



North Ayrshire Council
Comhairle Siorrachd Àir a Tuath

The place to be

How North Ayrshire Council's transformational journey has put it at the forefront of local government innovation



On the path to greatness

Standing nine metres high, the Trinity Mirror steel sculpture is the centrepiece of a multi-million-pound public space redevelopment at Bridgegate in the heart of Irvine.

North Ayrshire Council's journey of transformation has seen it move from middle of the road to leader of the pack

Enter the reception area at North Ayrshire Council's main offices in Irvine and the first thing that strikes you is that the walls are almost entirely covered with awards. Take a closer look and you'll find they are all from the last couple of years.

Last month the council was highly commended in two categories in The MJ Awards and next month it's up for no less than seven APSE Service Awards. Not bad going for a local authority that by its own admission was 'a moderate, middle of the road council' back in 2009.

That was when UK Government austerity measures began to bite and, like all local authorities, North Ayrshire had to start thinking about the kind of council it wanted to be. With some of the most deprived wards in Scotland and a challenging geography – taking in urban areas within commuting distance of Glasgow, rural and coastal communities and islands – more of the same just wouldn't cut it. It was also the year Elma Murray was appointed chief executive; tasked by elected members with the job of creating a culture of change across the council.

In essence, the journey since then has been about creating a resilient, innovative and confident local authority capable of nurturing that same resilience among the people it serves.

Last year the council produced a brochure reflecting on its achievements and setting out how it planned to move from being a 'good' council to a 'great' one. Examine the work it has done over the last two to three years in supporting the local economy, tackling education and skills issues, and in launching Scotland's first health and social care partnership (see page 4, overleaf) and it soon becomes clear it's well on course.

Elma sums up the drivers for change as twofold. Firstly, financial – North Ayrshire has lost £50m from its budget

over the last five years and expects 2018-19 to be its 'worst year' before things begin to plateau. Secondly, the need to localise services wherever possible using a locality planning approach to bring the council and its communities closer together.

One practical way the council is implementing that is by seeking to increase the number of councillors from 30 to 35, subject to approval from the Boundary Commission for Scotland. Approval would allow North Ayrshire to split disparate places like Ardrossan – home to Scotland's

busiest port – and the island of Arran into separate wards. 'From a service delivery perspective it doesn't make sense to have them as one ward,' she explains.

But having embarked on that journey it soon became clear that steadying the ship financially through cutbacks and efficiency savings, and introducing new ways of working, only formed part of the picture.

'Every time we change it shifts our expectations of the type of local authority we can be and what our local population can expect from us too,' says Elma. 'That's a great part of the journey. One of the most important aspects for me is our staff and how they engage with people in their communities.'

Investing in staff to help them deal with the pace of change has been vital. One such investment is Lean Six Sigma – a method used to design business processes to make them more effective and efficient. This innovative approach is supporting staff through the council's change agenda and equipping them as training champions. It has led to an open challenge across the workforce to generate ideas that will transform the way they work. Several projects have been successfully completed, one of which resulted in the council scooping the inaugural Lean Six Sigma award, and seven more projects are about to get underway.

'Staff understand that they need to work in partnership to make sustainable change happen. They have moved from a position of being scared about change and cuts six years ago. They couldn't imagine we could manage cuts to the budget and be innovative and deliver better services.'

Another investment is regular conferences with staff from across the council that break down any perceived barriers with senior management. 'As chief executive of an organisation employing 5,636 FTE staff, I don't really "do" things. My job is to empower and create space to let

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Elma Murray, chief executive of North Ayrshire Council

staff make great things happen.' Things like Team North Ayrshire (see below), a public-private partnership that has won praise from Scottish Enterprise and is transforming perceptions of the area as a place to do business. The way it is making the council easier to engage with echoes the approach taken in health and social care where multi-disciplinary teams are wrapping support around the user, a far cry from old ways of working that saw vulnerable people expected to navigate and fit into the system.

Elma sums it up as being 'about how we do things, not just what we do – the how can result in very different outcomes for people'.

The example she gives is the decision to switch its 'meals on wheels' service on the mainland to weekly deliveries of frozen food rather than daily visits. The decision was controversial because it took away day-to-day contact for older, vulnerable people. But the constraints of a busy delivery round meant that contact was minimal – and the money saved by changing the service has been invested in voluntary organisations to run more get-together clubs and other social events.

