



Finance Resources Audit & Governance Committee
14 July 2023

Annual Governance Statement 2022/23

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Portfolio: Governance, Technology & Innovation

Ward(s) Affected: All

Purpose of the Report:

The Committee is requested to review the Annual Governance Statement for 2022/23 to ensure that it reflects the reports that have been considered over the past year and that it supports the Committee's general understanding of the Council's governance arrangements.

Recommendations:

1. To approve the Annual Governance Statement for 2022/23.

1. Summary

- 1.1 The Council is required to gather evidence that the governance arrangements are adequate and to support the production of an Annual Governance Statement. Evidence, through assurance statements, has been submitted by key officers, and the Head of Internal Audit has provided an annual audit opinion.

2. Background

- 2.1 The CIPFA/SOLACE framework “Delivering Good Governance in Local Government” brings together an underlying set of legislative requirements, governance principles and management processes. Crucially, it states that good governance relates to the whole organisation. CIPFA has assigned proper practice to the governance framework. It outlines six core principles of governance focusing on the systems and processes for the direction and control of the organisation and its activities through which it accounts to, engages with and leads the community.
- 2.2 The arrangements required for gathering assurances for the preparation of the Annual Governance Statement provide an opportunity for authorities to consider the robustness of their governance arrangements. In doing so, authorities need to recognise that this is a corporate issue, affecting everyone in the organisation. Furthermore, it is not simply about evidencing compliance, but to highlight what arrangements are in place and the improvements that are necessary to inform stakeholders.
- 2.3 The key sources of assurance which have been used to prepare the Annual Governance Statement are:
- Performance management information
 - Risk management
 - Legal and regulatory assurances
 - Members’ assurances
 - Assurance Statements for key senior officers, reviewed and approved by Directors
 - Financial control assurance
 - Internal audit
 - External audit

The regulations state that the Annual Governance Statement needs to be approved in advance of the relevant authority approving the Statement of Accounts.

3. Current position/findings

- 3.1 The Committee receives regular reports from Internal Audit in relation to the framework of governance, risk management and control through review of:
- The Annual Report and Opinion of the Head of Internal Audit;

- Internal Audit Progress Reports, which contains the findings and associated recommendations agreed with management to address weaknesses and risks;
- Reports on the progress made in addressing the findings and recommendations; and
- Strategic and Annual Internal Audit Plans.

3.2 At the time of writing this report the work on Internal Audit on the 2022/23 internal audit plan is being finalised and the opinion on the framework of governance, risk management and control will be confirmed at the meeting.

3.3 During the year, Cabinet received regular reports on performance and financial monitoring in relation to both the capital and revenue budgets, and quarterly reports on Risk Management were taken to the Cabinet, alongside the performance and financial reports.

3.4 Assistant Directors (ADs) have again this year completed an Assurance Statement which covers key areas of responsibility as follows:

- Procedures;
- Effectiveness of key controls;
- Alignment of Services with Business Plan;
- Human Resources and Finance;
- Risks and Controls;
- Health and Safety;
- Procurement;
- Insurance;
- Information Technology;
- Data Protection and Freedom of Information;
- Business Continuity;
- Partnerships; and
- Equalities.

3.5 In addition, the Chief of Staff, the Head of Internal Audit, and the AD - Regulatory have also provided statements in relation to specific role queries.

3.6 The responses have highlighted that there are no significant governance issues and governance arrangements are mainly consistent across the Council. However, ADs have highlighted some development areas which are service specific in relation to *risk and control*; *business continuity*; and *procurement*, which will be reviewed over the forthcoming months.

4. Proposed action

4.1 The Committee is requested to review the Annual Governance Statement for 2022/23 to ensure that it reflects the reports that have been considered over the

past year and that it supports the Committees general understanding of the Council's governance arrangements.

5. Issues and risks

- 5.1 **Resource Implications** – any resource requirements are picked up through the completion of the assurance statements.
- 5.2 **Legal Implications** – the Annual Governance Statement is required to be completed as part of the Annual Statement of Accounts and is reported to this Committee for review and sign off.
- 5.3 **Equality Implications** – none
- 5.4 **Environmental Impact** – none
- 5.5 **Crime and Disorder** – none
- 5.6 **Risks** – the risks are assessed by the senior managers as part of the supporting assurance statements that are completed at year end and reviewed every six months. The statements then feed into this Annual Governance Statement.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 To approve the Annual Governance Statement for 2022/23.

