



ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2017/18

1 Introduction

North Devon Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently and effectively. In discharging this overall responsibility the council is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, and facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, which includes arrangements for the management of risk.

The Council has a code of corporate governance which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SoLACE Framework "Delivering Good Governance in Local Government 2016" ("The Framework"). This statement explains how the council has complied with the code and also meets the requirements of the Accounts and Audit Regulations in relation to the publication of a statement on internal control.

2 The purpose of the governance framework

Confidence in public sector governance is of critical importance, given the huge investments by taxpayers in local services and the need to ensure that none is wasted. This Annual Governance Statement is to help provide that confidence by formally recognising, recording and publishing the council's governance arrangements.

The Framework requires local authorities to be responsible for ensuring that:-

- Their business is conducted in accordance with all relevant laws and regulations,
- Public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for, and
- Resources are used economically, efficiently and effectively to achieve agreed priorities which benefit local people.

The governance framework has been in place at North Devon Council for the year ended 31 March 2018, and up to the date of approval of the annual report and statement of accounts.

Our governance framework derives from core principles in the Framework. They are:

- 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 optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes,

- e) Developing the entities capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it,
- f) Managing risks and performance through robust internal controls and strong public financial management,
- g) Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting and audit to deliver effective accountability.

The authority's financial management arrangements conform with the governance requirements of the CIPFA "*Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government*" (2016) as set out in the Application Note to the Framework.

3. Key Elements of the Council's Governance Framework

3.1 Council and Executive

- Set the budget, strategies and the corporate objectives
- Receive performance reports

3.2 Ethics and Audit Committees

- Oversight of ethics and governance issues
- Dealing with complaints
- Receiving audit reports
- Risk Management

3.3 Overview and Scrutiny

- Receiving performance reports
- Holding Executive to account
- Considering service plans

3.4 Senior Management Team

- Receiving performance reports
- Managing behaviours
- Dealing with health and safety issues
- Risk Management

3.5 Corporate Risk Group

- Identifying corporate risks and reporting

3.6 Statutory Officers

- Ensuring that the Council acts properly and lawfully

4 How we comply with the Framework

This section describes the key arrangements in place to meet the core principles set out above.

Principle A - Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law

The Council has adopted a set of management behaviours which managers are expected to comply with. Managers are judged against those behaviours through the appraisal process.

The Council has also adopted a Code of Conduct for Members and an Employee Code of Conduct which provide frameworks for the expected behaviour of Members and staff. Training has been provided on both.

The Council has also adopted various policies including those on Whistleblowing and Anti Fraud and Corruption and has provided training to officers and Members where appropriate.

All reports going to Executive have to be consulted upon with senior officers including the section 151 officer and the Monitoring Officer. The legal implications of any decisions also have to be considered. The section 151 officer and Monitoring Officer have specific duties to ensure the legality of decisions and processes and to investigate any alleged breaches.

The Council's Ethics Committee has a responsibility in maintaining ethical standards.

Principle B - Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

All Council meetings are open to the public other than where confidential issues are to be discussed. All agendas and minutes are published on the Council's website. The Council is active on social media and publishes any events through these media channels.

The Council takes an active role in various partnerships and boards on a range of issues such as health, social inclusion and economic generation.

The Council holds regular Parish Forums where representatives of all Parish Councils are invited to attend to discuss issues of concern. It also holds public meetings when appropriate to discuss major issues such as the level and type of facilities to be provided within the new Leisure Centre. It has also held public events to advise the public of the recycling trial undertaken during the year.

The Council also holds public consultation exercises and surveys where appropriate and engages with stakeholders over major issues such as new legislation eg the Homelessness Reduction Act.

Principle C and D - Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits and determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes

The Council has adopted a revised Corporate Plan with two focussed objectives of Service Improvement and Growth. Backing up the Corporate Plan is a Delivery Plan which sets out specific actions that will be carried out to delivery the Corporate Plan.

The Corporate Plan is carried through into Service Plans which are approved by Executive following scrutiny by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Individual appraisals then reflect the actions in the Service Plans. Progress towards completing actions is reported each month to the Senior Management Team and quarterly to Executive and Overview and Scrutiny Committee, along with performance against performance indicators. Quarterly reports also go to Full Council so that all Members are aware of the progress.

The Council has a transformation programme called 21:21. There are number of themes but all contribute towards achieving the Service Improvement objective. Themes are run as projects with regular project meetings and with any issues being escalated to Senior Management Team.

A project has also been formed to deliver the second objective of Growing North Devon. Workshops have been held with Councillors who have heard presentations from representatives from other Councils. That project is currently defining what growth will look like in the North Devon area.

