# Corporate Solutions Performance Report Quarter Two 2020/21



#### 01. Progress in delivery of strategic outcomes

Corporate Solutions ethos is to embrace the delivery of a high performance culture focused on creativity, innovation, performance, quality and outcomes. Ensuring that services are of the highest quality and meet Elected Member and public aspirations, whilst achieving Best Value and making the best use of resources.

The service, encompassing Finance, Human Resources, Employment and Reward, Legal, Procurement, Customer Services and Libraries, Revenues, Digital, Business Services and Communications, has a strategic focus on the delivery of the Midlothian route map for recovery through and out of the pandemic.

The teams are supporting the recovery and the retention of the best elements of transformation that took place in response to the pandemic and also securing permanent changes to the way the Council delivers its services in order to build back better. This approach is based on the creation of a wellbeing economy and it is designed to achieve wellbeing and fairness for our people and the rest of nature. The redesign of services and the changes to build back better are predicated on the overarching principle in delivering services, whether commissioned internally or externally, that we will keep our communities, our employees and our environment safe, minimising exposure to Covid-19, or any other viruses, at the same time as meeting our commitment to being carbon neutral by 2030.

The vast majority of tasks undertaken by Corporate Solutions staff have remained similar to pre-covid times with staff across the teams undertaking a range of additional work, to directly support the Council's response to the pandemic, to facilitate the rapid deployment of remote working and to undertake a range of additional activity including for example provide a range of guidance to employees, the rapid assessment of the financial impact of the pandemic on Council services and importantly providing a central point of contact for citizens as part of The Kindness @ Midlothian campaign.

At the onset of the pandemic it was recognised that the swift shift to remote working, coupled with an increasing range of expenditure pressures in services would require changes which not only needed to be implemented swiftly but which also required to comply with the Council financial regulations framework and give assurance that the internal control framework was being maintained. Accordingly an overview of the Financial Governance arrangements that would be of most relevance during the pandemic was provided to Corporate Incident Management Team (CIMT) in April 2020 and subsequently presented to the Group Leaders meeting. These arrangements were designed to; Support the maintenance of strong and effective financial control; Provide effective financial oversight; Allow for both efficiency and completeness in determining the financial impact on the Council; Supporting the development of effective mitigation to maintain financial sustainability; Supporting reporting and or lobbying for additional funding from Scottish Government; and aid the recovery phase.

In line with the route map at the end of the lockdown phase, we were able to begin reopening of stand-alone libraries, with Dalkeith, Newtongrange and Penicuik now open and with a revised mobile library service helping to service our communities where libraries remain closed to the public. We have also set out a range of quick and easy ways to pay Council Tax and House Rents. Highlighting that it is now easier than ever to pay both and saving our customers the time and trouble of making unwanted journeys or waiting in a queue.

Building on our nine drivers for change, the Service has a particular focus on the key elements of the route map encompassing the delivery and acceleration of the Capital Programme, delivering digital by default and remote working.

These elements of the Midlothian route map for recovery through and out of the pandemic are also captured in the recommendations from the NESTA Listen and Learn Report and having embraced both the Corporate Solutions teams have a key role in progressing the following strands of work

- Valuing Communities:- Being well together, using social media to engage with communities; meaningful local engagement, strengthen and build upon emerging ties with communities and work in partnership to deliver local, Place based services.
- Remote/Flexible Working: Local and flexible placed based working; working smarter; sustainable futures; and a tailored approach.
- Digital First: Access to wifi; technical capability; making things easier; digital by default.

The key activity which underpins this work and which the service is focused on includes:-

- Securing the financial sustainability and maintaining strong financial management across the Council through the delivery of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) incorporating Capital Strategy and Capital Investment plans, Reserves Strategy and Treasury Management Strategy;
- Nurturing a highly motivated and effective workforce through the delivery of the Workforce Strategy and the development of Service Workforce Plans;
- Digital first and embracing data insight and analytics by developing and implementing a refreshed Digital Strategy and Digital Learning Strategy;
- A refresh of the Customer Services Strategy and implementation of the online payments and services (OPAS) platform;
- A refreshed Procurement Strategy and Contract Delivery Plan.

