

Leadership in the development of new local strategic priorities

Midlothian Council
Best Value thematic work in 2022-23



Prepared by Audit Scotland
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Key messages

- 1 Midlothian Council has demonstrated ongoing commitment to best value since our Best Value Annual Report 2019. We have noted improvements in performance reporting and medium term financial planning as well as the strengthening of officer member relationships.
- 2 The Council works well with its community planning partners and citizens and this has facilitated the creation of the Single Midlothian Plan and a clear vision for Midlothian to create “a great, green place to grow” over the next four years.
- 3 The council and its partners are actively working to address inequalities. There is a cross party cost of living task force which has moved from taking a crisis intervention approach to a preventive approach and a child poverty strategy and plan has been produced.
- 4 The council has adopted an ambitious target to be net zero by 2030. Its vision, outcomes and priorities clearly reflect the importance it places on this. But achieving this target brings resourcing and financial risks which the Council is actively managing.
- 5 The latest five-year revenue budget strategy agreed in September 2023 is projecting a budget gap of £34.7 million to 2028/29. The council recognises that transformation is essential to ensure service delivery remains financially sustainable and has published a Transformation Blueprint for Midlothian. The Transformation Blueprint which aligns with the five-year revenue budget strategy to 2027/28 aims to create a wellbeing economy. However, detailed workforce and digital plans required to deliver transformation continue to be developed in partnership with elected members, council staff and partners. New strategic leads for Digital and Human Resources have been appointed to lead this work.
- 6 We have observed improved constructive relationships between members and officers which have facilitated the creation of the Cost of Living Taskforce, chaired by the Council Leader and the Transformation Blueprint.
- 7 The council has taken steps to improve decision-making and encourage scrutiny. Midlothian Council has an appropriate approach to ensuring there is sufficient knowledge at a member level to support the decision making and scrutiny.

Scope of the audit

1. When discussing the [Local Government in Scotland Overview 2022](#), the Chair of the Accounts Commission noted: “Councils are operating in a complex and increasingly volatile, unprecedented and unpredictable environment. Strong leadership from councils is needed now more than ever, with new and returning councillors being able and willing to make difficult decisions about where and how to spend highly pressurised resources.”
2. This report concludes on the effectiveness of the council’s leadership of the development of the council’s strategic priorities, following the 2022 local government elections.
3. [The Accounts Commission’s Strategy \(2021-26\)](#) sets out its priorities to focus on inequalities, funding, communities and recovery. The Code of Audit Practice sets out the Best Value work required to report on these priorities.

Code of Audit Practice 2020 Best Value reporting requirements

Best Value reporting – extract from the Code

87. The Accounts Commission’s approach to Best Value involves reporting on individual local government bodies and thematically across the local government sector through performance reports:

- As part of their integrated wider-scope annual audit work appointed auditors use a risk-based approach to assess and report whether the audited body has made proper arrangements for securing Best Value and is complying with its community planning duties, including reporting progress against previous Best Value findings and recommendations.
- The Accounts Commission also requires the Controller of Audit to report to the Accounts Commission on each council or Integration Joint Board (IJB) at least once over the five-year audit appointment on the body’s performance on its Best Value duty. This enables the Accounts Commission to make findings for improvement where appropriate. ¹
- The Accounts Commission reports nationally on thematic aspects of local government bodies’ approaches to, and performance in, meeting their Best Value and community planning duties. Local government appointed auditors report locally on any such Best Value thematic work prescribed by the Accounts Commission.

¹ The Controller of Audit will report the first tranche of council BV reports to the Commission between October 2023 and August 2024 on Moray, Falkirk, Dundee City, Orkney Islands, South Ayrshire, Dumfries and Galloway, Clackmannanshire and West Dunbartonshire.

4. This report covers the thematic aspect of the Best Value audit requirements. The Commission has directed auditors to report on the effectiveness of the leadership of the development of the council's strategic priorities.