Principle E - Developing the entities capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it

The Council has a programme for identifying and providing training to aspiring managers. It also has a continually adapting programme of Manager Forums at which issues are discussed or training given.

It is also identifying opportunities for apprentices and is also supportive of any employee that wishes to be seconded to other roles.

Training needs are identified through the annual appraisal process and a corporate training programme is developed based on this. A Member's training programme is also developed and delivered every two years.

Part of the 21:21 project is a complete review of processes within the Council to maximise capacity and develop a customer focus and a number of staff have received training to enable this element of the project to proceed.

Corporate training has been provided on issues such as the new Data Protection legislation, safeguarding and emergency planning.

Principle F - Managing risks and performance through robust internal controls and strong public financial management

The Council has an adopted Risk Management Strategy which sets out the Councils approach to risk identification and resolution. Each service maintains a risk register and these are reviewed at team meetings and by Senior Management Team. A Corporate Risk Group, made of up officers, identifies corporate risks and reports these to the Audit Committee.

Performance against service plan actions and performance indicators is measured each month and reported monthly to SMT and quarterly to Executive and Overview and Scrutiny Committee and then ultimately Full Council.

Service planning is underpinned by financial planning, with changed expenditure in any service area being approved by the Executive and Council through the annual resource allocation process. As part of this process a rigorous examination of all

budgets is undertaken to identify opportunities for making efficiency savings, maximising income, or reducing unnecessary expenditure.

Principle G - Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting and audit to deliver effective accountability

All Council decisions are published on the Council's website along with the reasons for taking the decision. All reports and agendas are also published online.

Audit recommendations from Audit reports are reported to Audit Committee and progress towards completion is tracked and reported. Performance monitoring reports are considered by Executive and Overview and Scrutiny and subsequently by Full Council. Senior officers can be requested to attend any of these Committees to answer questions and deal with issues relating to performance.

The Council adopts a proactive approach to publishing information through its web site but when a request is received under the Freedom of Information Act, a response is sent within the statutory time limit in almost 100% of cases.

5 Review of effectiveness

5.1 Background

The Council has conducted its annual review of the effectiveness of its governance framework including the system of internal control. The review of effectiveness is informed by

- the work of council officers who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of governance environment
- the annual report of internal audit, and
- comments made by the external auditors and other review agencies and inspectorates
- assurance work completed during the year and up until the point that this Annual Governance Statement is approved.

The main processes that have been relied upon by North Devon Council in reviewing and maintaining the effectiveness of the system of internal control are highlighted below.

5.2 Internal Audit

Internal Audit is responsible for objectively reviewing the Council's internal systems of control with a view to reporting on and making recommendations to management with regard to their effectiveness for managing business risk and achieving the organisation's objectives

Internal Audit reviews are designed to assess the effectiveness of the internal controls on which the council relies for managing risk. There is an annual risk-based internal audit plan approved by the Audit Committee. During the year Internal Audit undertook 18 audits. Audit Recommendations are reported to SMT on a regular basis.

All outstanding Audit actions that are contained within the Internal Audit Reports are contained within a report that is presented to Audit Committee. Audit Committee takes an active role in ensuring actions are completed.

The effectiveness of Internal Audit in carrying out this function is assessed by the Audit Committee.

The service is provided through an external supplier enabling access to a wide variety of skills and specialist practitioners. The supplier is Mazars Public Sector Internal Audit Ltd.

The Internal Auditors have stated that there is reasonable assurance that the Council's governance arrangements are largely compliant with best practice guidance.

5.3 External Audit

The Council has appointed Grant Thornton as its external auditors.

The 2016/17 Annual Audit Letter (received in October 2017) provided an unqualified opinion on the Council's accounts but made some recommendations in relation to financial savings targets for 18/19 to 20/21 and the valuation of Council assets. The valuation of Council assets has now been completed and so has not been carried forward to the Action Plan. The MTFP was reviewed in February 2018 but further work needs to be undertaken to bridge any funding gaps in subsequent years. This is reflected in the Action Plan.

5.4 Other external agencies

The **Local Government Ombudsman (LGO)** reports on each council every year. The report for the year 2016/17 shows that 25 complaints were received with the largest number (12) coming from the Planning area. In the preceding five years the numbers were 23, 23, 17, 21 and 23 respectively.

6 of those complaints were referred back to the Council for local resolution and 1 was upheld after a detailed investigation but resolved satisfactorily by the Council prior to the involvement of the LGO.

The **Investors in People** review has been used as a useful stimuli to prepare and implement improvements to:

- staff morale
- the performance appraisal process
- internal communications
- management capabilities

This resulted in a successful re-accreditation in February 2017. That accreditation has been reviewed since and has shown that the Council has not yet implemented the recommendations from the original report. An action has therefore been included within the Action Plan.