SOUTH NORFOLK COUNCIL ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2022/23

Scope of Responsibility

South Norfolk Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards. It must ensure that public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently and effectively. South Norfolk Council also has a duty under the Local Government Act 1999 to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

In discharging this overall responsibility, South Norfolk Council is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, and making proper arrangements for the management of risk.

As part of its Constitution, South Norfolk Council has approved and adopted a code of corporate governance, which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework “Delivering Good Governance in Local Government”.

A copy of the Code is available on our website, within the Constitution, and can be downloaded [here](#).

This statement explains how South Norfolk Council has complied with the code and also meets the requirements of regulation 6 (1) of the Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2015 in relation to the publication of a statement on internal control, and accompanies the 2022/23 Statement of Accounts of the Council. The Annual Governance Statement is subject to detailed review and approval by the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee.

The Purpose of the Governance Framework

The governance framework comprises the systems and processes for the direction and control of the authority and its activities through which it accounts to, engages with and leads the community. It enables the authority to monitor the achievement of its strategic objectives and to consider whether those objectives have led to the delivery of appropriate, cost-effective services.

The system of internal control is a significant part of that framework and is designed to manage risk to a reasonable level. It cannot eliminate all risk of failure to achieve policies, aims and objectives and can therefore only provide reasonable and not absolute assurance of effectiveness. The system of internal control is based on an ongoing process designed to identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of South Norfolk Council’s policies, aims and objectives, to evaluate the likelihood of those risks being realised and the impact should they be realised, and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically.

The governance framework has been in place at South Norfolk Council for the year ended 31 March 2023 and up to the date of approval of the statement of accounts.

The Governance Framework

An annual review of the Governance Framework at South Norfolk Council was completed prior to the preparation of the Annual Governance Statement, with key officers completing full assurance statements for their area of responsibility, and these being signed off by the relevant member of the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT). These are in place to ensure the governance arrangements across the Council are adequate, and to also recognise where any further work needs to be done.

The code of corporate governance was in place for the 2022/23 financial year. This Code is the framework of policies, procedures, behaviours and values which determine how the Council will achieve its priorities and is based upon the seven principles of the International Framework for Corporate Governance in the Public Sector.

The Council's Vision and Priorities:

The Council works in collaboration with Broadland District Council and as a result we share a Strategic Plan (2020 – 2024) and Delivery Plan (2022-2024). These set out our shared Vision and Priorities:

THE VISION: Working together to create the best place and environment for everyone, now and for future generations

OUR PRIORITIES, OUR PEOPLE, OUR APPROACH:

1. Growing the economy;
2. Supporting individuals and empowering communities;
3. Protecting and improving the natural and built environment, whilst maximising quality of life; and
4. Moving with the times, working smartly and collaboratively.

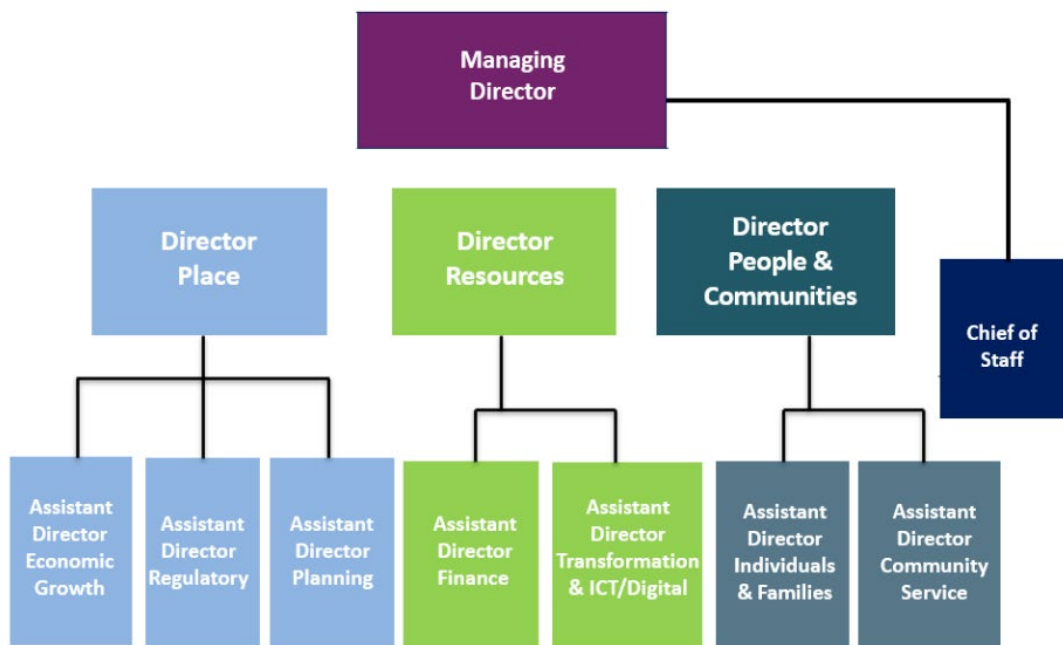
The Strategic Plan is a digital and interactive document which acts as a gateway for more in-depth details of the priorities and work of the Council and can be found [here](#).