5. In carrying out the work auditors have considered the following questions:

- How clear is the new council vision and its priorities?
- How effectively have the views of citizens and communities been reflected in the priorities and decisions taken by the council?
- How effectively do the council priorities reflect the need to reduce inequalities and climate change?
- How good are the delivery plans and is there alignment of financial, workforce, asset and digital plans with the council's priorities?
- Overall, how effective has the leadership been (political and officer) in setting clear priorities and a sustainable approach to delivering them?

6. An improvement action plan is included at [Appendix 1](#) of this report. This sets out audit recommendations in key areas, and the council's planned response including responsible officers and dates for implementation.

7. The coverage of the work is in line with the expectations for councils arrangements for the seven Best Value themes in the [Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, Best Value Statutory Guidance 2020](#).

Council vision and priorities

8. A council focused on achieving Best Value in how it operates will be able to demonstrate that elected members and officers have a clear vision and priorities for their area.
9. The [Local Government in Scotland Overview 2022](#) says that Scotland’s councils have had a pivotal role in supporting and working with communities as they respond to the impacts of Covid-19. Following the council elections in May 2022, councils will have reviewed their priorities.

The Council has created a clear vision through joint working with it’s community planning partners

10. Midlothian Council (the Council) agreed its Single Midlothian Plan 2023-27 (SMP) in June 2023.
11. The SMP was developed through joint working with community planning partners, engagement with citizens and the Citizens Panel, and following various stakeholder events throughout 2022. (refer to paragraph 22). It has been written in plain English to improve accessibility and marks a move from short term to medium term planning for the Council and its community planning partners.
12. The Council has created a clear vision for Midlothian to create “a great, green place to grow” over the next four years.
13. [Exhibit 1](#) sets out the Council’s vision statement. The vision is supported by three key outcomes and seven thematic groups which have been established within the Community Planning Partnership (CPP). Each of the seven thematic groups have set out their own improvement actions:

Exhibit 1
Single Midlothian Plan 2023-27

Vision statement	By working together as a Community Planning Partnership, individuals and communities will be able to lead healthier, safer and greener lives by 2030. No child or household need live in poverty. Midlothian will be a great green place to grow by achieving our net zero carbon ambitions and supporting local people to strengthen the skills they need for learning, life and work.
	Individuals and communities have improved health and skills for learning, life and work

Three Key Outcomes	No child or household living in poverty	
	Significant progress is made towards net zero carbon emissions by 2030	
Thematic priorities	Midlothian will be healthier	13 actions
	Midlothian will be safer	10 actions
	Midlothian will Get it Right for Every Child	12 actions
	Midlothian will support residents to improve employability and outcomes in our communities	24 actions
	Midlothian will be green	21 actions
	Midlothian will have a wellbeing economy and be better connected	9 actions
	Midlothian will work towards reducing poverty.	18 actions
	Total	107 actions

Source: Single Midlothian Plan (SMP) 2023-27

14. The SMP is a live document and is informed by consultation through the thematic groups. The work of CPP is reported to communities for feedback. In addition, key equality groups (Midlothian Peoples Equality Group and Faith Partnership Group) provide direct feedback and the Housing Services Tenant Participation Officer liaises with the tenants group over the actions within the SMP.

Performance reporting is continuing to improve

15. The CPP Board monitors performance of the Single Midlothian Plan every six months with the annual report highlighting success stories arising from the achievement of outcomes. The Council use a separate balanced scorecard to track the performance indicators for the services it is directly responsible for. In response to the [2019 Best Value Assurance Report](#), the council implemented a digital dashboard performance management system, Pentana Browser, where elected members can access up-to-date performance data.

16. The Single Midlothian Plan H2 Performance Report which included the SMP balanced scorecard indicators was approved at the June 2023 Midlothian Council meeting alongside the Council service plans. There are 110 indicators set out in a dashboard format. A RAG status is included to show how many

indicators are on target and areas where data is missing. Citizens can view the scorecards and performance reports on the Council's website.

17. Improvements in performance reporting, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data over time, are assisting the council and partners more clearly in demonstrating performance against agreed actions and targets.

The Council's vision and priorities have been shared with citizens and staff

18. The Council has engaged with citizens and staff to articulate its vision and priorities. The Council shared details of the renewed SMP with members of the public in June 2023 through a press release and the SMP is available on the Council's website.

