

THE ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL 2019/20

1. Scope of Responsibility

New Forest District Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law, proper standards are adhered to and that public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for and used economically, efficiently and effectively. It 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 best value. In discharging this overall responsibility New Forest District Council is required to have in place proper arrangements for the governance of the Council's affairs, facilitating the effective exercise of its functions and arrangements for the management of risk.

New Forest District Council has approved and adopted a Code of Good Governance, which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework "Delivering Good Governance in Local Government". This Statement explains how New Forest District Council has complied with the Code and also meets the requirements of regulation 13 of the Accounts & Audit Regulations 2015 in relation to the publication of a statement of corporate governance.

2. The Purpose of the Governance Framework

The governance framework comprises the systems and processes, as well as the culture and values, by which the authority is directed and controlled and its activities, through which it accounts to, engages with and leads the community. It enables the Authority to monitor the achievements 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 in delivery of policies, achieving 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 the Council's policies, aims and objectives, to evaluate the likelihood of those risks materialising and the impact should they be realised, and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically.

3. The Governance Framework

The good governance framework centres on the following 7 core principles:

A	Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values and respecting the rule of law.
B	Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.
C	Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits.
D	Determining the interventions necessary to optimize the achievement of the intended outcomes.
E	Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it.
F	Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management.
G	Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting and audit to deliver effective accountability.

Following District elections in May 2019, 'Community Matters', the Council's Corporate Plan for 2020-2024 was approved in March 2020 and focuses on the challenges faced and the plans to address them. It recognises the ongoing financial constraints, whilst building on the strong financial position created and sets priorities that matter to the people of the District to deliver a prosperous New Forest and put the community first.

The Council is concerned to ensure that quality of service delivery is maintained at a time of financial constraint and uses a variety of mechanisms to assess this. This helps inform future service delivery.

The Council continually revises its Medium Term forecast according to latest information received around likely funding levels and expenditure increases. The Council's current strong financial position and on-going efficiencies programme (including the development of new income generation initiatives) will help protect front-line service delivery and is underpinned by the healthy General Fund reserve, will enable the Council to respond to changes accordingly.

During 2020, the world-wide Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic has impacted global economies in ways that haven't been seen for decades. The UK's response has included an unprecedented package of financial measures to try and protect the UK economy.

Local Authorities have been significantly impacted with disruption to services, enforced home-working, new legislation and responsibilities and more recently playing a role in the recovery phase.

At a meeting in June, the Council's Cabinet agreed that the Council would need to re-cast the Medium Term Financial Plan, including the provision of an Emergency Budget for 2020/21 in light of the severity of the impact to the Council's budget. Four Task and Finish Groups have been established to assist in the Council's recovery plan and meetings commenced in the week of 22/06/2020.

Over the years, the Council has developed a number of successful joint or collaborative working arrangements with other public partners. This has continued into 2019/20 and includes arrangements with Hampshire County Council (in respect of Audit and Treasury functions) and a joint Information Office 'The Ringwood Gateway' between Ringwood Town Council, HCC and the District Council.

The Council's Constitution sets out how the Council operates, including the roles, responsibilities and relationships between Council, the Executive (Cabinet), Audit Committee and other bodies such as the Overview and Scrutiny Panels and Officers in respect of policy and decision-making processes. There is a comprehensive scheme of delegations to officers to ensure timely decision-making. The Constitution also sets out details on Codes of Conduct and key policies such as Financial Regulations and Contract Standing Orders as to Contracts. It is important that the Council operates efficiently and transparently and is accountable to the local people.

The Constitution is reviewed and updated where opportunities for improvement are identified.

The Risk Management Framework is in place to ensure that risks to the Council in achieving its strategic objectives, both at a corporate and service level, are more consciously identified, assessed and managed. It aligns risk with existing arrangements, in particular the performance management framework with an assessment of risk forming part of the Service Planning processes.

In 2016 CIPFA/SOLACE carried out a review of their framework to ensure that it still reflects the environment in which Councils are operating and to also reflect the International framework which had been developed by CIPFA and the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) in 2014. As a result of their review in April 2016 CIPFA/SOLACE published a new framework document "Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework 2016 Edition" with the key focus of governance processes and structures centring on the attainment of sustainable economic, societal and environmental outcomes. Council approved the revised code in April 2017 which follows the recommended text in the CIPFA/SOLACE framework.