The vision and priorities are communicated through the Strategic Plan, plus regular briefings, press releases, website and the Link magazine, which is delivered 3 times a year to every household and business in the District.

To underpin the Strategic Plan, a detailed Delivery Plan is produced, often annually, however the current Plan spans two years to take account of the District election. This describes our intended activities for the 12 months from April to March each year to support the priorities set out in the Strategic Plan. This plan is produced as an integrated process with the Council's annual budget setting and Medium-Term Financial Plan revision. The 2022-2024 Plan can be accessed [here](#).

Review of the Council's Governance Arrangements:

The Council regularly reviews its organisational structure as part of aligning resources with demand to deliver the priorities above. The Council's collaboration with Broadland District Council established one officer team across the two Councils, which includes a Corporate Leadership Team (CLT), consisting of the Managing Director, three Directors, the Monitoring Officer (Chief of Staff) and the Section 151 Officer (Assistant Director Finance). CLT is also supported by a further six Assistant Directors, as follows:



Measuring the Quality of Services for Users and ensuring they are delivered in accordance with the Council's objectives and best use of resources:

The 4-year Strategic Plan sets out our Priorities together with targets for success over this time. The 2022-2024 Delivery Plan uses these priorities and shows the 'Delivery Measures' which aim to track the performance of our services and how well we are achieving our key ambitions. The Delivery Measures are tracked and reported each quarter to Cabinet as part of our Performance Framework.

The Delivery Plan sets out the proposed activities and 'business as usual' operational services that will be undertaken for the financial year ahead commencing 1 April. Between February and April staff personal objectives are set for the year and reflect the proposed activities they will be working on from the Delivery Plan. These personal objectives are reviewed regularly during the year and are normally assessed as part of annual staff performance reviews in March/April each year.

Defining and Documenting Roles and Responsibilities of Councillors and Officers and how decisions are taken:

The Council's constitution, scheme of delegation, Local Member Protocol, protocol on Member / officer relations, contract standing orders, rules of financial governance and rule of procedure set the framework in which the organisation makes decisions.

Codes of Conduct Defining Standards of Behaviour for Councillors and Officers:

The Council operates Codes of Conduct for Councillors and Officers, with clear processes embedded to respond to any concerns raised regarding the standards of behaviour. The Council reviewed its Code of Conduct during 2022/23, which resulted in Full Council adopting a new Code of Conduct based on the Local Government Association model Code in May 2023, which provides a more robust framework for standards amongst members.

The Council conforms to the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government (2016)

The Rules of Financial Governance explain the statutory duties of the Section 151 Officer including the responsibility under direction of the Cabinet for the proper administration of the Council's financial affairs. The Council's governance arrangements allow the Section 151 Officer to bring influence to bear on all material business decisions. The Section 151 Officer supports the CLT and has the authority to bring matters directly to the attention of the Managing Director if required. Regular specific meetings are also held to discuss matters relating to the Section 151 role.

CIPFA Financial Management Code

The Council has assessed itself against the CIPFA Financial Management code and has concluded that it complies with the key requirements therein, alongside this conclusion an action plan has been developed to make further improvements.

The Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee

The Committee met regularly during the year. Its key tasks are to monitor the work of Internal and External Audit, support risk management, to approve the statutory accounts, and to oversee the internal and external audit work in supporting the production of this Annual Governance Statement.