The Council is arranging more community planning events to showcase the work of the partnership

19. A community planning launch event took place in November 2023 and over the next four years there is expected to be an increased profile of community planning led events, showcasing the work of the partnership.

20. The chief executive shares the vision and priorities with staff through a weekly email bulletin, the Leadership Forum and through a separate bulletin to stakeholders.

21. Midlothian Council is a partner with the 5 other local authorities that make up the Edinburgh and South East Scotland City region, together with regional universities, colleges and the private sector signed a City Region Deal with the UK and Scottish Governments, with a value of over £1.3 billion. The City Region Deal aims to drive productivity and growth while reducing inequalities and deprivation. pulling in significant government investment by innovation, skills and infrastructure. Performance will be significantly improved, and the inclusive growth will tackle inequality and deprivation.

Community engagement and feedback

22. Councils, with their community planning partners, have a responsibility to ensure that people and communities are able to be fully involved in the decisions that affect their everyday lives. There must be a focus on getting the services people need in place, to have the best impact on the lives of individuals and communities.

23. Early and meaningful engagement and effective collaboration with communities to identify and understand local needs, and in decisions that affect the planning and delivery of services should be a core part of determining a council's vision and priorities.

24. In Midlothian, the Community Planning Partnership is led by the Community Planning Partnership Board which is made up of members from many organisations including Police Scotland, NHS Lothian, various community groups and Midlothian Voluntary Action. There is a Community Planning Working Group which reports to the Board, and this group is supported by the 7 thematic groups ([Exhibit 1](#)).

The Council worked with key stakeholders to develop shared priorities which informed the Single Midlothian Plan

25. Community engagement and feedback is important to Midlothian Council. There is supporting evidence that the Council meets with Public, Private, Voluntary sectors and local communities on a regular basis throughout the year. To inform the development of the SMP an annual community planning development day was held, with over 70 representatives from the council, community groups, and third sector organisations. This provided an inclusive forum for attendees to reflect on the previous SMP and to analyse survey results from a citizen panel to form actions for the new plan.

26. Three additional events were held in May 2023 to gain feedback on the draft plan and the draft plan was also circulated across the CPP network of over 3,500 people for comments.

27. In recognition that some community groups are harder to reach the Midlothian Youth Platform organised events to gather the views of young people aged 12-21. This included a conference called a "Hackathon" at Dalkeith Primary which was attended by around 70 people.

28. The Council has reported the following additional successes through engaging with communities :

- Annual participation measure for young people over 16 is 93.4% for Midlothian (2022/23: 95%).
- Following public consultations the Council created a cross party cost of living task force in June 2022 to tackle the increased pressure on household finances. Five elected members continue to meet monthly to identify local solutions to support families in crisis and work with partner agencies and local organisations to put support in place.
- In November 2022 a public consultation was held on road speed limits in the area. Over 1,000 comments and suggestions were received from local residents, community councils and other organisations. The council approved the creation of an action plan in May 2023 which will be considered at a future council meeting and shared on the council's website to update participants on the final results.
- The Council's ageing well programme has delivered over 50 activities each week
- Volunteering at Midlothian Community Hospital has increased by 125%
- A grant of £10,000 has been obtained for the Midlothian Tourism Forum.
- Biodiversity work has been included in the school curriculum. The number of children and young people receiving support from community-based services increased
- 1-1 support was offered for 22 Third Sector organisations.
- This year 3,300 volunteer hours were spent in countryside sites ensuring an attractive, safe and welcoming environment for all to enjoy. Volunteer numbers have increased significantly over the last few years, with a 20% increase in volunteer hours this quarter compared to the same period last year. Green flag status was awarded for Kings Park Dalkeith and Straiton pond. The awards for Countryside sites demonstrate the success of close partnership working between volunteers and their coordination by our Ranger service.
- The Countryside Ranger Service continues to engage with communities and volunteers on various initiatives and events. Grassland management, to increase pollinator species and carbon sequestration rates, was carried out at Vogrie, Roslin and Straiton Pond by volunteers cutting and lifting wildflower rich meadow areas. 'Vogrie Bioblitz' of the former golf course took place with partners and volunteer recorders to gather information on species as a benchmark for future management interventions in species diversity. Butterfly Surveys were carried out weekly from April to September by volunteers as part of national monitoring scheme. Work continues this quarter with the river Esk giant hogweed eradication project.

