

ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT – 2014/15

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 As prescribed by the Account and Audit Regulations 2011, the Council is required to produce an Annual Governance Statement (AGS) following an assessment of its governance framework.
- 1.2 The Leader of the Council and the Head of Paid Services (Chief Executive) are required to sign the AGS and be satisfied that the document is supported by reliable evidence. It is published with the Statement of Accounts.
- 1.3 The draft AGS 2014/15 was approved by Audit Committee in June 2015 and provided to the external auditors for review.

2.0 THE ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT (AGS)

- 2.1 Whilst the AGS covers the period 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015, the document remains open for update until it is approved at the end of September 2015 and can make reference to any significant matter that has arisen.
- 2.2 Internal Audit has not recommended any changes to the draft statement and no changes have been recommended to date by the external auditor.
- 2.3 The statement has been reviewed by the Executive Management team. The final AGS for 2014/15 is attached in Appendix 1.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 There are no financial consequences arising directly from this report.

4. EQUALITIES & DIVERSITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL MATTERS

- 4.1 There are no equalities & diversity or environmental matters associated with this report.

5.0 CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no crime and disorder issues arising directly from this report.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 The Annual Governance Statement reports that the Council has sound levels of internal control and good governance arrangements.
- 6.2 The statement does identify some areas for improvement and these will be managed by the Council's Executive Management Team.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 That the Audit Committee approve the Annual Governance Statement for the Financial Year ended 31 March 2015 as reported in Appendix 1.
- 7.2 That the Leader of the Council and Head of Paid service sign the AGS 2014/15
- 7.3 That the AGS 2014/15 be published on the Councils' website, ensuring ease of access.

For Further Information Contact

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Background Papers

New Code of Good Governance – 23/3/08
AGS 13-14 – Audit Committee 20/6/14

**THE ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT
NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
2014/15**

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". A copy of the code can be found on our website: <http://www.newforest.gov.uk/committeedocs/sc/CDR03688.pdf>. This statement explains how New Forest District Council has complied with the code and also meets the requirements of regulation 4 (3) of the Accounts & Audit Regulations 2011 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, and 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 service.

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 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.

The governance framework has been in place at New Forest District Council for the year ended 31 March 2015.

3. The Governance Framework

The Local Code of Corporate Governance describes the Council's governance framework in relation to the six core principles below. A review of compliance against this Local Code has been reported separately, with opportunities for improvement recorded within a separate action plan.

1. Focusing on the purpose of the Authority and on outcomes for the community and creating and implementing a vision for the local area;
2. Members and Officers working together to achieve a common purpose with clearly defined functions and roles;
3. Promoting values for the Authority and demonstrating the values of good governance through upholding high standards of conduct and behaviour;
4. Taking informed and transparent decisions, which are subject to effective scrutiny and managing risk;

5. Developing the capacity and capability of members and officers to be effective; and
6. Engaging with local people and other stakeholders to ensure robust public accountability.

The Council aims to deliver high quality services that provide value for money and which are aligned to the needs and priorities of the local community. The Council's overarching vision, values and strategy for the year 2014/15 is contained in the Corporate Plan "Delivering for our Communities" which sets out what the Council aims to achieve for the period 2012 - 2016. <http://www.newforest.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=12103>. This plan includes a dedicated aim in relation to governance; "Maintaining strong Governance" as well as new values.

The Council has in place service action plans to deliver each of the aims of the Corporate Plan, for which responsibility is with the Heads of Service to deliver with their teams. The Executive Management Team oversees the performance and progress made against each plan.

The quality of service delivery is checked with users through regular consultation initiatives. Outputs from consultation are used to inform future service delivery.

The Council has Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) which sets out the Council's spending plans by each Portfolio, on a rolling basis.

The Council has also developed over the years a number of successful joint or collaborative working arrangements with the public and other agencies. This has continued into 2014/15, for example, with the New Forest National Park Authority (with regards to financial services, IT services, HR and Payroll, shared accommodation and processing of Tree Perseveration Orders) continued joint working and assets sharing arrangements at the Ringwood Gateway (which includes Hampshire County Council and Ringwood Town Council) and continued management arrangements for Internal Audit within four Dorset Councils.

