from home for those who were able to do this. The Council is supporting hybrid working with *The Way We Work* initiative set-up to review our approach to work styles and looking at the property and technology supports we need to put in place to support our workforce to work effectively in this new environment.

51. From summer into autumn 2021/22 there were positive signs with the number of Covid cases declining, however in December 2021 the Omicron variant took hold and this again had an impact on our workforce with the peak in January 2022 of 396 employees affected. Over the last 2 years, in line with national guidance, the majority of COVID absence has been treated as special leave however in May 2022 there was a change in COSLA circulars with now only the first full 10 days of any absence is covered by special leave and the employee then moves onto normal absence reporting.

52. The top non-covid absence levels for 2021/22 were 9.4 days per FTE compared with 8.2 days per FTE the previous year. The top 3 reasons for absence in the 2021/22 were:

- Stress (non-work related)
- Musculoskeletal except back pain
- Gastro-intestinal

53. There are concerns over the impact of absences due to psychological issues over the next 12-36 months. Employees have been impacted by the pandemic, some are seeing increasing workloads due to budget savings and some are feeling real impacts from the cost of living crisis. This will continue to be monitored.

54. We will work with our Occupational Health provider to ensure continued support to employees and also signpost resources in the community. Within the HSCP specialist provision has been provided for services identified as requiring additional support. In terms of financial support, HR and Money Advice & Rights (MART) have strengthened working relationships and offer appropriate support with employee consent and also ensure employees are aware of the financial services that can be accessed via EastRen Rewards.

Skills & Recruitment

55. The purpose of the Workforce Plan is to look at the longer term changes to skills, job roles and requirements within the council as well as demand and supply of the workforce. The report recognises the Council is a complex organisation with many competing demands and consideration needs to be given to both skills and capacity of the workforce.

56. SPDS (Society Personnel and Development Scotland) carried out a workforce planning survey in autumn 2021. The table below details the key areas of skills shortages currently experienced in Scottish Local Authorities due to the impacts of Covid/Brexit:

Area of Shortage	No. of Councils	%	Area of Shortage	No. of Councils	%
Social Care	29	91%	Mental Health Officers	9	28%
Facilities Mgt. (catering/cleaning)	20	63%	Mechanics	6	19%
HGV Drivers	18	56%	Trades	6	19%
Social Workers	17	53%	Early Years	5	16%
Env. Health Officers	16	50%	Trading Standards	5	16%
Teachers	12	38%	Janitors	3	9%
Building Standards	10	31%			

57. Other areas of skill shortage identified by councils were:

- Additional Support Needs
- All areas across ICT
- Childcare posts in school clubs
- ICT specialisms, for example Data Analysts
- Marine staff
- Planners
- Procurement
- Support Workers

58. 66% of survey respondents believed that shortages were a result of impacts from both Brexit and Covid. Respondents listed the reasons attributing to the shortages as:

- Everyone nationally is looking for those with the same skills including the private sector. Labour market has tightened
- Covid and Brexit exacerbating roles that were already high turnover and difficult to recruit to e.g. HGV drivers, facilities management, catering & cleaning.
- HGV Drivers have always been scarce, but again has become worse due to isolation and lack of new drivers with the required skills/qualifications.
- Early Years - due to expansion of the service it is difficult to get the required numbers of qualified practitioners coming through, however, the requirement for bubbles and isolation periods has again worsened the situation.
- Additional Covid monies from Scottish Government is making it difficult to recruit to Early Years and Teaching Posts - in particular supply
- Pay gaps between public / private and increase in demand in some roles.
- Increased demand due to COVID for additional staffing within social care in particular. Shortages in Social Care existed pre-covid, but with the restrictions in relation to isolation this has caused the situation to become worse.
- Environmental Health has always been a struggle but due to the increased requirements on the service during Covid the impact of this has been exacerbated.
- Absence rates.

59. The results from this survey generally reflect the position in East Renfrewshire Council where the top 3 areas of shortage Social Care, Facilities Management and HGV Drivers are areas of continued focus. Early Years is however an area where the Council has successfully expanded the workforce and requirements continue to be monitored.