Whist remote working has brought a range of new challenges it has also by necessity brought about the accelerated adoption of a range of business tools and systems developments which are supporting our staff to effectively continue to deliver services. These developments also providing an effective and efficient means to progress and monitor work and teams performance. The adoption of electronic workflows for example has removed reliance on paper and wet signatures and provides an electronic record of what has been carried out by whom and when. Managers and colleagues are using all of the new technology available to them to maintain contact with colleagues, work collaboratively to deliver outcomes and to support colleagues continued personal development and learning.

## **Growing Council**

Midlothian is projected to have the highest percentage change in population size of all council areas in Scotland. Between 2018 to 2028, the population of Midlothian is projected to increase from 91,340 to 103,945. This is an increase of 13.8%, which is on contrast to a projected increase of 1.8% for Scotland as a whole.

This brings the opportunity to support the Council vision of being 'A Great Place to Grow'. The opportunity to redevelop parts of Midlothian, improve infrastructure with a focus on area targeting, improving economic opportunities, improving education and health outcomes.

This growth creates the opportunity to meet the housing need with 25% of new homes being built in the affordable housing bracket, in addition to the expansion in Council House building. This construction will directly support employment in construction and will see a steady increase in the value of Council Tax received over time.

The approved, Capital Strategy sets out infrastructure required to meet those demographic pressures and includes the financial contributions Midlothian will make to the Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal.

The extent of the population growth brings with it specific funding challenges and a key element of securing continued financial sustainability will be to secure a fair funding deal for the Council and its community planning partners. Securing a funding settlement from government which recognises and supports growth, growth which is central to the Scottish economy as a whole.

## 1: Medium Term Financial Strategy

The core objective of the MTFS is to secure the Council's financial sustainability during an ongoing period of financial constraint coupled with acute service demand pressures and increasing customer expectations.

The MTFS is not only about balancing the budgets, it provides a means to ensure as far as possible that the limited resources available to the Council are targeted on delivery of improved outcomes, particularly against the key priorities of:-

- Reducing the gap in learning outcomes
- Reducing the gap in health outcomes
- Reducing the gap in economic circumstances

The MTFS is central to ensuring that the resources available to the Council is directed towards the priorities set out in the Midlothian Single Plan.

## Achievements

a) Against the backdrop of COVID 19 successful completion of the draft audited accounts for 2019/20 with an unqualified opinion and some very positive auditor comment;

b) Completion of the full suite of 2019/20 Financial Monitoring reports for Council in August 2020 as part of the robust scrutiny of financial performance, and which included an updated assessment of the financial impact of Covid on the Council;

c) Securing a green rating for financial management as detailed in EY's 2019/20 annual report;

d) Finalisation of the strategic review of the Loans Fund which provides the Council with the option of a corporate solution to the remaining years of the MTFS;

e) The development of a corporate solution to secure financial balance for 2021/22 and 2022/23 which was presented to BTB on 7 October 2020 and which was unanimously endorsed by BTSG on 26 October 2020 and will be presented to Council in December 2020;

f) Maintaining financial governance and internal control despite the overnight shift to remove working. Removing reliance on wet signatures and imbedding controls within workflows as detailed in a report to CMT on 14 October 2020;

g) Maintaining Council Tax collection rates and administration of SWF and a range of Covid grant schemes.

# 2: Workforce Strategy

The purpose of the Workforce Strategy is in essence quite simple, but nevertheless of critical importance, and will ensure that the Council continues to have a workforce that is able to deliver positive outcomes for the people of Midlothian. It sets out an approach to supporting, developing and reshaping the workforce now and in the future in response to changes whether as a consequence of national or local issues. It is underpinned by the Council's values and vision.

The Workforce Strategy is important as it outlines the organisation's approach to articulating how workforce issues will be managed to ensure the Council has the people and skills to manage change and deliver service. The strategy will ensure we have the right people at the right time and who have the right skills, knowledge and attitude to provide services confidently and competently.