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 (Delegations) in respect of policy and decision-making processes. 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.

During 2014, CPFA and the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) published the International Framework: Good Governance in the Public Sector. This framework details seven core principles. The Council has not updated its framework during the year but it has had regard to the International Framework when conducting its review. The Seven principles are set out in the diagram below:

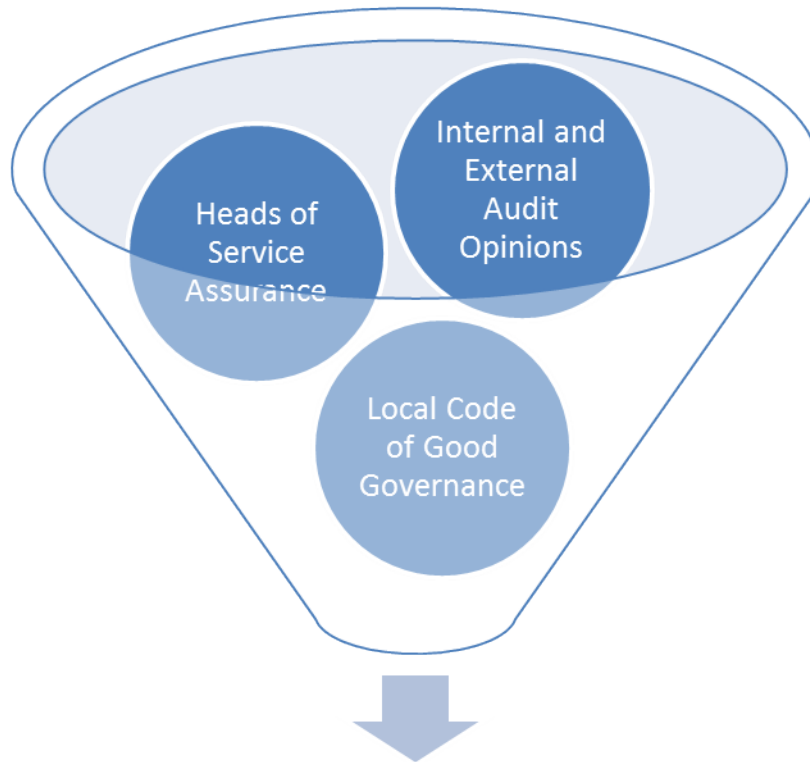
The diagram below illustrates the seven core principles contained within the International Framework.



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 the 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.

Governance Framework – Key Sources of Information



Annual Governance Statement

The Council has undertaken a mid year review of its governance arrangements/agreed actions as well as a year end review. The importance of maintaining strong governance arrangements is evidenced by a dedicated corporate aim. This aim and its achievements are recorded on the Council's website.

This Council has always maintained a strong internal control environment. 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.

The review concluded;

1. The Constitution and other Council Policies were reviewed and improvements approved including;
 - Procurement Strategy and Policy (Contract Procedure Rules)
 - Treasury Management Strategy
 - Employee Code of Conduct
2. The Council's arrangements for financial management and reporting are sound and are well documented. All proposals for expenditure and income are supported by a business case that includes links to the Corporate Plans; these are scrutinised initially by the service Portfolio Holder prior to inclusion as a formal bid to Cabinet and the Council. The planning process also includes a review of proposals by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Panels, before final proposals and the council tax levels are considered and approved by the Council each year.
3. Financial monitoring is achieved by regular budgetary control reports to nominated budget holders, Executive Management Team, the relevant Portfolio Holder, and the 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 published to Cabinet.