Reducing inequalities and tackling climate change

29. Council priorities are expected to reflect the Best Value expectations that all activity should contribute to tackling poverty, reducing inequality and promoting fairness, respect and dignity for all citizens, alongside a focus on sustainable development, including climate change.

30. The Accounts Commission's [Local Government in Scotland Overview 2023](#) report highlights that changing demographics, the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have increased pressure on council services and people already experiencing inequality are most affected. As councils take steps to radically change how they deliver services, the needs of the most vulnerable or people living in poverty must be at the centre.

31. The Accounts Commission's report also notes that councils have a critical role in achieving Scotland's national climate change goals and contributing towards the national target of net zero by 2045.

32. Around two-thirds of councils have formally declared a climate emergency, and COSLA's Blueprint for Local Government states that climate change is a 'greater threat than COVID'. The Scottish Government has recently published guidance on public sector leadership on the global climate emergency to help public bodies in leading climate action. Addressing the climate emergency and setting actions to achieve net zero will need to be a key element of councils' recovery and renewal from the pandemic.

The Council has a clear focus on reducing poverty and tackling inequality.

33. The Council has a clear focus on the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and has carried out a significant amount of work in delivering against the UNCRC as evidenced in the Midlothian Children's Rights Report 2020-2023. As a child-centred organisation, the UNCRC provides the Council and NHS Lothian with a platform to help determine progress in improving and promoting the wellbeing of children.

34. Work is ongoing across the Council in partnership with NHS, Police and 3rd sector organisations to improve educational attainment and achievement, improve health and wellbeing outcomes, support parents and carers, reduce unemployment and ensure the participation of young people.

35. The Council has set up a cross party cost of living task force and moved from taking a crisis intervention approach to a preventive approach.

36. The Council has an established strategic poverty prevention group comprising cross party elected members, public health workers and representatives from partner organisations and communities. The group, which was established in the Autumn 2022, is working with the Midlothian Financial Inclusion Network on cost of living issues. In addition, the Council jointly leads a child poverty working group with NHS Lothian and they report annually on locally agreed actions to reduce child poverty during the year.

37. The strategic poverty prevention and the child poverty working groups plan to collaboratively develop a long term child poverty strategy and action plan by 2024-25. It will be informed by the Midlothian Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation profile and people with lived experience.

38. Understanding the areas in Midlothian where the population is most income deprived will help to target and measure actions to reduce child poverty. This data will be used as one source of information to continue to inform the development a Child Poverty Index and Poverty locality maps, using multiple data sources that will ensure a more robust data set.

39. As part of improvement work, the council were supported by the Improvement Service to develop a Child Poverty Index (CPI) for Midlothian. The CPI uses DWP Low Income families, Free School Meal, School Clothing Grant and Education Maintenance Allowance data to identify geographic areas where high levels of child poverty may be prevalent.

40. Elected Members, the Council Management Team and staff attend, or complete mandatory online equality and diversity awareness training and it is included in the staff induction programme.

41. The Council engages with local equality groups including the Peoples Equality Group, Young People's Advice Service and LGBT Youth Group through various events and forums. Some examples of this engagement are:

- Equal Midlothian week which was held in March 2023 and included events on topics including disability and cooking skills.
- The Depute Provost was appointed as the Midlothian Council Equalities and White Ribbon Champion, which is an initiative to encourage men to end violence against women.

42. Midlothian Council uses an Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) tool to examine the impact of decisions on the community. IIAs are required for all policies that affect people to ensure the impact is considered equally including for those with protected characteristics. Every relevant policy considered by the council is subject to an IIA with support and quality-assurance offered by the Equality and Diversity Officer at the planning stage.

Reducing climate change is a strategic priority for the council and it is considered a corporate risk.

