

DRAFT 2024 to 2025 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 2025 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 Stockton on Tees Plan 2024 provides a framework that the Council, as well as partners and communities, will use to ensure we work together towards a shared vision that brings our vision to life.

Our Vision for the Borough

The best start in life to achieve big ambitions

- Giving children and young people the best possible start, in an inclusive community where everyone can thrive
- A safe community for all children and young people
- Preventing children and families from experiencing the impact of poverty and taking a targeted approach to reduce the number of children in poverty
- Support for children in our care
- A bright future and sense of belonging

Healthy and resilient communities

- Ensuring happy and healthy lives for all – we will work to reduce health inequalities
- Working with our residents to build resilience and independence in their own homes
- Building safe and connected communities
- Supporting those who are experiencing poverty and work with communities to reduce the impact of poverty

A great place to live, work and visit

- Our borough will be a place to be proud of, for communities and business
- A vibrant and diverse place – the playground of the Tees Valley
- A great place to live and call home
- An environment that is well looked after, with outdoor spaces to enjoy and connect local amenities

An inclusive economy

- Delivering and sustaining economic growth
- Ensuring all our residents can benefit from economic opportunities by delivering and embedding a fairer distribution of wealth
- Cementing our role as the well-connected, economic heart of the Tees Valley

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 2021.

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, Transformation and Performance and Deputy Managing Director 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 Corporate Services 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 decisions are made by 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 Corporate Services 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 a new Health and Wellbeing Strategy and implemented a new Leadership Development programme.

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 Assistant Director - Procurement and Governance 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 several assurances gathered from all available sources and in particular:

- Assurances from external sources such as OFSTED and the Care Quality Commission.
- 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 Assurance 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,
- Performance information which is reported to Cabinet and management teams.
- The external auditors (Mazars) Annual Audit Letter for 2023/24 concludes that, in all significant respects, the Council had proper arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.
- Governance related issues identified during the year,

- Information reported to the Audit and Governance Committee,
- The results of the Council's self-assessment of compliance with the CIPFA financial Management Code, and
- Progress made in addressing significant weaknesses and issues requiring improvement identified in previous annual governance statements.

The Financial Management Code

The Council has concluded a full self-assessment against the CIPFA Financial Management Code. The work has not identified any significant weakness in compliance with the code.

Significant Changes

The Council has continued to review and develop its Performance Management Framework, creating a system that provides comprehensive performance information to operational and senior managers and Members. The updated system provides data and intelligence to drive future plans/ activity and improve decision making and helps monitor progress of the Stockton on Tees Plan 2024.

The Council has also continued to develop the Risk Management Framework to provide senior management and Members with a clearer understanding of key strategic risks. The system now takes assurance intelligence from several sources to aid risk assessment.

The 'Powering our Future' program continues to develop and mature. The program aims to improve services and meet future budget challenges. The governance arrangements and resources that ensure these aims are delivered have settled and are effective.

The Council's shared service, Xentrall ICT have worked to ensure the Council is best placed to meet the ever-evolving cyber threat. The Council has successfully retained Cabinet Office certification for the Public Services Network (PSN) as well as taking part in a pilot of the replacement to PSN, the Cyber Assessment Framework (CAF). The CAF has been developed by the National Cyber Security Centre and has a greater focus on the impact of a cyber-attack on key line of business applications. In addition, ICT have developed a Cyber Incident Response plan, invested in additional monitoring tools and created specific cyber roles which will be responsible for delivering further improvements.

The Council has received a CQC inspection of Adult Services under the new Assurance Framework which considered the following themes: working with people, providing support, ensuring safety within the system and leadership. Once the results are known, an action plan will be developed to ensure the recommendations are effectively implemented.

The regeneration element of the Powering our Future has been reviewed and updated and new governance arrangements to strengthen the delivery of the program implemented. New delivery teams have been established, and a revamped board oversees progress.

New governance arrangements for the hotel company have been introduced including a new shareholder agreement which clarifies the role of the shareholder representative and company matters to be reserved to the shareholder. The shareholder agreement is scheduled to be approved by Cabinet in July 2025. An annual performance report will be presented to the Cabinet upon receipt of the latest accounts.

AGS Improvement Plan 2025/26

The improvement plan for last year has been reviewed and updated for this year.

The improvement plan includes the ongoing delivery of the Children Services Improvement Plan developed because of the OFSTED Local Authority Children Services Inspection held in February and March 2023.

The improvement plan again includes a commitment to review the Officer Code of Conduct as part of the Colleagues Powering Our Futures Program. This review was delayed during 24/25 due to the need to firstly re-define the Council's organizational values and behaviors.

The improvement plan also includes a commitment to review and update the Council's Confidential Reporting Policy (whistleblowing) to reflect organizational changes and to reflect best practice in this area.

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
Implement the Improvement Plan from the CQC inspection once the outcome has been received	Updated policies and processes	Director Adults, Health and Wellbeing	2025/26 2026/27
Continue to deliver the Children Services Improvement Plan developed after the OFSTED Inspection	Improved OFSTED Rating	Good and Beyond Board	2025/26
Review the Officer Code of Conduct	New Officer Code of Conduct	Monitoring Officer	2025/26
Review and update the Confidential Reporting Policy (whistleblowing).	New policy	Monitoring Officer	2025/26

By order of the authority

Signed:

Signed:

M Greene

L Evans

Chief Executive

Leader of the Council

Date:

Date: