

21 June 2021



Title of Report: Annual Governance Statement 2020/21

Report Of: Darren Collins, Strategic Director, Resources and Digital

Purpose of the Report

1. The Committee are asked to review the evidence of assurances provided on the Council's internal controls, risk management and governance arrangements, and approve the Annual Governance Statement 2020/21, attached at Appendix A.

Background

2. The Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 require Councils to produce an Annual Governance Statement giving an assessment of governance arrangements and their effectiveness. This accompanies the Annual Statement of Accounts and is signed by the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive.
3. The Audit and Standards Committee agreed on 8 March 2021 the assurance framework which would provide evidence for the completion of the Annual Governance Statement. Assurances were required in the following areas:
 - Governance arrangements
 - Councillors
 - Senior Managers
 - The system of internal audit
 - Risk management arrangements
 - Counter Fraud Arrangements
 - Performance management and data quality
 - Views of the external auditor and other external inspectorates
 - The legal and regulatory framework
 - Financial controls
 - Partnership arrangements and governance
 - Other sources of assurance
4. This AGS has been prepared during the outbreak of COVID-19. During this period the Council has operated within the framework of its Business Continuity Plans which have been developed to enable the Council to

operate effectively in times of crisis. Critical activities were prioritised and support services were delivered at a reduced level to comply with Government guidance and also enable redeployment of resources to support critical activities. Paragraph 24 of the AGS summarises the key actions taken to ensure Governance arrangements continued to be effective, and paragraph 43 how assurance was provided on the effectiveness of arrangements.

Governance Arrangements

5. The Council has a Local Code of Governance, which was originally presented to the Audit and Standards Committees in April 2007. This was last updated and agreed by the Audit and Standards Committee on 25 January 2021. This Code defines how the Council complies with the principals of good governance as set out in the Local Code of Governance developed by CIPFA, Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework.
6. The effectiveness of the Council's governance arrangements will be considered through the assessment of assurances below.

Councillors

7. As in the previous year assurance has been sought from Members of the Cabinet on the effectiveness they feel can be placed on the Council's corporate governance arrangements. A report elsewhere on this agenda sets out the evidence to show that effective governance arrangements are in place.

Senior Managers

8. All Service Directors have completed self-assessment assurance statements detailing the level of assurance obtained from their key control processes and governance arrangements. The conclusion of this exercise is reported elsewhere on this agenda and found that managers agreed that effective control systems were in place.

The System of Internal Audit

9. The Internal Audit Service has undertaken audit work throughout the year based on the risk based audit plan. In addition the Council has a framework of assurance available to satisfy that its risks have been properly identified and are being managed by controls that are adequately designed and effective in operation. This includes assurance from a variety of sources other than the Internal Audit Service, for example, the Health and Safety team. These other assurance sources have been assessed as part of the Audit Plan.

10. The system of Internal Audit, which includes the Audit and Standards Committee, has been reviewed and found to be operating effectively by the Council's Internal Control Group which met on 8 June 2021.
11. Based on evidence arising from planned internal audit activity during 2020/21, the overall opinion of the Chief Internal Auditor for the year which is reported elsewhere on this agenda in the Internal Audit Annual Report 2020/21, is that internal control systems and governance arrangements are considered to be effective.

Risk Management Arrangements

12. The Strategic Director, Resources and Digital reports elsewhere on this agenda that risk management arrangements during the year were effective.

Counter Fraud Arrangements

13. The Strategic Director, Resources and Digital reports elsewhere on this agenda that Counter Fraud Arrangements during the year were effective.

Performance Management and Data Quality

14. The Council has a corporate suite of strategic performance indicators to enable effective monitoring of the Council's strategic approach through which quality of service is measured via strategic outcome indicators. The monitoring of performance takes place at key performance points as identified in the framework including quarterly performance reported to Group Management Teams and Corporate Senior Officer meetings.
15. In addition, performance is also monitored, measured, challenged and scrutinised on a six monthly basis at Cabinet and respective Overview and Scrutiny Committees.
16. The Corporate Data Management Group is overseeing the development of an approach to improving how the performance information is presented so that this is accessible to all stakeholders. Performance reports to Overview and Scrutiny are published on the Council's website.
17. The evidence arising from the performance management framework process for 2020/21 was presented to the Council's Internal Control Group on 8 June 2021. Based on this evidence the Group found that effective controls are in place.