# Achievements

a) In very rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic, remote working was swiftly adopted and subsequently a Remote Working Policy has been endorsed by CMT which will support the continuation of remote working through and out of the pandemic. Successful deployment of scores of existing staff to posts into frontline services in response to the Council's first responder status;

b) Continuation of a rolling programme of Wellness@Midlothian initiatives to ensure we continue to support the wellbeing of our staff during these difficult times;

c) Significant number of detailed communications issued to both staff and managers in terms of updates, directives, and most importantly supports available during the COVID emergency;

d) Facilitation of the sustainable and safe return to work of over 150 staff previously on COVID-19 paid special leave due to underlying health condition;

e) Continuation of robust and collegiate relations with our trade union colleagues;

f) Successful joint working with Nesta on the 'Listen and Learn' report continuing to ensure staff engagement continues to be a priority particularly during and out of the COVID crisis;

g) Implementation of an all-staff engagement survey to measure current engagement levels and ensure tailored interventions are implemented via service-level action plans, in response;

h) Successful re-tendering for Physiotherapy Service to ensure our staff continue to receive the highest quality of care.

# 3: Digital Strategy and Digital Learning Strategy

The current Digital Strategy has provided ICT infrastructure and facilities that have supported the rapid transition to new ways of working demonstrating that they effectively and efficiently underpin delivery of Council Services and align with the Single Midlothian Plan and the National ICT Strategy for Scotland.

Midlothian's current Digital Learning Strategy is central to the Council's aim of delivering a world-class education system. It is closely aligned with Scottish Government's policy and advice on digital learning and it also articulates with key national and local priorities.

Embracing the Digital First strand of the Nesta report presents an ideal opportunity to refresh the Council's Digital Strategy. This refreshed digital strategy will support the Council's stated objectives in both the route map and Nesta recommendations and will also embrace the opportunities to embrace the power of data insight and data analytics to support service redesign and the implementation of preventative interventions. As such the Council is entering an exciting phase where it can not only continue to embrace use of digital technologies in the workplace and schools but also harness the power of the data it collects to drive innovative and forward looking service redesign for the benefit of all citizens.

## Achievements

a) Significant achievement by in the response and deployment of a range of digital solutions and technologies to support the pandemic response. Implemented a number of transformational projects Council wide (migrated 2,200 user mail accounts, implemented MS Teams, deployed in excess of 500 hundred digital and mobile devices (Laptops, Smartphones and Tablets). Delivered a range of digital solutions that allowed users to work remotely with access to Council applications and services;

b) Continuous improvements and changes to Customer and Contact Centre operation to improve Council response and services and to swiftly shift to a remote Contact Centre operating model:- Phase 3 – Implemented and redesigned the Scottish Welfare Fund – now live. Phase 4 - Deployment of payment capabilities for Council services via remote working solution;

c) Provided a totally different model of support for staff who are working remotely and who needed access to critical Council services along with maintaining business critical systems and applications with the Corporate and Education environment.

d) Digital enabled projects: a number of new business applications have been implemented and these continue to improve the overall digital end user customer experience e.g. Planning, Building Standards, Environmental Health and Trading Standards along with associated public registers and Social Work application has just been successfully migrated to software as a service;

e) CyberSecurity resilience: number of improvements made to the Council Cyber defences implemented enhancements to firewalls and the regular review and maintenance of ongoing threats and risks. Implement Scottish Government CyberSecurity action plan. Compliance: Preparation and planning of for PSN accreditation – certification now confirmed until April 2021.

## 4: Customer Services Strategy

The Customer Service Strategy defines the key drivers that will enable Midlothian Council to deliver 'customer service excellence' to our communities. It outlines the commitment to provide choice to the customer in the way services are accessed and provided. This includes innovation, partnership working and optimising the use of technology within resource constraints. The Strategy will help us to change the way we deliver services utilising the latest technologies and linking to national frameworks.

As one of the fastest growing areas in Scotland, the Council cannot support more customers using the current resources, systems and processes. This means that the adoption of digital and automated processes will be key to continuing to provide a seamless customer journey, satisfying enquiries at the first point of contact and meeting increased demand.

Customer self-service and new automated processes can help deliver some key services without customers dealing directly with a member of staff and could truly transform the way the Council deliver services. We already have a well-managed public facing website with SOCITM awarding our site four stars. Midlothian is one of only four Councils in Scotland to achieve this accolade. Our Web Team, 50 Content Editors and Council employees, generally 'get it' and already we have been able to transform how our customers interact with the Council. During 2020/21, increasing the pace of digital transformation, particularly in front-facing customer services, will be a service and corporate priority, for Midlothian Council – one that can deliver the required efficiencies without negatively affecting customer experience.