4. The Council's banking arrangements were tendered during the year with a number of other Local Councils. The tender process was successful resulting in an agreed new provider. The project implementation has been sound with little disruption to the public. All old accounts with the previous provider have been closed.
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. Member training will be in place to induct any new members following the elections in May 2015.
6. An Executive Director has Section 151 responsibilities (Chief Finance Officer). The Head of Legal and Democratic Services is the Monitoring Officer. All committee reports are reviewed by members of the Executive Management Team, which includes the Executive Directors as well as being provided to the Head of Legal and Democratic, prior to any decisions being made. This safeguards the Council to ensure legal decisions are taken and that decisions consider the Councils' corporate priorities and risks.
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).
8. The Performance Management framework ensures strategic monitoring with a focus on national indicators and the achievement of both the *Corporate and Portfolio Plans*. Performance indicators are reviewed during the year.
9. The Audit Committee met regularly and received training. The Committee has both a forward plan and will have a training plan in place for new 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 2011. The Assurance Framework was reviewed and approved during the year. The Committee also reviews the effectiveness of the Councils' system of Internal Control and receive a statement of conformance against the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards.
10. Internal Audit forms part of the internal control framework. It is a mandatory function whose primary aim is to ensure that the Executive Director'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 following consultation with the Heads of Service. The Committee has also received reports and updates from the External Auditor.
11. The Internal Audit team operates to the Standards as set out in 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. The improvements arising from the conformance against the standards were also reviewed during the year by Audit Committee.
12. Internal Audit Managers' 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 an overall opinion that;
 - Arrangements are in place to ensure there is an adequate and effective framework of governance, risk management and control in place

- Systems and internal control arrangements continue to be effective and agreed policies and regulations have been complied with in the majority cases. There have been weaknesses identified during the year; however recommendations have been made to address these with progress of their implementation monitored. Internal Audit is content that management are implementing the required actions to strengthen controls. These actions have been taken into account whilst forming the overall opinion. Where delay of high priority audit recommendation implementation is identified these are reported regularly to Audit Committee.
- Managers are therefore aware of the importance of maintaining internal controls and accept recommendations made by Internal Audit to improve controls
- Arrangements are in place to deter and detect fraud however these need to be improved. Recommendations surrounding this are recommended for inclusion within the Annual Governance Statement Action Plan.

This Opinion report, presented to the Executive Management Team and Audit Committee further comments on the control environment against the agreed Assurance Framework.

13. 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.
14. Heads of Service have been asked to report any significant governance or internal control issues. No significant issues were raised.
15. All organisations, worldwide face increasing cyber related threats. The Council maintains sound standards and continually reviews opportunities to further strengthen these. ICT and Internal Audit are working together to develop an updated Cyber Security policy within the Councils ICT Security Policy.
16. Internal Audit has reported an adequate opinion on the overall control environment, however the following audit areas have received high priority recommendations that have not been resolved promptly; Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard Accreditation and Asset Management.

5. Significant Governance Issues

Whilst there have been a number of improvements made throughout the year, the Council constantly strives for continuous improvement. In our conclusion we consider that governance issues can be grouped by;

- i) Elements of the governance framework for which the compliance assessment has identified that some improvement is necessary to provide full assurance;
- ii) Issues that the governance framework has identified and which require action in future to meet stakeholder expectations.

Under the first element there are no areas where the Council is not compliant but judgement is made that these areas have partial compliance and improvements should be made;

1. Completion of the Financial Regulations review
2. Implementation of uncompleted high priority audit recommendations
3. Improvements to Counter Fraud arrangements

The second element considers elements from the new Administration's manifesto.

Action, as detailed in the attached plan will be subject to biannual review by the Executive Management Team and Audit Committee.

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 2015 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 arrangement. 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: *Signed:*

Leader of the Council

Chief Executive

Date: *Date:*

Annual Governance Statement 2014/15 Action Plan

Topic	Action	Responsible Officer(s)	Deadline
Financial Regulations	To review and update Financial Regulations.	Executive Director (S151) in consultation with the Head of Legal and Democratic Services	31.3.16
Uncompleted high priority audit recommendations	To action uncompleted audit recommendations	Head of Service	30.9.15
Counter Fraud	To complete the self assessment against the CIPFA Counter Fraud Code of Practice and implement actions arising	Executive Director (S151) with Internal Audit Manager	31.3.16