

**Title:** Scottish Welfare Fund, Peer Collaborative Improvement Review

**Meeting:** Corporate Management Team

**Date:** 18 December 2024

**Submitted by:** Director of Transformation, Communities and Corporate

**1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 This report outlines the process, key findings, and recommendations from the Peer Collaborative Improvement Review of Falkirk Council's Scottish Welfare Fund. By considering and implementing some of these changes, Falkirk Council aims to enhance service delivery, ensure better use of resources and provide a more effective support to its community.
- 1.2 This report supports the Council Plan priority of Supporting Stronger & Healthier Communities.

**2. Recommendations**

**2.1 CMT is asked to:**

- **Note the Scottish Welfare Fund, Peer Collaborative Improvement Review paper**
- **Agree to receiving a summary report with an update on the progress of actions implemented by Spring 2025**
- **Note one of the recommendations is to restrict access to online applications from 3pm – 9am. Our existing software supplier is unable to enable this so it is not an option but if software supplier is changed CMT view on this will be sought. In interim our performance will be inhibited, and top quartile performance will not be achievable.**

**3. Background**

- 3.1 The Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) managed by Falkirk Council was identified as underperforming in processing times and budget spend compared to other councils, when assessing data from the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF). An offer from Improvement Service to undertake a peer collaborative improvement review was welcomed.

- 3.2 The peer collaborative review is a new process which the Improvement Service is operating to support Local Authorities in which experts from similar fields collaborate and review each other's work to identify areas of improvement.
- 3.3 This involved top-performing councils (Midlothian, East Renfrewshire, and Inverclyde) along with COSLA and the Improvement Service.
- 3.4 The review aimed to examine Falkirk Council's current processes, identify areas for improvement and provide recommendations to enhance service efficiency and better support the community.

#### 4. Performance Analysis

- 4.1 The 2023/24 LGBF data highlights significant gaps in Falkirk Council's SWF performance when compared to peers and the Scottish average:

Metric	Falkirk	Scottish Average	Peer Reviewers Average	Gap (Falkirk to Peers)
Crisis Grant decisions within 1 day	59%	93%	99%	40%
Community Care Grants decisions within 15 days	41%	86%	100%	59%
Proportion of Budget Spent	71%	130%	115%	64%

- 4.2 This data indicates a clear need for Falkirk Council to improve processing efficiency and use of budget to align with the performance of high-performing councils.
- 4.3 The Scottish Welfare Fund faces significant challenges due to a limited budget and requires a focus on high-priority spending to manage limited resources effectively.
- 4.4 The budget for 2024/25 is £1,221,296 and this is comprised of three elements (outlined below). As two of these three elements are non-recurring and Scottish Government funding for 2024/25 is unlikely to increase significantly, the strain on this budget is likely to increase.

Core Funding (Scottish Government)	£978,884
Top up Fairer Falkirk Funding	£187,458 (one off)
Additional Budget	£54,954 (one off)

#### 5. Discovery Phase

- 5.1 The review began with the Improvement Service requesting contextual information and a self-assessment from Falkirk Council staff involved in SWF

delivery and Fairer Falkirk. All available documents and reports on SWF, local and national, were shared with the peer review team.

5.2 A meeting held on 10 May 2024 with representatives from Midlothian, Inverclyde, East Renfrewshire and COSLA, identified key themes for improvement:

1. **Underspend:** Analysis of budget underspend and the impact on customer satisfaction.
2. **Staff Welfare:** Addressing staff support and training, particularly post-COVID.
3. **Customer Communication:** Improving clarity in the decision-making process and measuring customer satisfaction.
4. **Internal Communication:** Addressing gaps in team knowledge, such as budget KPI's and priority levels.
5. **Service Delivery:** Evaluating the efficiency of using contact service vs. SWF decision-makers.
6. **IT System Integration:** Exploring software solutions for better service flexibility.
7. **Reducing SWF Dependency:** Integrating SWF with anti-poverty strategies.
8. **Face-to-Face Service:** Considering opportunities for in-person service delivery.
9. **Action Plan Alignment:** Ensuring recommendations align with the SWF Action Plan.

5.3 Key Meetings and Engagements - The review involved a series of follow-up meetings between Falkirk Council and peer reviewers to discuss internal processes, staffing, and strategies to address the identified themes. Meetings took place between May and July 2024 with various stakeholders including SWF team members, senior managers, and portfolio holder.

## 6. Considerations from the Peer Review Team

6.1 The peer collaborative improvement team provided a set of recommendations aimed at improving service delivery, processing efficiency, customer experience and staff welfare:

1. **Call Handling Redesign:** Streamline call handling by transferring responsibility from contact centre to SWF assessors to minimise double handling and improve customer service.
2. **Service Opening Hours:** Restrict crisis grant applications to 9am-3pm, allowing staff to process decisions in late afternoon.