The **LGA Peer Review** visited the Council in the previous year. Whilst the report was generally positive, again some actions suggested by the report have not yet been implemented and so an action has been included within the Action Plan.

5.5 Statutory Officers (i.e. Head of Paid Service, Chief Financial Officer, and Monitoring Officer)

No formal reports have been made by any statutory officer.

5.6 Senior Management Team

The Senior Management Team meets each week to develop policy issues and also considers internal control issues, including risk management, performance management, compliances, efficiency and value for money, and financial management.

During the year all external and internal audit reports were considered by the Senior Management Team before agreement of the recommendations. This ensured that any action that stemmed from them was properly integrated into the Council's activity.

The Senior Management Team reviewed and updated the Corporate Risk Register, supported by the Corporate Risk Management Group.

The Council's performance was reviewed quarterly. The Senior Management Team are the first step in the chain of monitoring and action that culminated in Executive decisions on the Performance and Financial Management Report.

Senior Management Team exercise control over all appointments and any staffing changes, including direct replacements have to be supported by business cases and approved by the Team.

All members of Senior Management Team have responsibility for maintaining a system of sound internal controls and management processes within their area of responsibility, and for reviewing their effectiveness. Each has completed an **Assurance Statement** for their area confirming that a sound system of internal control has been in place throughout the financial year, and identifying any areas that are less robust. Any issues identified as part of these have been incorporated into the Action Plan.

5.7 Health and Safety

There are established risk assessment and incident reporting processes. These are supported by framework risk assessments for 'office work', 'office work at home' 'site visits', 'driving at work', and 'attendance at exhibitions'. In addition there is information on a wide range of subjects available.

The Senior Management Team and the Council's Health Safety, and Welfare Committee (a joint staff/Member/management committee) met during the year and received incidence statistics with notes of trends and actions taken. These meetings support the Health and Safety Advisor's introduction of improvements and updates to guidance or practices to mitigate risks/incidence issues.

There are reports to the Chief Executive and the Senior Management Team when issues arise.

5.8 Information Management and Security

The Council holds a great deal of information and personal data to support the delivery of services. The security of that information is of paramount importance. The Information Management Group monitors compliance with the Information Security, Email, Internet, and Data Protection Policies. It has responsibility for ensuring that procedures are in place to reinforce the policies and for ensuring that specific training and guidance is provided at all levels within the Council. It reports to the Senior Management Team as issues arise. No major issues have been identified.

Steps have commenced for the implementation of GDPR. A replacement Data Protection officer has been appointed who is a member of the Legal team and training of all staff is being undertaken.

6. Governance Issues of Concern

North Devon Council has considered the outcomes of the governance arrangements referred to in this Statement. Where appropriate action plans have been developed to ensure the continuous improvement of the council's internal control, risk management and corporate governance arrangements.

The following governance issues were identified during 2017/18 as a result of the review of arrangements:

Areas identified by an internal review of governance arrangements

Issue	Action
<u>Significant Issues</u>	
1 Potential for severe disruption of council services by extreme events, such a localised flooding of council property or deliberate actions such as cyber attack. This is carried over from previous years although work is underway.	A review of all business continuity plans and introduction of a corporate business resumption plan together with a cyber attack response plan, a revised Disaster Recovery Plan and new Cyber Incident Response Plan
<u>Other Issues</u>	
2 Development of an Action Plan to implement recommendations from the IIP report and the Peer review	A complete review of two reports should be undertaken and a full Action Plan developed with timescales for implementation
3 Medium Term Financial Plan	Development of savings plans to plan for budget reductions during the period 19/20 – 21/22.
4 Equality Policy	A review of the Council's Equality policy and framework should be undertaken
5 Scheme of Officer Delegations	A further review should be conducted to ensure that all appropriate decision making powers are delegated to officers.

Issue	Action
6 Review of decision making arrangements	A root and branches review of the system for decision making should be conducted, taking into account all options for changes to the structure.

No additional risk areas were identified by either our external or internal auditors.

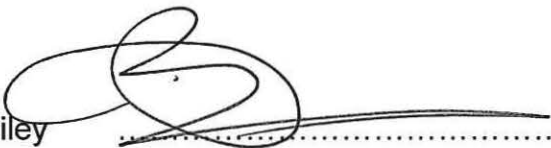
3 Certification

We have been advised on the implications of the result of the review of the effectiveness of the governance framework to address weaknesses and ensure continuous improvement of the system is in place.

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

Signed:

Councillor Des Brailey
Leader



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Mike Mansell
Chief Executive



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North Devon Council Assurance Framework