43. Tackling climate change is central to the SMP and its vision for the area. The Council has an agreed outcome to make significant progress towards net zero carbon emissions by 2030.

44. The Council recognises the strategic risks of fulfilling the requirements of the Climate Change Act including staffing and significant financial investment and began actively managing the risks in 2019. The Council declared a climate emergency in December 2019 and published its Climate Change Strategy and action plan in August 2020.

45. A Carbon Charter and action plan for Midlothian Businesses has been created and includes local, national and international resources to support businesses become more energy and carbon efficient.

46. A Climate Emergency Group has been established to monitor progress of the Council's ambitious targets. The group consists of elected members, individuals and representatives of the community councils and community groups, national government agencies, third sector organisations, local chamber of commerce, landowners and the council's joint venture; Midlothian Energy Ltd.

47. Failure to adapt to climate change is included in the council's corporate risk register and is actively monitored through the corporate risk management process. We will continue to review progress against actions identified to mitigate the risks.

Alignment of delivery plans

48. Making the best use of public resources is at the heart of delivering Best Value. With clear plans and strategies in place, and with sound governance and strong leadership, a Council will be well placed to ensure that all of its resources are deployed to achieve its strategic priorities, meet the needs of its communities and deliver continuous improvement.

49. In our [Local Government in Scotland Overview 2023](#), we acknowledged that budget constraints and increasing cost pressures are putting councils' finances under severe strain. An increasing proportion of funding is ringfenced or directed for national policy initiatives. While this is important to help deliver national priorities, it prevents councils from making decisions about how funds can be used at a local level, to meet local need. Increasingly difficult choices about spending priorities and service provision are having to be made. Delivering services differently should be focused on improving performance and outcomes in ways that are innovative, affordable, and sustainable.

The five-year revenue budget strategy agreed in September 2023 is projecting a budget gap of £34.7 million to 2028/29

50. In February 2023, the Council agreed a five-year revenue budget strategy for the period 2023/24 to 2027/28. At that time the strategy was projecting a cumulative budget gap of £15 million by 2027/28. The Council updated the five-year revenue budget strategy in September and the cumulative projected budget gap has increased significantly to £24 million to 2027/28.

51. We performed a review of the Council's annual budget setting arrangements and have concluded that the budget process implemented by the Council appears to be well established and officers and Finance Business Partners are very clear about their responsibilities and time frames. The process involves strong scrutiny arrangements, with the Business Transformation Steering Group and Council both having opportunities to scrutinise the budget and consider opportunities to reduce any emerging budget gap. The budget setting document includes realistic financial assumptions and it offers good information regarding where there are projected over and underspends. It also gives brief explanations and context setting as appropriate.

52. Savings proposals to bridge the budget gap were previously considered in the annual budget setting meetings but are now considered by the Business Transformation Steering Group (BTSG). This enables savings proposals to be agreed so that the Council is able to invest in its vision and corporate priorities.

53. Midlothian is a fast growing council area and this presents challenges in terms of increased service demand within its funding allocation. The Council is exploring whether the growth in population is accurately reflected in government

funding to mitigate the increase in cost pressures on services, particularly those which are demand led.

54. It is clear that the council faces heightened financial challenges in delivering balanced budgets and financially sustainable services and radical solutions and robust financial plans will be needed to ensure service delivery remains financially sustainable.

New service plans are in place and demonstrate clear links to the council's strategic plans and Single Midlothian Plan.

55. Service plans were approved by the Council in June 2023. Each service has a service improvement plan that links the local outcomes to the commitments in the Single Midlothian Plan and council strategic priorities. Progress of the plans are scrutinised quarterly by the Cabinet and Performance, Review and Scrutiny Committees.

56. The service plans are sufficiently detailed and include the main priorities that the Council are looking to pursue. The plans are interconnected ensuring that the key priorities are being monitored and worked on. They identify each services performance and challenges well and provide good level of detail in terms of planned actions for the coming quarters.

The council has aligned its key strategies to recover from Covid-19 by focusing on creating a wellbeing economy

57. The Council's Transformation Blueprint aims to bridge the Council's projected funding gap and builds on the previous Route Map through and out of the Covid Pandemic. It aligns with the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2023/24 - 2027/28 and has an allocation of £2 million from the General Fund for delivery.