3. **Application Channels:** Limit online crisis grant applications to business hours.
4. **Application Form Simplification:** Consolidate application forms to reduce complexity.
5. **IT System Enhancement:** Consider using Civica software, used for all other means-tested assessments, to support SWF processing via greater integration.
6. **Financial Controls:** Strengthen budget monitoring and introduce corporate checks.
7. **Application Closing Procedures:** Ensure timely closure of applications and implement clear guidance.
8. **Team Desk Allocation:** Designate a shared workspace for the SWF team.
9. **Staffing Resilience:** Develop backup arrangements for peak periods.
10. **Raise SWF Profile:** Highlight SWF's role in poverty reduction and report on performance regularly.
11. **Staff Engagement:** Foster stronger communication with staff and involve them in process changes.

6.2 Falkirk Council officers also identified further opportunity during the review. This was to explore the potential of the "Cash First" model to provide more autonomy to grant recipients while reducing administrative tasks.

## 7. Implementation of Recommendations / Next Steps

7.1 The following provides a summary of the recommendations and agreed actions to be taken:

Recommendation	Action	Timeline
<b>Call Handling Redesign</b> Streamline call handling by transferring responsibility to SWF assessors to minimise double handling and improve customer service	Interim steps include a pre-recorded message to inform applicants about the process before speaking to an operator.  Confirm scale of resources to be transferred from Contact Centre and implementation plan to be developed.	Complete    To be implemented by March 2025
<b>Service Opening Hours:</b> Restrict crisis grant applications to 9am-3pm, allowing staff to process	Awaiting confirmation from IEG4 to advise if online form can be closed at 3pm. Not an option with current supplier.	Review in tandem with any software change

decisions in the afternoon.	<p>Will review in tandem with any software supplier change in the future and seek CMT agreement.</p> <p>Analysis of application patterns is ongoing to ensure alignment with Social Work emergency contacts.</p>	
<b>Application Channels:</b> Limit online crisis grant applications to business hours.	As above	Review in tandem with any software change
<b>Application Form Simplification:</b> Consolidate application forms to reduce complexity.	<p>Engagement with IEG4 to introduce drop-downs and reduce the number of forms is underway.</p> <p>Survey sent to previous applicants (within 6mth period) – survey closed 25.10.24 this will determine if applicants have found applying via online, and the number of options, complex.</p> <p>Existing users didn't find the online form complex – no proposal to change</p>	Review in tandem with any software change
<b>IT System Enhancement:</b> Consider using CIVICA to support SWF processing for better integration.	Talks are underway with CIVICA regarding upgrading existing system to include SWF module.	June 2025
<b>Financial Controls:</b> Strengthen budget monitoring and introduce corporate checks.	The Team Leader has adopted financial control practices and future reports will be shared with senior management.	complete
<b>Application Closing Procedures:</b> Ensure timely closure of applications and implement clear guidance.	Implemented. New procedures ensure cases are closed on time, with an established appeal process for applicants.	complete
<b>Team Desk Allocation:</b> Designate a shared workspace for the SWF team.	Designated space identified – available by end of October 24	complete

<b>Staffing Resilience:</b> Develop backup arrangements for peak periods.	Trial period of staff within R&B supporting SWF	ongoing
<b>Raise SWF Profile:</b> Highlight SWF's role in poverty reduction and report on performance regularly.	Efforts to integrate SWF reporting into broader strategic updates are ongoing.	ongoing
<b>Staff Engagement:</b> Foster stronger communication with staff and involve them in process changes.	The Team Leader has been sharing information in terms of budget position and priority level. Staff have been involved at all stages of the Collaboration process.	ongoing
<b>Cash First:</b> Exploring the potential of the "Cash First" model to provide more autonomy to grant recipients while reducing administrative tasks.	<p>Survey sent to previous applicants (within 6mth period) – survey closed 25.10.25 this will determine if applicants would have preferred cash for good or good supplied and installed.</p> <p>Input was sought from Fairer Falkirk who were broadly supportive but only if appropriate safeguards can be implemented.</p> <p>Also currently establishing if customers can access the required goods at the same costs that are currently incurred.</p>	<p>Complete</p> <p>Review January 2025</p> <p>Review January 2025</p>

- 7.2 Progress will be monitored through a fortnightly operational meeting involving the management team. A summary report will be presented to the Council Senior Management Team in early 2025 with an update on the actions taken, and quarterly updates will be included in corporate performance reports.

## 8. Conclusions

We have already seen improvement by virtue of this process, and we expect to see that continue. Due to the reporting cycle the full impact of improvements may not be visible until 2026/27.

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