4. Review of Effectiveness

The 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 senior statutory officers within the authority who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, the Internal Audit's annual report, and also by comments made by the external auditors and other review agencies and inspectorates.

This Council has always maintained a strong internal control environment and sees risk management as an integral part of everyday management. It has long established principles on the way its business is conducted enabling good governance and control of risk. Factors that influence the control environment include; integrity, ethics, operating style and the way management and members assign responsibility and authority.

A summary of the review activities undertaken during 2019/20 are included below:

1. A number of Council policies were reviewed or new Plans/Policies implemented including:
 - The Local Plan;
 - A new Housing Allocation Policy;
 - Compulsory Purchase and Overriding Easements Policy;
 - Gas Safety, Legionella, Lifts and Lifting Equipment Policy;
 - Void and Mutual Exchange Policy;
 - ICT Security Policy updated;
 - The Council's Publication Scheme (which is updated regularly)
2. The Council's Executive Management Team has remained unchanged throughout 2019/20 offering continuity in the top tier of management within the Council.
3. The Council's arrangements for financial management and reporting are sound and are well documented. Proposals for asset maintenance expenditure are supported by a business case as are new requests for revenue resources. These are scrutinised initially by EMT and the relevant Service Portfolio Holder prior to inclusion within the budget setting process. The financial planning process also includes a review of proposals by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Panels, before final budgetary proposals and the council tax levels are considered and approved by Council each year.
4. Financial monitoring is achieved by regular budgetary control reports to nominated budget holders, Executive Management Team, the relevant Portfolio Holder, and Cabinet. All elected Members have access to Cabinet Agendas and the financial reports; a process is in place to enable members to request additional, more detailed information and question any financial issues. Strong Overview and Scrutiny arrangements in place with an annual report of work carried out presented to Council.
5. In line with the continuous improvement culture of the Council, it is recognised that all Members and Officers of the Council must have the skills, knowledge and capacity that they need to discharge their responsibilities effectively and therefore significant emphasis is placed on continuous improvement and development. Following the elections in May 2019, a number of training sessions were arranged and run for all newly elected, and re-elected councillors.
6. The responsibility of S151 functions sits with the Chief Finance Officer who undertakes that statutory role. The Executive Head of Governance and Regulation is the Monitoring Officer, which is also a statutory role. All committee reports are reviewed by members of the Executive Management Team, as well as being provided to the Executive Head of Governance and Regulation (who is also the Council's Solicitor), prior to any decisions being made. This safeguards the Council to ensure that decisions are taken lawfully and that risks are properly considered.

7. The Council's financial management arrangements conform to the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government (2010). A review of the Council's Financial Regulations was completed during 2017/18 with the new regulations presented to and endorsed by the Audit Committee. The new regulations went live during April 2018, following approval by full Council.
8. Performance Management ensures strategic monitoring with a focus on organisational and service based indicators, reflecting the aims and objectives of the Corporate Plan. A review of the Council's Performance Management Framework commenced during 2019/20 in light of the new Corporate Plan and will be finalised during 2020/21.
9. The Audit Committee meet regularly and training is available to all members to ensure they are clear in their responsibilities in providing an independent assurance to the Council in relation to the effectiveness of the Council's internal control environment, in accordance with Regulation 6 of the Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2015.
10. The Council reviewed its insurance and risk management arrangements and employed a new officer during 2019/20 with responsibility for these respective areas. The Council's approach to risk management has been long standing, although the annual review originally scheduled for March 2020 was temporarily postponed. The review and associated update to the Audit Committee will take place during 2020/21.
11. Internal Audit forms part of the internal control framework. It is a mandatory function whose primary aim is to ensure that the Chief Financial Officer's responsibilities, to maintain proper control over the Council's financial affairs, as defined by Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972, are fully met. The Audit Committee has reviewed and approved the risk based audit plan and progress reports against the audit plan throughout the year. This risk based audit plan was also approved by the Section 151 Officer and the Executive Management Team. The Committee has also received reports and updates from the External Auditor.
12. The Internal Audit function is provided by the Southern Internal Audit Partnership (operated by Hampshire County Council) and accords with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards. Internal Auditors are trained and have acted independently, objectively and ethically at all times. The Internal Audit Charter was approved during the year.
13. The Principal Auditor's annual opinion report, concluded that whilst Internal Audit are unable to give absolute assurance, the results of the reviews completed during the year have resulted in his overall opinion that:
 - sufficient assurance work has been carried out to allow a reasonable conclusion on the adequacy and effectiveness of New Forest District Council's internal control environment
 - New Forest District Council's framework of governance, risk management and control is 'Adequate' and audit testing has demonstrated controls to be working in practice
 - where weaknesses have been identified through internal audit review, Internal Audit have worked with the Council's management to agree appropriate corrective actions and a timescale for improvement.
14. Ernst & Young acts as the Council's independent external auditor. The Section 151 Officer and Chair of Audit Committee have responded openly to the External Auditor under the requirements of the International Auditing Standards.