58. It has three main aims:

- individuals and communities have improved health and learning outcomes
- no child or household live in poverty
- significant progress is made towards the net zero agenda.

59. The Transformation Blueprint is aligned to the Scottish Government's vision for Scotland and the Wellbeing Economy Monitor. A wellbeing economy includes promoting wellbeing, inclusion and fairness, and the environment. The Transformation Blueprint also aligns to the Single Midlothian Plan 2023-27 and is designed to help secure greater financial sustainability as well as making sure the Council has the technology, assets, skilled staff and multi-agency working to create more efficient and effective services for local people.

60. There is an emphasis on workforce in theme 2 of the blueprint but we have observed that the Council does not have a current workforce plan. However, the [2023/24 Corporate Services Service Plan](#) outlines a number of updates in relation to workforce planning. It notes that there is a Corporate Workforce Plan

in place, that workforce plans for all service areas is an objective for 2023/24, and the rollout of a Wellbeing Strategy for the workforce is planned in 2023/24.

61. We have also observed that the current digital strategy covers the period 2020-2023 and is soon to be out of date. We have been advised that the Council is currently revising the strategy.

62. The Council plan's to deliver transformation in 19 sprints over the five year period and a three year fixed term project management office will be established to drive forward the Transformation Blueprint. Each programme will have a series of key performance indicators embedded within each sprint.

63. Performance will be monitored by senior management and quarterly reports will be submitted to Cabinet and the Performance, Review and Scrutiny committee. Performance improvement will be targeted towards moving the 41 low performing Local Government Benchmarking Framework indicators into the upper quartiles in order to deliver better outcomes.

64. The council needs to closely monitor progress with the Transformation Blueprint and ensure it can deliver its plans within the constrained financial context.

65. The Capital Plan outlines the Council's corporate priorities and the considerations required relating to funding, governance and assessing affordability. There is recognition through the prioritisation process engagement between officers and members that there is a need to balance investment in maintaining and enhancing existing infrastructure against the ambition for developing new assets.

The Council engages with citizens in budget decisions

66. The Council have previously piloted a participatory budgeting process to encourage citizens to get involved in the allocation of budgets.

67. Around 600 people attended the budgeting events, with 473 people each voting for 3 projects to be funded. In total, 32 projects received funding. A participatory budgeting approach was also taken to allocate the Council's share of the Local Authority Covid Economic Recovery Fund, more detail in paragraph 24.

68. The Council held a consultation on the 2023/24 budget. It received over 450 responses. 12 Have Your Say emails and 84 social media comments were also considered. The majority of responses were from individuals but around 10% came from organisations. The results were provided as part of the budget setting meeting papers to provide transparency for members of the public. Examples of comments included:

- "Maintaining leisure facilities is vital. Youngest are struggling with mental health issues following covid. It is vital that they can exercise and clubs are not forced to close as a result of price increases."
- "Early years learning very important for struggling families, working parents. Should be one of the priorities in council list."

- “Partner organisations provide really good value for money so do not cut their budgets. Third sector are a great support.”

Leadership

69. We have observed improved constructive relationships between members and officers which have facilitated the creation of the Cost of Living Taskforce and the Transformation Blueprint. Effective leadership from councillors, chief executives and senior officers, is key to councils achieving their objectives and providing clear strategic direction. The complex local government environment means collaborative leadership, working with partners, communities and citizens to improve outcomes is more important than ever.

70. Leaders need to be skilled in effective strategic thinking, decision-making and collaborative working and able to learn lessons from new ways of working. Councillors and officers must continue to be clear on their roles in setting the vision and planning for its delivery.

71. Leaders should continue to demonstrate behaviours and working relationships that foster a culture of cooperation, and a commitment to continuous improvement and innovation. Good conduct and behaviours when working together are crucial. Working relationships between members and between members and officers should be constructive and productive. Councillors should show a commitment to agreed council priorities and work together to achieve them.