Ensuring Compliance with Laws and Regulations, Internal Policies and Procedures:

Responsibilities for statutory obligations are formally established. The Head of Paid Service disseminates statutory instruments to Managers responsible for acting on them. The relevant professional officers are tasked with ensuring compliance with appropriate policies and procedures to ensure all Officers work within them.

Decisions to be taken by Councillors as part of the Council's Committee processes are subject to a rigorous scrutiny process by the Monitoring Officer, Section 151 Officer and in most cases CLT before they are considered by Cabinet or Full Council.

Assistant Directors have completed an Assurance Statement covering key governance aspects with their area of responsibility. The outcomes of these Assurance Statements are described under *Managers' Assurance within Governance Issues*.

Whistle-blowing Policies and Investigating Complaints:

As employees, councillors and others who deal with the Council are often the first to spot things that may be wrong or inappropriate at the Council, a Whistle-blowing Policy is in place to provide help and assistance with such matters. There is also a formal complaints procedure operated as part of the Council's performance management framework.

Tackling Fraud and Corruption:

The Council has a Counter Fraud, Corruption and Bribery Strategy in place to ensure that we can deliver against our priorities whilst minimising losses to fraud, corruption and bribery..

Each Internal Audit undertaken recognises fraud risks and assesses the adequacy and effectiveness of the controls in place to mitigate such risks and an Annual Fraud Return is provided to the External Auditor which summarises the Head of Internal Audit's views on risk of fraud at the Authority. In addition, the Monitoring Officer, the Section 151 Officer and the Chair of the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee also complete such statements on an annual basis.

During 2022/23 Internal Audit have carried out a review of the Councils fraud and corruption arrangements against the latest best practice guidance. The result of this review are referred to in the section below on the work of internal audit as appropriate.

Development Needs of Councillors and Officers:

There is a training programme in place for officers and Councillors. This is drawn up from new risks or legislation, in response to known and emerging key areas of focus and from the Delivery Plan and staff Performance Reviews. The Council has made extensive investment in training in line with its Learning and Development Strategy for staff, which also includes an online platform that allows staff to undertake learning remotely, at a time that is convenient for them, a Management & Leadership Development Programme and the roll out of MBTI assessments for all managers, with individual feedback provided and group sessions also held to better understand team dynamics. The online platform has been extremely useful during the COVID-19 pandemic, whilst the majority of officers worked from home, and ensured that we can continue to provide training and development as required in an agile working environment moving forwards. This has also included more informal sessions on stress awareness etc.

In relation to Members, they undertook a rigorous training schedule in 2019/20 after they were elected, which began with a general induction programme and continued throughout the year on more specific topics to ensure Members can take on all

aspects of their role confidently and legally. Training has continued throughout their term of office and is often centred on regulatory matters that provide them with the relevant accreditation to sit on specific Committees. Members also have access to the online training platform referred to above.

Establishing Communication with all Sections of the Community and Other Stakeholders:

The Council works with the County Council, other Norfolk District Councils, the Police, NHS, Central Government departments, businesses, and voluntary and community groups.

The Council consults with members of the public through a number of avenues from workshops, telephone calls, social media channels and the website, to gauge public opinion on a number of issues such as shaping the budget, the development of the Local Plan and the Council Tax Support Scheme. The Council, alongside Broadland District Council, has established a 'Customer Panel', which is made up of residents and those who work in the districts. This Panel will provide valuable feedback on services with a view to ensure continued improvement and a first-class customer experience.

Good Governance Arrangements with Partnerships:

Partnership arrangements take the form of Service Level Agreements. These are reviewed as part of the budget setting process and in advance of the date of cessation. The Council maintains a formal protocol on how it enters into funding arrangements with voluntary and third sector organisations.

The CIPFA Framework for Corporate Governance places a high degree of emphasis on partnership working. In practice, the Council takes a collaborative approach to working, recognising that there are a variety of means to engage with third parties.

As the collaboration with Broadland District Council has progressed appropriate governance has been put in place such as Joint Committees and Joint Informal Cabinet.

