

2020 / 2021

Annual Governance Statement

Scope of Responsibility

Stockton Borough Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for and used economically, efficiently and effectively. We also have a duty to continually review and improve the way in which functions are exercised.

The 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”. The Framework constitutes ‘proper practice in relation to internal control’. This statement explains how Stockton Borough Council has complied with the code and also meets the requirements of regulation 6(1) of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 in relation to the publication of a Statement on Internal Control.

The Purpose of the Governance Framework

The governance framework comprises the systems and processes, culture and values that direct and control our activities and through which we account to, engage with, and leads the community. The framework enables us to monitor the achievement of 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 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 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 the Council for the year ended 31st March 2021 and up to the date of approval of the Statement of Accounts.

The Governance Framework

There is a clear vision of our purpose and intended outcomes for citizens and service users that is clearly communicated, both within and outside the organisation. The Council Plan 2021 - 2024 provides the framework for the Council, partner organisations, groups of residents and individuals, to work together to improve the quality of life in Stockton by 2024. It sets out a Vision for the borough and its residents and how everyone will work together to achieve that Vision.

Our Vision for the Borough

A place where people are healthy, safe and protected from harm

This means the borough will be a place where:

- People live in cohesive and safe communities
- People are supported and protected from harm
- People live healthy lives

A place that is clean, vibrant and attractive

This means we will enjoy:

- Great places to live and visit
- Clean and green spaces
- Rich cultural experiences

A place with a thriving economy where everyone has opportunities to succeed

This means that the borough will have:

- A growing economy
- Improved education and skills development
- Job creation and increased employment

We will play our part in bringing about this vision for the Borough by being ...

A Council that is ambitious, effective and proud to serve

This means that we will make sure that we provide:

- Financial sustainability and value for money
- Dedicated and resourceful employees
- Strong leadership and governance

The Council Plan sets out our priorities and the significant actions we will take. These, in turn, shape the activity of our numerous services and how we will focus our resources. We are clear where we need to get to and what we need to do to get there.

Arrangements are in place to review our vision and its implications for the authority's governance arrangements. The annual strategic planning process, engagement and participation with residents, needs analysis and demographic information ensure the authority's vision remains relevant and meets the needs of local communities. There are regular reviews of the local Code of Corporate Governance to ensure that it is up to date and effective.

Arrangements are in place to measure the quality of our services, to ensure they are delivered in line with our objectives and for ensuring that they provide value for money. There are performance management arrangements in place including an annual appraisal scheme for staff. Services are delivered by suitably qualified / trained / experienced staff and all posts have detailed job descriptions/ person specifications.

The roles and responsibilities of Council members and employees are clearly documented. The Council's Constitution sets out how the Council operates. It incorporates a scheme of delegation and sets out how decisions are made. The Council's Constitution is regularly reviewed and updated to reflect organisational changes. Directorates have established schemes of delegation, which are reviewed regularly to ensure they are current and reflect any on-going organisational changes.

The Constitution includes Rules of Procedure and various Codes and Protocols that set out standards of behaviour for members and officers. The Code of Conduct for Members was reviewed in 2017/ 18.

During the year a system of scrutiny was in place allowing the scrutiny function to:

- Review and/or scrutinise decisions made, or actions taken in connection with the discharge of any of the Council's functions.
- Make reports and/or recommendations to the full Council and/or the executive and/or any joint or area committee in connection with the discharge of any functions.
- Consider any matter affecting the area or its inhabitants.
- Exercise the right to call-in, for reconsideration, decisions made but not yet implemented by the executive and/or area committees; and
- Consider Local Petitions and Councillor Calls for Action for matters within their terms of reference.

Appropriate governance arrangements are in place for commercial ventures operated through company structures, for example the Hampton by Hilton Hotel.

A range of financial and HR policies and procedures are in place, as well as robust and well embedded risk management processes. Appropriate project management standards and Business Continuity Plans are in place, which are subject to on-going review. There are comprehensive budgeting systems in place and a robust system of budgetary control, including formal quarterly and annual financial reports, which indicate financial performance against forecasts. There are clearly defined capital expenditure guidelines in place and procedures are in place to ensure that the Dedicated Schools Grant is properly allocated to and used by schools in line with the terms of grant given by the Secretary of State under section 16 of the Education Act 2002.

The authority's financial management arrangements conform to the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government (2016). The Director of Finance and Business Services is designated Chief Finance Officer (Section 151 Officer) and fulfilled this role through the following:

- Attendance at meetings of the Corporate Management Team, helping it to develop and implement strategy and to resource and deliver the Council's strategic objectives sustainably and in the public interest.
- Involvement in all material business decisions to ensure immediate and longer-term implications, opportunities and risks are fully considered.
- Alignment of medium-term business and financial planning processes.
- Leading the promotion and delivery of good financial management by the whole organisation so that public money is safeguarded and used appropriately, economically, efficiently and effectively; and
- Ensuring that the finance function is resourced to be fit for purpose.

The Council has an Audit and Governance Committee which, as well as approving the Authority's Statement of Accounts, undertakes an assurance and advisory role to:

- Reviewing and monitoring the Council's approach to risk management and corporate governance including the approval of the Statement of Internal Control.
- Monitoring the integrity of the Council's financial statements and approving the Statement of Accounts.
- Reviewing any proposed changes to accounting policies and promoting discussion around these.
- Approving the role and responsibilities of the Internal Audit Service.
- Considering the appointment of the External Audit Service and monitoring the effectiveness of auditor's performance.
- Approving the internal and external audit plans.
- Reviewing Internal Audit work on a quarterly basis; internal and external annual reports together with any management response and receiving details of specific significant issues highlighted via audit work and referring to the Executive Scrutiny Committee; the Select Committees, the Standards Panel, Cabinet or Council, as appropriate, any issues arising which are key in nature.
- Maintaining an overview of the Council's Constitution in respect of contract procedure rules, financial regulations and codes of conduct and behaviour, and considering the Council's compliance with its own and other published standards and controls; and
- Considering details of key ethical or wider corporate governance issues submitted by the Standards Panel.

We have arrangements to ensure compliance with relevant laws, regulations, internal policies and procedures, and that expenditure is lawful. The Director of HR, Legal and Communications is the Council's designated Monitoring Officer and a protocol is in place with all directors, to safeguard the legality of all Council activities. All Cabinet Reports are considered for legal issues before submission to members.

Arrangements for whistleblowing and for receiving and investigating complaints from the public are well publicised and subject to periodic review. We are committed to maintaining these arrangements to ensure that, where any individual has concerns regarding the conduct of any aspect of the Council's business, they can easily report their concerns. Monitoring records held by the Director of HR, Legal and Communications show that the whistle blowing arrangements are being used by both staff and the public, and that the Council is responding appropriately. The whistle blowing arrangements have assisted with the maintenance of a strong regime of internal control.

We have arrangements to identify the development needs of members and senior officers in relation to their strategic roles. Members have access to a Members Handbook and a Learning & Development Strategy. The Council recognises that managing the performance of all of employees is key to ensuring that the organisation meets the needs of the community. This includes assessing ability against requirements of the role focusing on strengths and highlighting areas of weakness, job related training, and on-going evaluation of the extent to which employees understand and support the values of the Council. In response to the ongoing challenges we face, we have developed the Shaping a Brighter Future programme to increase capacity, resilience and capability in employees.

Channels of communication have been established with all sections of the community to promote accountability and encourage open consultation. We are committed to listening to, and acting upon, the views of the local community and carry out consultation in order to make sure that services meet the needs of local people. We continue to use the 'My Views' consultation portal, which provides an improved online platform to support consultations on service changes and proposals.

We continue to work closely with all our partners including other public bodies, the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector and the private sector. We have established the proportionate governance arrangements for all partnerships.

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 Strategic Procurement and Governance Manager has directed, co-ordinated and overseen the review and its findings have been reported to Corporate Governance Group and the Audit and Governance Committee for their consideration and approval of the Annual Governance Statement.

The review is informed by a number of assurances gathered from all available sources and in particular:

- Assurances from external sources.
- Assurances from Corporate Governance Group.
- A self-assessment against the CIPFA Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework 2016 Edition.
- Assurances from senior officers responsible for relevant specialist areas. For example, the Director of Public Health's Annual Report.
- Internal audit planning processes which include consultation with all directors and assistant directors, and the results of audit activity as summarised in the Annual Internal Audit Report. In the report the Audit and Risk Manager states in his opinion on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's governance, risk and control framework: "It is my opinion that the Council continues to have an appropriate, and overall, an effective system of internal control, upon which it can place reasonable reliance to deliver the Council's objectives and detect fraud and other malpractice within a reasonable period of time. Where weaknesses have been identified through internal audit work, we have worked with management to agree appropriate corrective actions and a timescale for introduction".
- Best practice across the sector, and
- The external auditors (Mazars) Annual Audit Letter for 2019/20 concludes that, in all significant respects, the Council had proper arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

Impact of Covid-19

Covid-19 has inevitably impacted upon the Council's governance arrangements. Changes were made to working arrangements and the delivery of services, particularly during the first wave of the pandemic.