72. The current chief executive has been in post since 2018. She is supported by three directors who are responsible for health, place and children, young people, families, communities and partnerships. The council leader and provost were both elected following the election making it the only council in Scotland with an all-female council leadership team.

73. The previous BVAR recommended that the council develop and sustain more constructive relationships between members and between members and officers. There is evidence this is happening through discussions with officers and members and the creation of the Cost of Living Task Force and creation of the Transformation Blueprint.

74. Members also worked together to agree the Medium-Term Financial Strategy in February 2023. This was supplemented by officer led briefings to all three political groups prior to the full council meeting. The Corporate Management Team and Elected Members Business Transformation Steering Group also discussed budget saving proposals and transformation priorities prior to full council approval.

The council has taken steps to improve decision-making and encourage scrutiny

75. Prior to the local government election in May 2022 all council committees were chaired by the administration except the Performance Review and

Scrutiny, and the Audit Committee. The new council leader worked with members following the election to ensure the current committee structure has cross party representation. Additionally, in the last term all outside bodies and organisations were allocated to administration members, but they are now shared proportionately between the three political groups. This demonstrates the council has taken steps to improve decision-making, encourage scrutiny and build councillors personal development. The council leader hopes this approach will lead to the retention of Councillors at the next election.

The Council supports continuous improvement for elected members and staff

76. Midlothian Council has an appropriate approach to ensuring there is sufficient knowledge at a member level to support decision making and scrutiny. Elected members were provided with a wide-ranging training programme as part of the formal induction process following the local government election in May 2022. The eight week programme covered all aspects of the council and in more complex areas such as treasury management, more regular briefing sessions were provided. Sessions were generally well attended, with an average attendance of 11 members across 30 sessions, ranging from three members attending local by default to 16 members attending a session on local government finance. Elected members are encouraged to maintain their own personal development plans.

77. In February 2022 the Council launched a staff survey in the Place Directorate. Nesta innovation foundation was invited to conduct the research and over 70 people participated. The “Listen and Learn” report led to several improvements including: greater awareness of where staff can get support that works for them at the right time; more managers implemented an open-door policy; and a new IVF and miscarriage policy was created.

Appendix 1

Improvement Action plan

Issue/risk	Recommendation	Agreed management action / timing
<p>1. Financial sustainability</p> <p>In February 2023, Midlothian Council agreed a five-year revenue budget strategy for the period 2023/24 to 2027/28. At that time the strategy was projecting a budget gap of £15 million by 2027/28. The Council updated the five-year revenue budget strategy in September and the projected budget gap has increased significantly to £34.7 million to 2028/29.</p> <p>It is clear that the Council faces heightened financial challenges in delivering balanced budgets and financially sustainable services (including statutory services) and more radical solutions will be needed to ensure service delivery remains financially sustainable.</p>	<p>Robust financial planning will be required to make the strategic decisions and transformation necessary to deliver financially sustainable services into the longer term (refer paragraph 54).</p>	<p>Management Response: The budget gap for the forthcoming financial year will be updated as detailed information becomes available on Scottish Government funding, the position with Council tax increases, conditions attached to Scottish Government funding and base budget pressures. The Transformation Blueprint sprints will develop savings options and Capital Plan Prioritisation will maintain an affordable level of debt charges. The projected budget gap for the remainder of the MTFS will be updated in light of the 2024/25 budget setting.</p> <p>Officer: Corporate Management Team</p> <p>Date: 30 June 2023</p>
<p>2. Implementing the Transformation Blueprint</p> <p>The Council's Transformation Blueprint aims to bridge the council's projected five year funding gap and builds on the previous Route Map out of the Covid Pandemic. It aligns with the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2023/24 - 2027/28 and has an</p>	<p>The council needs to closely monitor progress with the Transformation Blueprint and ensure it can deliver its plans within the constrained financial context (refer paragraph 64).</p>	<p>Management Response: A structured and regular reporting mechanism for the Transformation Blueprint is in place and will continue.</p> <p>Officer: Chief Executive</p> <p>Date: Ongoing.</p>

allocation of £2 million from
the General Fund for delivery.

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