15. All organisations, worldwide face increasing cyber related threats. The Council maintains sound standards and continually reviews opportunities to further strengthen these. The Council is a member of the Cyber security Information Sharing Partnership (CISP) and has signed up the South East Government Warning, Advisory and Reposting Point (providing information, knowledge and alerts on threat and incidents. The Audit Committee received an update during 2019/20 on cyber risks, and as a result of an adopted recommendation from that meeting, has since taken out a cyber insurance policy. ICT also reviewed the ICT Security Policy during 2019/20.
16. Internal Audit has reported an 'Adequate' opinion on the overall control environment. Three limited assurance audit opinions were given and monitoring of progress against the management actions of these audits has been conducted during 2019/20 and will continue into 2020/21 where necessary. The following audit areas have previously received high priority recommendations:
 - Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard Accreditation
 - Business Continuity
 - Good joint work underway with Hampshire County Council to test the Council's approach to business continuity. Also the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic starting March 2020 enabled it to fully test its business continuity arrangements with positive results. The new Covid-19 Task and Finish Groups will examine the outcome of the Council's response and will consider future ways of working and make appropriate recommendations.
17. The Council has developed an accurate and up to date draft Partnership Register during the year to ensure that terms of reference, the risks of collaborative working and the added value of partnership working is reviewed and suitably documented.
18. During 2019/20, the Council undertook a significant project to replace the aging and largely unsupported Financial Management System. Governance on this project was provided by way of a formal Board, containing 2 Executive Officers from the Council (including the S151 Officer), 2 Cabinet Members, 2 representatives from our third party implementation partner and our client manager from the software provider. During the implementation of this difficult project, a key motivation and outcome was to move away from extreme levels of NFDC customisations to the more standard product and processes that are used more readily across the user base.

5. Significant Governance Issues

Whilst there have been a number of improvements made throughout the year, the Council constantly strives for continuous improvement. The following significant areas will be included in the action plan:

1. Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard Accreditation
2. A review of the new workflow processes as included within the new Finance System to ensure their appropriateness in offering suitable financial control and management

6. Certification

To the best of our knowledge, governance arrangements, as defined above, have been in place at New Forest District Council for the year ended 31st March 2020 and up to the date of approval of the annual report and statement of accounts.

We propose to take steps over the coming year to address those areas identified above to further enhance our governance arrangements. We are satisfied that these steps will address the need for improvements that were identified during the review of effectiveness and will monitor their implementation and operation as part of our next annual review.

Signed:

Leader of the Council

Signed:

Chief Executive

Date:

Date:

Annual Governance Statement Action Plan for 2020/21

Heading	Update / Action	Responsible	Target
PCI Accreditation	<p>Work is underway on PCI accreditation in light of the recent changes to the Finance System and Telephone Payment System.</p> <p>Action: to finalise the process in relation to seeking PCI accreditation</p>	Chief Finance Officer	March 2021
Finance System Workflow	<p>Following the implementation of the new finance system which went live on 1/4/20, a review will be undertaken to provide assurance on the suitability of the adopted workflow processes imbedded within it.</p> <p>Action: to complete an audit review of the new workflow processes within the new Finance System</p>	Chief Finance Officer	March 2021