Numerous services were paused, suspended or significantly reduced with a rolling communications programme outlining the key service disruptions on the Council's website, signposted by daily and then more latterly twice weekly briefings from the Leader. At the time of writing, the majority of services have been reinstated.

Throughout, the Council has actively engaged with the Cleveland Local Resilience Forum (LRF) as the statutory body for coordinating the regional response to crisis events. Officers have also continued to liaise as part of sub regional and regional coordination – such as through the Chief Executives networks and through operational networks such as the Directors of Public Health, Association of Directors of Adults Services, NHS England and Directors of Children's Services.

At the start of the pandemic the Council moved rapidly to enable home working for the majority of office-based staff. Improved ICT capabilities, including widespread adoption of MS Teams as well as the well-developed process of replacing desktops with laptops and tablets enabled significant numbers of people to work from home with minimal disruption from March 2020. Virtual meetings were held across all services and with key partners. Average monthly use of MS teams since lockdown:

- 320,000 Teams chat messages
- 10,000 Teams meetings organised (single attendee)
- 31,000 Teams meetings attended (multiple attendees)
- 66,000 one-to-one Teams calls.

For those services where home working was not possible, risk assessments were undertaken and significant changes made to ways of working on shift patterns, changes to the physical environment and other adjustments to procedures and protocols to keep services running.

During the initial lockdown some Council committee meetings were suspended but when they resumed, these were conducted using a hybrid approach until the beginning of July 2020 when the Council introduced remote meetings only and have done so until recently. Over 120 public meetings have been delivered successfully using this approach.

The pandemic has obviously had a substantial impact on the Civic Year and the engagements that make up the Mayoral year. The Council has made use of alternative communication channels such as the Facebook page for the mayor to communicate key messages, such as Show Racism the Red Card, VJ Day, and Civic Awards where over 70 nominations were received.

During the year, the Council Plan has been reviewed and updated to identify new and/ or changes in objectives to reflect recovery from the pandemic. Interventions/ projects are in place to deliver these objectives.

Budget monitoring has continued as normal but has included the added complication presented by the additional Covid funding received from government. Regular returns to government have increased but the extra workload has been managed by Finance.

Audit activity continued during the year as planned, albeit remotely. The new innovative approach to auditing was implemented and has delivered an overall increase in audit activity, partly because of remote working and less travelling, but also due to less time spent on writing audit reports.

Overall, although the pandemic had initially impacted upon the Council's governance arrangements, the rapid implementation of alternative ways of working and carefully managed suspension and the then return to service delivery significantly minimized the impact upon governance.

The Financial Management Code

The Council has commenced a full self-assessment against the Financial Management Code. The work to date has identified that most elements of the code are in place. The improvement plan includes the requirement to conclude the review and implement any necessary actions.

AGS Improvement Plan 2020/21

The improvement plan from last year has been delivered, with new style risk register and audit report reporting to Audit and Governance Committee, Corporate Governance Group, directors, the section 151 officer and chief executive have been developed. The review of decision recording is complete and new schemes of delegation developed which include how and when to record decisions.

The outcome of the review of effectiveness provided us with the necessary assurance that no significant issues were identified. The findings of the review have been reported to Corporate Governance Group and the Audit and Governance Committee and under their Terms of Reference the Committee have satisfied themselves that the Annual Governance Statement accurately reflects the risk environment and any actions required to improve it. The areas to be addressed with new actions are outlined in the agreed improvement plan.

We propose over the coming year to take steps to implement the improvement plan to further enhance the Council's governance arrangements. We are satisfied that these steps will address the need for improvements that were identified in the review, and we will monitor their implementation and operation as part of the next annual review.

Improvement Plan

Action	Outcome	Responsibility	By When
Conclude the self-assessment of the Financial Management Code	Compliance with the code	Chief Accountant	2 nd qtr 2021/22
Monitor the recovery of services and ensure new ways of working comply with the code of governance.	Robust governance arrangements	Strategic Procurement and Governance Manager	4 th qtr 2021/22

By order of the authority

Signed:

J Danks
Managing
Director

Signed:

R Cook
Leader of the
Council