# Achievements

a) Working closely with colleagues in the Revenues Team amongst others, service re-design of the Scottish Welfare Fund resulted in an online form being launched to provide greater options for applicants and help those facing in-work poverty;

b) The Customer Services Platform (OPAS) has been approved and contractual discussions are continuing;
 c) The extended Contact Centre staff continue to provide support for core Contact Centre calls in addition to kindness and shielding calls;

d) Libraries have provided online services throughout the summer and worked closely with colleagues in Education to promote eBooks, eAudiobooks and eComics to families provided with Council Chromebooks. The Summer Reading Challenge was run online and Midlothian recorded the 6th greatest number of children who interacted with the challenge and the 7th greatest number of children who completed the challenge. Two library branches have reopened offering Reserve and Collect, a returns service, PC access along with NEC enquiries amongst other things; e) Registrars have maintained service and have provided assistance to Edinburgh and East Lothian colleagues for birth registrations.

## Procurement Strategy

The procurement function has a central role in supporting the Council to achieve its strategic priorities within a constrained financial envelope. Procurement allows the Council to use its spending power to drive our key strategic priorities and to secure the best possible value and outcomes for Midlothian. Effective procurement can maximise the value of every pound spent in terms of jobs, skills and supply chain opportunities in the local community. We will aim

to address economic, social and environmental considerations at all stages of the procurement cycle within the rules of open, fair and transparent competition.

The procurement team in conjunction with Economic Development are working to develop an SME Strategy to support and assist local businesses to win contracts fairly and transparently on a competitive market. We will further develop our collaborative and commercial relationships with key partners as part of our strategic category management approach, to deliver the best possible outcomes for the citizens of Midlothian.

The team has utilised framework agreements with Scotland Excel and Procurement for Housing (amongst others) which not only provides an easier route to market but also delivers value for money. The Procurement team is currently working with Scotland Excel to review the service to ensure it remains fit for purpose. We have also explored with neighbouring Council's albeit with limited success opportunities to collaborate on the joint delivery of procurement services and so will continue to engage with Scotland Excel to help support service development.

# Achievements

a) High value contracts awarded, including:

- Domestic Gas Inspection services
- Residual Waste and associated services
- Morris Road Housing Construction
- Architectural Services, High Street, Bonnyrigg
- Semi-permanent street barrier systems
- Various vehicles purchased through Scotland Excel
- Passive House Certifier contracts awarded for Polton Street and Newbattle new build housing projects
- Perimeter fencing at Cornbank Primary School and Hawthorn Children's Centre
- Northburn Culvert repairs

b) Roll out of Cenefits system to assist the Council in obtaining community benefits from contracts;

c) Hosted meet the buyer events held remotely;

d) Roll out of contract variations for all National Care Home Providers contracts;

e) Worked to protect the supply chain and ensured Council was able to access necessary items during the COVID 19 pandemic.

## 5: Other Service Improvements

a) In response to COVID-19 pandemic BACS payments issued for Free School Meals, Self Employed Grants, Bed & Breakfasts and Transition Fund for Nurseries;

b) Successful implementation for the electronic submission and payment of Gas Safety Inspection invoices and associated Gas Safety Certificates;

c) Total Repairs upgrade completed including the replace of TotalMobile services completed in conjunction with Digital Services;

d) d) Upgrade to Kirona DRS (BMS appointments software) completed.

## 02. Challenges and Risks

The most significant challenge facing all services is continued impact of and response to the COVID 19 pandemic. This has presented new and unique challenges through the first half of the year and continues to bring new challenges into quarter three.

## **Financial Sustainability**

Given the divergence from budget as a result of the pandemic the expectation of continuing challenging grant settlements representing a real terms reduction in core funding together with the impact of a rapidly growing population and greater demand for services, the Council will need to maintain a focus on securing a sustainable and deliverable Medium Term Financial Strategy. Delivery of service redesign and savings is key and this needs to continue to be monitored closely though the Business Transformation Board and Steering Group and through the dedicated CMT Financial Monitoring arrangements. Values attached to proposals in the MTFS were reviewed further to ensure they sat correctly within a detailed delivery plan which was reflected in the final 2020/21 budget recognising that it is important for the Council that the measures in the MTFS are fully developed (where necessary) at pace and also proceed to implementation at pace.