60. The demographics of East Renfrewshire, with growing populations particularly amongst our young and older residents, mean there are particular demands for education provision, health services and social care. East Renfrewshire is also one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse communities in the country, we expect this trend to continue and aim to better reflect this in our workforce. The workforce changes as a result of these demand drivers include an increase in:

- general services to households e.g. refuse collection, street cleaning, customer enquiries, planning etc
- demand for teachers, especially in the denominational sector
- demand for nursery staff
- demand for home care and social care employees
- need for employees with different culture sensitivities
- need for employees for data and digital skills.

61. The cost of living crisis will also have a significant impact on demand for some of our services, but also on the wellbeing and circumstances of our own workforce.

62. There has been a significant increase in turnover rates for Local Government Employees and Teaching staff. In 2020/21 there was a significant downturn in turnover as an initial result of the pandemic, however in the last year this has greatly increased. These will continue to be monitored to see if they return to pre-pandemic levels.

63. The way people want to work is changing with more employees looking for increased flexibility and a better work-life balance. This could affect roles within the council in a number of ways. We could see an increase in part-time/freelance workers and in remote living with flexibility of time potentially becoming an important driver for employees and it is important that we continue to review and iterate our policies in these areas.

64. As an employer we have attractive terms and conditions and we encourage recognition of achievements within our workforce and these are celebrated using Kudos and our We Are East Ren Awards and our East Ren Reward Scheme includes an employee discount scheme, financial service support and salary sacrifice car benefit scheme.

65. The importance of skills development, including data and digital, and the learning and development of employees and managers is crucially important to support the Council to meet its ambitions. However it must be recognised that there are capacity issues within the organisation. This can lead to managers continuing to operate with individual contributor roles; lack of focus on people management issues; people managing competing priorities; and managers covering gaps sometimes below their grade. Particularly in the light of the budgetary challenges ahead, as an organisation we need to carefully consider capacity and in some cases slow down and prioritise.

66. Due to the size and scale of the Council many of our jobs have developed into hybrid and not discrete job roles. This has advantages and disadvantages: employees get to be involved in a well-rounded, broad role, however it can be difficult to recruit. This aspect of jobs needs to be recognised so that as we succession plan and upskill across teams we consider the great breadth many roles have. We also need to be aware of overall capacity within our workforce as we drive forward business as usual service delivery alongside transformational change. This will be an ongoing pressure, worsened by the scale of the public sector budgetary position.

67. Workforce planning guidance and workforce information from our HR/Payroll ICT system are available to support managers and the process is driven by a Workforce Planning Working Group. The Group are engaging with the Digital Transformation Workforce Productivity programme to develop an interactive data dashboard which will give managers better access to real-time information about employees.

MEETING LOCAL NEEDS

Impact of Covid-19 on Services & Inequality Collaboration & Communities

68. The Strategic Planning report to Council in March 2022 highlighted 3 key pieces of broad-based research and community engagement:

- Citizens Panel Survey 2021
- Humanitarian Research into the Impact of COVID-19 in East Renfrewshire
- 2022-23 Budget Consultation

69. These provide us insight into the ways the pandemic has affected local people and communities. This research can help inform our priorities as we move forward into recovery and renewal and seek to refresh our 'Vision for the Future'.

70. There has been a wide reach across the various aspects of the research, including a 62% response rate (581 respondents) to the Citizens' Panel; 150 in-depth interviews with local residents, community groups, businesses and key stakeholders (including elected members) as part of Humanitarian research and 251 responses to the Council's budget engagement survey.

71. The Accounts Commission highlight the importance of the use of data in tackling inequality and in councils' responses to the pandemic. We continue to develop our approaches to data and insight in East Renfrewshire Council and this is a specific focus of our Workforce Productivity digital transformation programme. The Corporate Management Team also continue to review monthly dashboards of key metrics around Covid response and recovery. The Improvement Service published case studies of our [data-led approach to supporting shielding residents](#) during the pandemic and also our partnership approach to [supporting local communities](#) and further details on these can be found in the various Covid-19 update reports to Council since 2020.