Views of the External Auditor and other External Inspectors

18. Mazars, the Council's external auditor, issued an Annual Audit Letter in October 2020 covering the financial year 2019/20. This comprised of two elements:

- the audit of the Council's Statement of Accounts – an unqualified opinion was issued and presented to the Council's Accounts Committee on 2 November 2020.
 - Value for Money Conclusion - the conclusion was that the Council had proper arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.
19. Other external inspectorates' reports have been issued from time to time on management and governance arrangements to the Council.

The Legal and Regulatory Framework

20. Assurance has been obtained from the Strategic Director, Corporate Services and Governance as the Monitoring Officer who has a legal duty to ensure the lawfulness and fairness of decision-making within the Council. The Council has a Constitution in place and compliance with established policies, procedures, laws and regulations is ensured by the requirement to give the Strategic Director, Corporate Services and Governance the opportunity to comment on every report submitted to a decision-making body. This evidence supporting an effective Legal and Regulatory Framework was presented to the Council's Internal Control Group on 8 June 2021.

Financial Controls

21. Assurance has been obtained from the Strategic Director, Resources and Digital, who is designated as the responsible officer for the administration of the Council's financial affairs under section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972, that financial controls are effective. Systems in place include Financial Regulations, the opportunity to comment on the financial implications of committee reports, monitoring meetings and evidence from internal and external audit. This evidence supporting effective financial controls was presented to the Council's Internal Control Group on 8 June 2021.

Partnership Arrangements & Governance

22. Service Directors review partnerships within their service plans on an annual basis. As partners are key to the delivery of the Council's objectives assurance of their control and governance systems is required. Service Directors have also been required to provide assurance on governance arrangements through their self-assessment statements and all Services are required to identify, through their business plans, where delivery of activity could impact on partnership working. The consensus amongst Service Directors was that all Partnership Arrangements have been established in compliance with the Council's Guide to Partnership Working. In addition, the most recent review of this area by the Internal Audit Service found it to be operating satisfactorily.

23. Based on evidence arising from partnerships for 2020/21 effective controls are in place. This evidence was presented to the Council's Internal Control Group on 8 June 2021.

The Annual Governance Statement

24. As reported to the Audit and Standards Committee on 8 March 2021, a corporate group uses the findings of the above sources of assurance to form a view on the adequacy of the Council's overall internal control and governance arrangements. Using evidence from this assessment the Group prepares the Annual Governance Statement for approval by this Committee, which will then accompany the Statement of Accounts.
25. This Group, the Internal Control Group, which is chaired by the Strategic Director, Resources and Digital and includes the Strategic Director, Corporate Services and Governance along with representatives of Internal Audit and Corporate Risk Management has reviewed the evidence from the sources of assurance above and prepared the Annual Governance Statement for 2020/21 which is attached at Appendix A.
26. Based on the review of the Council's governance arrangements during 2020/21, including the internal control and risk management environments, the opinion is that the Council's governance arrangements continue to be regarded as fit for purpose.
27. Based on the review of the arrangements introduced to strengthen governance to support the Council's response to the COVID-19 emergency, the opinion is that the Council's governance arrangements continued to be fit for purpose during that period.
28. The Annual Governance Statement therefore reflects this opinion and gives details of the evidence obtained to achieve it, actions taken to improve governance following the previous Annual Governance Statement, and an action plan for the next year.

Recommendation

29. The Committee is asked to approve the Annual Governance Statement to accompany the Statement of Accounts 2020/21 prior to it being passed to the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive for signature.

Contact name: Craig Oakes Ext. 3711
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