Review of Effectiveness

The Role of the Council

South Norfolk Council has responsibility for conducting, at least annually, a review of the effectiveness of its governance framework including the system of internal control. The review of effectiveness is informed by the work of the Managers and Councillors within the authority who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, Internal Audit's annual report, and by comments made by the External Auditors and other review agencies. Full Council approve the Revenue and Capital Budget and the Treasury Management Strategy annually.

The Role of the Cabinet

The Cabinet approved the Strategic Plan and Delivery Plan and agreed a range of strategies and policies during the year, including the Treasury Management Strategy, the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and the Revenue and Capital Budget. Cabinet regularly received reports on performance, risk, projects and their financial implications. Policy development is delegated to Policy Committees with Cabinet making the final decisions.

The Role of the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee

The activity of the Committee in the financial year is described above. It has also ensured that it is satisfied that the control, governance and risk management arrangements have operated effectively. The work of the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee is summarised in an Annual Report to Council.

The Role of the Scrutiny Committee

The Scrutiny Committee can undertake any work relating to the four key principles of scrutiny as follows:

- Hold the Executive to account (Call-In of Reports before final decision)
- Performance management
- Assist policy reviews
- Internal/external scrutiny

As referred elsewhere in this report, members of the Scrutiny Committee have undergone specific training this year. The work of the Scrutiny Committee is summarised to Full Council in an Annual Report.

Role of the Monitoring Officer

The Chief of Staff is the Council's Monitoring Officer. The Monitoring Officer has the specific duty to ensure that the Council, its officers, and its Elected Councillors, maintain the highest standards of conduct in all they do. The Monitoring Officer's legal basis is found in Section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, as amended by Schedule 5 paragraph 24 of the Local Government Act 2000. The Monitoring Officer has three main roles:

- To report on matters they believe are, or are likely to be, illegal or amount to maladministration (such a report has not been required).
- To be responsible for Matters relating to the conduct of Councillors and Officers.
- To be responsible for the operation of the Council's Constitution.

The Monitoring Officer is supported in their role by the Council's legal service, which is provided by Birketts and the Deputy Monitoring Officers.

The Role of the Chief Financial Officer

The Assistant Director Finance is designated as the Section 151 Officer for the purposes of Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 and is responsible under the general direction of the Cabinet for the proper administration of the Council's affairs. This statutory responsibility cannot be overridden. Responsibilities include:

- Setting and monitoring compliance with financial management standards
- Advising on the corporate financial position and on the key financial controls necessary to secure sound financial management

Section 114 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 requires the Section 151 Officer to report to the full Council, Cabinet and External Auditor if the authority or one of its Officers:

- Has made, or is about to make, a decision which involves incurring unlawful expenditure
- Has taken, or is about to take, an unlawful action which has resulted or would result in a loss or deficiency to the authority
- Is about to make an unlawful entry in the authority's accounts.

The Section 151 Officer has not been required to make such a report.

The Role of Internal Audit

All audits are performed in accordance with the good practice contained within the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) 2013. Internal Audit report to the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee and provides an opinion on the system of internal control, which is incorporated in the Head of Internal Audit's Annual Report and Opinion 2022/23.

Internal Audit is arranged through a consortium, Eastern Internal Audit Services, which comprises Breckland, Broadland, North Norfolk, Norwich City and South Norfolk Councils, Great Yarmouth Borough Council and the Broads Authority. The Head of Internal Audit is employed by South Norfolk Council and the operational and field management staff are employed by an external provider, TIAA Ltd.

In addition, the Head of Internal Audit role only is now provided to the Borough of Kings Lynn and West Norfolk.

The Internal Audit Service assesses itself annually to ensure conformance against the PSIAS, and are also required to have an external assessment every five years. The most recent external assessment in January 2023, concluded that the internal audit service conforms to the professional standards and the work has been performed in accordance with the International Professional Practices Framework.

The Role of External Review Bodies

Ernst and Young LLP review the Council's arrangements for:

- preparing accounts in accordance with statutory and other relevant requirements
- ensuring the proper conduct of financial affairs and monitoring their adequacy and effectiveness in practice
- managing performance to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources

Ernst & Young LLP were appointed by Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) as the Council's external auditors. The auditors give their opinion on whether the financial statements of the Council give a true and fair view of the financial position as at the year end and of the income and expenditure for the year then ended; and they also provide an opinion on the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Value for Money). The Council takes appropriate action where improvements need to be made.