CONCLUSION

72. East Renfrewshire Council fully recognises the challenges outlined in the Accounts Commission's Local Government in Scotland – Overview 2022. We are working to address these pertinent issues through the approaches and activities highlighted in this report. We believe that the coverage of key issues throughout the year as part of day-to-day business provides strong evidence and gives assurance that East Renfrewshire Council is well positioned across the wide range of issues highlighted.










73. It is suggested that the Audit and Scrutiny Committee considers this Accounts Commission report and the issues and themes therein as part of its annual work programme to guide areas where the Committee would find value in a more detailed response to enable further discussion and scrutiny.

Report Author:

Louise Pringle, Director of Business Operations & Partnerships

Louise.pringle@eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk

KEY FACTS (East Renfrewshire)

 East Renfrewshire Council	 96,060 Local residents												
 4056 FTE Workforce	 £259.594m Budget (Net expenditure budget for 2021/22)												
 25,632 Covid-19 Cases (Cases between Mar 2021 and Feb 2022)	 £1.4M of lost income was covered by reduced expenditure and a further £4.2M was covered from the COVID reserve/funding.												
 <h2>Inequality</h2> <p>Life Expectancy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Males in East Renfrewshire have the 2nd highest life expectancy in Scotland (highest of mainland authorities), 8 years more than Scottish average. Males also have a life expectancy 2 years more than females. • Females in East Renfrewshire have the 3rd highest life expectancy in Scotland (highest of mainland authorities), 5 years more than the Scottish average <p>Child Poverty</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12.8% of children living in relative poverty in East Renfrewshire (2020/21) 													
 <h2>Financial hardship</h2> <p>Rent arrears 9.08% rent arrears in East Renfrewshire at December 2021 (6.5% at end of 2019/20)</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Claimant count</th> <th><u>2019/20</u></th> <th><u>2021/22</u></th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Average Housing Benefit Claim Count</td> <td>2958</td> <td>2484</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Average Council Tax Reduction Claim Count</td> <td>4175</td> <td>4609</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Discretionary Housing Payments Claims Rec'd</td> <td>358</td> <td>293</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Claimant count	<u>2019/20</u>	<u>2021/22</u>	Average Housing Benefit Claim Count	2958	2484	Average Council Tax Reduction Claim Count	4175	4609	Discretionary Housing Payments Claims Rec'd	358	293
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 <h2>Support</h2> <p>Self-Isolation Support Grants – Sept 2020 to end August 2022</p> <p>Applications received – 2814 SIGs Awarded – 2158 Awarded applications 2090 x £500 = £1,045,000 Awarded applications 68 x £225 = £15,300 Total SIG spend = £1,060,300</p> <p>10,956 isolation support contacts Sept 2020 to end June 2022</p>													

Business Support Grants paid in 2021/22:

Fund	Value spent
Softplay Nightclub COVID Cont	£18,000
COVID19 SFG Business Closure	£109,071
COVID19 SFG Business Hardship	£4,800
Taxi Private Hire Support	£530,500
Retail Top Up Support	£24,000
Local Discretion Fund 1	£296,000
SFBFTP £1K	£358,571
SFBF Transition £1500	£15,000
Business Restart Grant £6k	£1,518,000
Business Restart Grant £8k	£424,000
Business Restart Grant £12k	£638,000
Business Restart Grant £18k	£126,000
Small Accom SFBF £1k	£2,000
Small Accom SFBF £8k	£16,000
Taxi Driver Top Up	£514,500
Covid Soft Play up to £51k	£6,000
Covid Hospitality up to £51k	£207,900
Covid Hospitality over £51k	£15,750
Covid Taxi Operator 1 Vehicle	£195,000
Covid Taxi Operator 2-9 Vehicle	£33,000
Covid Taxi Operator 10-49 Vehicle	£42,000
Local Discretion Fund 2	£17,046
Hospitality Top Up Dec/Jan	£409,500
Hospitality Leisure Fund Top-Up	£147,700
Scottish Brewers Support 2022	£5,625
Top Up Taxi & Private Hire	£415,250
Public House Table Service Fund	£30,000
Business Ventilation Fund	£5,077
Total Payments	£6,124,291.76