As touched on earlier a corporate solution to securing financial balance for the 2021/22 and 2022/23 budgets, the two remaining budgets which fall within the term of this Council, was considered by BTSG on 26 October 2020. The adoption of a corporate solution will avoid the need for service cuts at an already challenging time and will in turn enable the leadership team to develop a MTFS for consideration by the next term of Council after the 2022 local government elections.

# UK Decision to leave the EU

All Council services have been kept abreast of the risks associated with the UK leaving the EU and in particular the risks for a no deal scenario. Services have been directed towards UK Government guidance on how to prepare for a no deal and have been tasked with assessing the potential impact and identifying appropriate risk responses. A Council Cross Service Brexit Working Group is in place and is directing preparation for a potential No Deal exit from the European Union.

## 1: Medium Term Financial Strategy

The need to continue to strengthen financial sustainability and financial management by:

a) Continue work on developing cost projections and the corporate solution to achieve financial balance for the remaining period of the Medium Term Financial Strategy;

b) Prepare financial monitoring reports for Q2 reflecting the impact of COVID 19 on the Council's finances and continue to work with budget holders to maintain effective control over expenditure and with Chief Officers to develop plans which address and mitigate against overspends;

c) Mitigating the financial impact of COVID 19 and securing further financial support from Scottish Government and the application of financial flexibilities as part of the MTFS;

d) Continued financial support for the range of service redesign and change programmes and delivery of savings measures. Help shape and lead all strands of the programme, continue to revise savings profiles. Oversight of investment to support transformational change;

e) Review of the Capital Strategy and the affordability of investment plans principally to reflect the ongoing review of the Learning Estate Strategy and recognising the role our investment plans have in supporting economic recovery;
 f) Continue to strengthen financial stewardship in a climate of reducing budgets and increasing service pressure;
 g) Review and update financial directives and associated documentation;

h) To ensure that the Capital Plan and Asset Management Board provides adequate scrutiny and oversight of capital projects to ensure projects are delivered as planned and so, minimise reported slippage in the capital plan;
i) In partnership with colleagues in Place and Education secure funding support for the Learning Estate Strategy from the Phase 2 awards from the LEIP;

j) The additional pressures presented by Welfare Reform are monitored in relation to income disruption to housing rent payments and Council Tax Reduction scheme, evident in increased arrears and increased demand for crisis grants from the Scottish Welfare Fund. DWP introduced a number of Covid-19 measures in April 2020, including an increase in Universal Credit and Tax Credit payments of £20 per week and increasing Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates for private tenants to the 30th percentile measures (previously 50th percentile);

k) DWP commenced the move to Universal Credit (UC) pilot scheme in Harrogate in July 2019 and state that the pilot will end in 2020, with full migration to be achieved by the end of 2023. Due to the impacts of the coronavirus outbreak across the UK from March 2020, work on the pilot is suspended until further notice. From November 2020, it had been expected that more people would be moved across to UC through the managed migration process until completion. In early 2020, the expected completion of the full move over to UC was put back from December 2023 to a revised completion date of September 2024. There has been no update on these dates from DWP due to the impacts of the coronavirus outbreak, as staff were diverted to deal with the large increase in Universal Credit claims with 1.5 million claims made between 13 March and 9 April, six times more than in the same period last year; I) The number of Midlothian Council tenants receiving UC housing costs increased from 1600 in March 2020 to 1,960 in September 2020. During the migration period the accurate and secure administration of Housing Benefit remains with Midlothian Council Revenues Services as required service provision for citizens across Midlothian. Demand and budget expenditure will continue to be monitored and priorities updated, if required, in relation to the number of applications received to the Scottish Welfare Fund.