Effectiveness of Other Organisations

The Council established a group structure in 2015/16 with all companies held by Big Sky Ventures Ltd. At the end of 2017, Big Sky Ventures Ltd transferred its shares in Build Insight Ventures Ltd to the Council and the Council proceeded to establish a joint venture with Norfolk Property Services (NPS) Limited for the Build Insight group of companies. The Build Insight Ventures Ltd consisted of Build Insight Ltd, an Approved Inspector for Building Control and Build Insight Consulting Ltd. As at 22nd March 2021, the Council transferred its sole share in Build Insight Ventures Ltd, to Norfolk Property Services (NPS) Limited in order to exit the group in advance of Norfolk Property Services (NPS) Limited transferring the whole group to Broste Rivers Limited.

Big Sky Ventures Ltd is the holding company for Big Sky Developments Ltd, a property development company, and Big Sky Property Management Ltd, a property rental company, both were actively trading during 2020/2021. The effectiveness of internal controls within the companies over the course of the year have continued to be overseen by the financial review group, supported by appropriate officers. There were no significant control weaknesses identified during the year that are required to be included in this statement. Training was organised for Directors in December 2019 which focused on the roles and responsibilities of Directors.

During the year a review was undertaken of the Governance arrangements relating to the Big Sky Group and following recommendations from the Council the Companies governance framework and shareholder arrangements for both the Council and the Companies have been amended to model best practice and enable greater oversight by the shareholder. This change was in recognition of the increased scale of operation of Big Sky Developments Ltd and the increase in investment in the Big Sky Group by the Council to deliver the ambitions of Big Sky Developments Ltd.

Governance Issues

Managers' Assurance Statements

On an annual basis, Assistant Directors (AD) across the Council complete an Assurance Statement relating to their service area, the template of which has remained consistent since 2019/20. The statements are then signed off by either the Managing Director or Director responsible for the service area.

Assurance Statements - looking back on the issues raised in 2021/22

Risk and control

A number of ADs highlighted issues with risk management when undertaking their last few Assurance Statements, however due to the work undertaken to the risk registers and introduction of new corporate risk management policy, this is no longer an issue.

Business Continuity

Business Continuity no longer remains a corporate issue and plans have been developed and agreed throughout the business.

Procurement

A small number of ADs reported that procurement was an issue last year and this remains to be an issue, as highlighted below.

Assurance Statements for 2022/23

The Assurance Statement asked specific questions about: policy and procedure, effectiveness of key controls, alignment of services with the Delivery Plan, human resources, finance, risks and controls, health and safety, procurement, insurance, information technology, data protection, freedom of information, business continuity, partnerships and equalities. A yes / partial / no response was required, with evidence and action needed to be noted. Each AD also needed to note any issues that they felt represented a significant control item or governance issue.

In terms of emerging themes for the organisation, one area has been highlighted as requiring further attention to become fully compliant:

Procurement

There have been a few instances raised regarding procurement and the contracts register, work is underway to improve processes and whilst recognising this is work in progress it is important to flag this as an area for review. We hope to see positive progress with this when ADs provide feedback later in the year with regard to progress to compliance.

Crucially, the responses have highlighted that there are no significant governance issues and governance arrangements are mainly consistent across the Council. Where partial responses have been provided, managers have already identified

actions that are being progressed to address these areas and the Chief of Staff / Monitoring Officer will review progress during 2022/23, with updates being sought from ADs in early Autumn 2023.

Internal Audit

To be completed following completion of the internal audit plan for 2022/23.

Risk Management

A risk management framework and strategy is in place to ensure a consistent approach at the Council with regard to risks. The Audit Committee has oversight of the strategic risks, which are also considered by the Cabinet.

Review and Approval of the Annual Governance Statement

The annual review of governance is coordinated by the Chief of Staff & Monitoring Officer, involving senior managers across the Council and reviewed by the Corporate Leadership Team. This Annual Governance Statement is considered in draft by the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee and amended to reflect the Committee's considerations and the views of the external auditor. The (revised) Annual Governance Statement is published with the Council's annual accounts.

Certification

We are satisfied that appropriate arrangements are in place to address improvements in our review of effectiveness. Progress on these improvements and mitigation of risks will be monitored through the year and considered at our next annual review.

Trevor Holden, Managing Director

Stephen Ridley (Chairman of the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee) – Lead Councillor