She adds: 'We need to get to a place where we are fundamentally about the relationship between the council and people who live in the area. In some cases, it's people with very little hope who can't see opportunities for themselves because of multigenerational poverty, mental health issues, drug addiction and so on. It's for those people that we have to help them to a place where they see hope, where they can see answers.' Getting to that point will not

NORTH AYRSHIRE FACTFILE

- Arran and Cumbrae are two of Scotland's most accessible islands
- Largs is the biggest marina in Scotland
- The 'Cathedral of The Isles' in Millport is Britain's smallest cathedral and dates from 1851
- 95% of North Ayrshire pupils now move onto positive destinations – this is above the Scottish average and is the highest figure ever recorded in North Ayrshire
- North Ayrshire Council is the fifth best performing authority in Scotland for achieving positive destinations for school leavers
- The council was the first in Scotland to launch its Health and Social Care Partnership
- Business growth managers are working with 150 key North Ayrshire businesses to develop bespoke growth plans
- 283 jobs have been created as a direct result of Team North Ayrshire during the last six months
- North Ayrshire Council is currently the only council in Scotland to hold 'EFQM Recognised for Excellence' accreditation

only secure their future, but also the council's.

'It's about targeting resources to help people lift themselves to a point where we have less targeted, more universal services. That's where you start to square the finances and it has a knock-on impact on people who are in a better place and have reasonable employment because it frees up resources to spend elsewhere.'

One of the recurring themes that comes up in conversation with staff at North Ayrshire Council is how the authority has matured and become more confident.

Council leader, Willie Gibson, believes one of the keys

to recent success is the abundance of talent and drive among elected members and officers – including Elma, who he describes as an 'excellent chief executive at the top of her game'.

'We challenge each other. But it has helped us to change and we have managed to make cuts and provide a better service while we're doing it. We want to be the best council in Scotland if not the best in Britain.'

'The biggest change is that now, when someone has an idea, we will ask ourselves "how can we do that?" Our attitude now is can-do. It's a complete transformation.'

A fresh approach to spark economic growth

From industrial urban areas to market towns to busy ports, island communities and tourism hotspots, in many ways North Ayrshire could be described as a microcosm of Scotland – such is its variety.

It makes devising an overriding economic development strategy for the area quite a challenge. The council has therefore taken a strategic and pragmatic approach to the task of attracting business and boosting local employment.

At its forefront is Team North Ayrshire, a partnership comprised of the council, key agencies such as Scottish Enterprise and a growing number of businesses. Its job is to ensure those investing in the area have a single point of contact and are offered a flexible range of support to enable them to do business.

Two of its three strands, 'international' and 'entrepreneurs/innovators', are all about bringing new blood into the economy. But existing businesses in the area will be the biggest factor in whether the council hits its target of creating 13,000 new jobs and 7,500 homes over the next five years. That's why the third strand, Team North Ayrshire Growth, has identified the top 150 firms in the area with the greatest growth potential and has begun working with some of them to understand their needs and tailor support accordingly.

It's part of a proactive approach which is changing perceptions of the council, says Karen Yeomans, executive director economy and communities. 'I meet up with a lot of businesses and repeatedly they say how different the council now is to work with and what we can help them achieve. I hear that daily.'

'Previously, one business owner told me he'd got fed up of going to the council and being bounced around different departments. We now have account managers to sort out issues. We're not leaving it to the business to fathom out how to get around the organisation. We have got their trust



and confidence in what we are doing – they know it's not just words.' Latest developments include Irvine Vision, which sets out plans for a series of projects across five area frameworks. Whereas in the past the focus would have been predominantly around the town centre, it now takes a whole-town approach to include assets such as its enterprise area and harbourside.

Some £100m of physical regeneration projects are either underway or in the pipeline across North Ayrshire, including the purchase of 120 acres at Irvine's enterprise area – one of the largest undeveloped employment sites in the UK.

The council is taking a more localised approach across six areas including Arran, where an economic group has been established to look at ways to grow the island's economy.

Like many areas, a key challenge is to ensure local people are able to take the opportunities on offer. That's why the council has invested £1m in a new skills centre at Ayrshire College, the first of its kind in Scotland.

It has opened an employability hub in one of its most deprived areas. The hub offers a range of support on site and more are planned.

'We're providing civic and strategic leadership, catalysing partners around an agenda and vision, clarifying what the priorities should be.'

'What are the things that we can do to make the case for North Ayrshire? I don't think three years ago we were quite in that place. Now we can have those sorts of discussions with businesses and politicians and other strategic partners. We have got the credibility.'



Residents, staff and visitors at Arran's new Montrose House Care Home, which was officially opened in June by the cabinet secretary for health, wellbeing and sport, Shona Robison

A healthy union

By launching Scotland's first ever health and social care partnership, North Ayrshire Council believes it is better equipped than ever to tackle inequality

Like many areas, North Ayrshire is facing a conundrum of dealing with greater demand for local services at a time of diminishing public funds. Nowhere is that challenge starker than in health and social care where two key statistics highlight the pressures at both ends of the age scale. One in four North Ayrshire children are living in poverty and the area's over-75 population is expected to grow by 92% between 2012 and 2037.

The council and its partners are tackling things head-on. They're switching the focus to preventative and personalised care in the community and relieving pressure on already over-stretched acute hospital services. In an era of greater integration between health and social care, North Ayrshire is taking it to another level.

Its Health and Social Care Partnership was officially launched in April this year - the first in Scotland by just two hours ahead of East and South Ayrshire. It brings together the council, the NHS, third sector and other

agencies to create a new body of 3,000 staff backed by a £200m budget. It's responsible for adult services, children's community health services and the whole of social work services, including children and families and criminal justice. It also plays a key role in planning acute hospital services.

In short, the partnership marks a seismic shift in the way services are designed and delivered. With its neighbouring authorities, it will effectively create a pan-Ayrshire approach to supporting vulnerable people.

The beauty of bringing so many different professionals together is that it makes multi-disciplinary working the norm so that, from the user's point of view, it's a seamless service whatever their circumstances.

'The problem before was that funding sat in different agencies and there was a tendency to shunt people from one side to the other,' explains Iona Colvin, the partnership's director. 'For example, take someone waiting to be discharged. The longer you are in hospital in an acute

bed when you don't need to be, the more independence you lose.

'Before the partnership we didn't have both sides of the system working together. Our aim is to get people out of hospital and into the best place for them to be.'

For example, a ward at one of the community hospitals has been revamped and staffed with a team of social workers, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, nurses and a GP. It will take people discharged from acute care and, if possible, work with them intensively to help them return home.

But there's a wider push to tackle inequality by establishing a preventative approach across the board, from GP surgeries to schools - getting key professionals into the community where they can make a difference.

'It's about using the resources we have and intervening earlier whenever we can,' says Iona. 'We know if we get in at the right level it does have a major impact on people's lives.'

Promoting education for all

'Our children should have no poverty of aspiration, no poverty of ambition and no poverty of opportunity'. The strapline of North Ayrshire's education directorate leaves little doubt as to where its priorities lie. It reflects the commitment to tackling inequality that runs through the council's corporate strategy and beyond.

Tackling poor engagement with school and boosting the social and emotional development of six to 12 year olds are among key priorities established in June towards improving children's outcomes. The priorities were shaped by feedback following a schools' and community survey in which more than 7,500 pupils and 635 families took part. The survey formed part of a wider project by the Scottish Government and the Dartington Social Research Unit on improving children's outcomes and reflects the integral role education services has in tackling inequality.

The council will invest in a professional learning academy over the next five years which will enable a focus

on learning and teaching, with a particular emphasis on literacy and numeracy. The academy will complement work which has taken place over the last two years on



early intervention and prevention programmes. These have been supporting families through parenting courses and via specialist programmes for those with particular

issues, such as addictions. Not only is the council building capacity among parents and reducing their need for support, it's also helping to shift the emphasis from crisis intervention to preventative approaches.

Much of the work has been shaped by a partnership with the Robert Owen Centre at the University of Glasgow, using its innovative 'making education work for all' model. Through targeted support across its schools and engagement with parents, the council is confident attainment levels will continue to rise.

'Our strapline is what we're promoting as a vision and culture in all of our schools,' says John Butcher, executive director for education and youth employment. 'That really means we are aiming to recognise that education is for all our children. Those in disadvantaged communities should get high quality education too.'

'Schools are very supportive, they have bought into the vision and there's a really good ethos built on collective values.'