# 2: Workforce Strategy

Alongside the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2020/21 to 2022/3 we will continue to implement the Workforce Strategy 2017-2022. This includes a focus on the identified themes over the next five years. The Service Workforce Plans will need to be updated to align to the MTFS, the new leadership structure and detail the projected workforce actions over the medium term.

a) Identifying alternative service delivery approaches and the impact on service delivery with pressure on available resource;

b) Securing the improvement in flexibility and productivity throughout the workforce;

c) Continued development of the Workforce Strategy action plan;

d) In light of the implementation of the senior leadership review revisions to the F&ISS workforce plan are no longer appropriate. A new service workforce plan and associated actions will be required for Corporate Solutions which also reflects the Medium Term financial Strategy (MTFS);

e) Continue to support our leadership community so that they are able to perform to a high standard and deliver on the Change Programme adopting the route map and NESTA principles, particularly challenging in the new context we find ourselves working within;

f) Ensuring the adoption of the principles of the new Remote Working Policy to support the Council's position of 'remote working by default';

g) Absence levels are increasing as a direct result of COVID-19 and increased support is required in service areas with high or increasing absence levels to deliver interventions to support their service workforce strategies and;
 h) Staff absence due to COVID-related absence continues to pose a significant risk to service delivery.

# 3: Digital Strategy and Digital Learning Strategy

a) Progressing the refresh of these strategies and ensuring the Council has the capacity and skills to take forward the associated investment and delivery plans. We have engaged SOCITIM Advisory to support this work. SOCITIM bring a welcome external perspective and challenge;

b) Pursuing the transformation of and innovation in service delivery by pursuing digital opportunities, including automation, artificial intelligence and Introduction of new ways of working supported by modern technology solutions etc;

c) The pandemic response has changed a large part of Midlothian's digital foundation and how Council staff and citizens now use Council services as a result. There is still work to be done to ensure the changes that were made at speed to underlying business applications, technologies and processed are reviewed and consolidated to ensure wider stability and resilience can be maintained. Remote workforce also introduces different security, compliance and support challenges;

d) Increased threat of cyber/security attacks, e.g. denial of service, ransomware/hackers is heightened at this time and is an ongoing challenge to mitigate risk and minimise service disruption;

e) Maintaining the integrity and compliance of Public Services Network (PSN) ensuring that the digital estate and associated technologies inclusive of business applications are all up to date and pass rigorous penetration testing is ongoing;

f) Ensuring sustainable investment in digital foundations and assets at a time of financial constraints to allow delivery of the Asset Management Programme:- Microsoft Exchange/Office 365 / Windows 10 upgrade which is currently in the preparation and planning stage;

g) Regulatory changes proposed will impact on Council activities if not planned for – for example New Data Protection laws (GDPR) and other compliance requirements such as Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard (PCI-DSS).

# 4. Customer Services Strategy

a) The resumption of services, sometimes working in a different way than before has led to additional work and pressure for the Contact Centre to respond to;

b) Although there are still redeployed staff providing support they will return to their original services in time and there is an increased workload overall.

# 5. Procurement

a) Completing and implementing a review of the procurement arrangements across the Council including continuing to explore options for joint working with neighbouring councils;

b) Completion of the Annual Procurement report;

c) To deliver and demonstrate savings through procurement by continuing to review and monitor performance;

d) Completing the Purchase to Pay project;

e) As the next stage of the Council's procurement journey, and similar to most other councils the aim is to deliver a robust contract and supplier management tool by rolling out guidance and training to contract owners.

## 6. Business Services

a) Continuing to change the way we work to sustain remote working and minimise the requirement for office based working;

b) Migration of processes which are still predominately paper based to electronic solutions.

# **Emerging Challenges:**

The emerging challenge is addressing the financial impact of COVID 19 on the Council and as part of that to increase the pace in which change, improvement and transformation is being delivered. Ensuring that there is clarity on priorities and that strategic outcomes are clearly defined and articulated. Maintaining forward momentum amid a period of fundamental change and focusing resources on the delivery of the route map through and out of the pandemic and delivering on **Valuing Communities**, **Remote/Flexible Working and Digital First**.

Having secured the unanimous endorsement of BTSG for the corporate solution to the remaining years of the MTFS to set out updated budget projections to Council in December 2020 and secure Councils agreement to the corporate solution recommended by BTSG for 2021/22 and 2022/23 budgets.

