ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2022/2023

1.   SCOPE OF RESPONSIBILITY

West Oxfordshire District Council ('the Council') is responsible for ensuring that:

- Its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards;
- Public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for;
- Public money is used economically, efficiently and effectively; and
- There is a sound system of governance, incorporating the system of internal control

The Council has a Best Value 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 a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

In discharging these responsibilities, the Council is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, and including arrangements for the management of risk.

The Council has developed and approved a Local Code of Corporate Governance ('the Code'), which is consistent with the core principles and sub-principles as set out in the CIPFA/SOLACE "Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework (2016)" ('the Framework'). This statement explains how the Council has complied with the Code and also meets the requirements of Regulation 6(1)(a) of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 (England) which requires the Council to conduct a review at least once a year on the effectiveness of its system of internal control and include a statement reporting on the review with any published Statement of Accounts.

In addition to this, CIPFA issued its 'Statement on the Role of the Chief Finance Officer in Local Government (2015)'. The Annual Governance Statement ('the AGS') reflects compliance with this statement for reporting purposes.

2.   THE PURPOSE OF THE GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

The governance framework comprises the systems and processes, and culture and values, by which the Council is directed and controlled including activities through which it accounts to, engages with and leads its communities. It enables the Council to monitor the achievement 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 the governance 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 on-going process designed to:

- Identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of the Council's policies, aims and objectives;

- Evaluate the likelihood of those risks occurring;
- Assess the impact should those risks occur; and
- Manage the risks efficiently, effectively and economically

The governance framework has been in place at the Council for the year ended 31st March 2023 and up to the date of approval of the Annual Statement of Accounts.

While Financial savings have been delivered over the last few years, we have identified some areas where more resources are required, so additional support has been given and further reviews are being undertaken, particularly in areas such as the Finance Team which has been identified as being significantly under-resourced.

Since March 2020, the Council has been managing the impact of Covid-19 which has had a significant impact on the Council, its residents and businesses. The Council changed the way it delivered existing services, and was innovative in the creation of new services in order to meet the needs of businesses and residents. During 2022-23 this challenge has been extended by the cost of living crisis that has also impacted many of our communities, requiring us to change the way we deliver services and driving the creation of new services in order to meet the needs of our residents.

3.   THE GOVERNANCE ENVIRONMENT

The key elements of the Council's governance arrangements are outlined in the Code. The governance framework includes arrangements for:

- Identifying and communicating the Council's vision of its purpose and intended outcomes for citizens and service users;

- Reviewing the Council's vision and its implications for the Council's governance arrangements;

- Measuring the quality of services for users, ensuing that they are delivered in accordance with the Council's objectives and ensuring that they represent the best use of resources;

- Defining and documenting the roles and responsibilities of the Executive (Cabinet), Non-Executive, Scrutiny and Officer functions, with clear delegation arrangements and protocols for effective communication;

- Developing, communicating and embedding codes of conduct, defining the standards of behaviour for Members and staff;

- Establishment of a Constitution Working Group to review and update Financial Rules, Contract Rules, Constitution, Scheme of Delegation and supporting procedure notes / manuals, which clearly define how decisions are taken and the processes and controls required to manage risks;

- Ensuring effective counter-fraud and anti-corruption arrangements are developed and maintained;

- Ensuring the Council's financial management arrangements conform with the governance requirements of the *CIPFA* Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government (2015);

- Undertaking the core functions of an Audit Committee, as identified in CIPFA's Audit Committees: Practical Guidance for Local Authorities;

- Ensuring compliance with relevant laws and regulations, internal policies and procedures, and that expenditure is lawful;

- Whistleblowing and for receiving and investigating complaints;

- Risk based Internal Audit Strategy and Annual Plan;

- Identifying the development needs of Members and Senior Officers in relation to their strategic roles, supported by the appropriate training;

- Establishing clear channels of communication with all sections of the community and other stakeholders, ensuring accountability and encouraging open consultation;

- Incorporating good governance arrangements in respect of partnerships, including shared services and other joint working and reflecting these in the Council's overall governance arrangements;

- Reports from external bodies such as the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman, HM Revenue & Customs, Information Commissioner, Investigatory Powers Commissioner and Planning Inspectorate.

- Overview & Scrutiny Committees represent public forums through which Councillors can monitor the implementation of the Council's policies and the quality of its services; make recommendations on the discharge of the Council's functions and/or matters effecting the District and hold the Executive (Cabinet) to account for their decisions and actions.

The main areas of the Council's governance framework, and the key evidence of delivery, are set out below, under the headings of the core principles and sub-principles from the CIPFA/SOLACE "Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework (2016)

> **A. Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law**
>
> - Behaving with Integrity
> - Demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values
> - Respecting the rule of the law

- The roles and responsibilities of Members generally and all office holders are set out in the Council's Constitution, along with the way in which the various elements of the Council interact and complement each other. The Constitution is supported and underpinned by a separate Code of Conduct for Members and a joint Member / Officer Protocol, which sets out guidelines as to behaviour and practical issues. This is further supported by Publica's[1] Business Conduct rules which set out guidelines for staff on behavioural issues.

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[1] Publica Group (Support) Limited is a local authority owned company, jointly owned by Cheltenham Borough Council and Cotswold, Forest of Dean and West Oxfordshire District Councils. Over 95% of staff formerly employed by West Oxfordshire District Council are now employed by Publica which delivers services on behalf of the Council.

- Declarations are made at meetings by Members and Officers, where appropriate, and are recorded in the minutes of the meeting. The Members' Code of Conduct requires Members to make declarations of interest when necessary, these are also recorded.

- Registers of interest are completed annually by Members and published on the Council's website. A register of gifts and hospitality received by Members is maintained by the Monitoring Officer.

- An employee declaration is completed annually by all staff. A register of gifts and hospitality is maintained by Corporate Responsibility and addressed by the Governance Group every quarter.

- The Monitoring Officer and Section 151 Officer report directly to the Head of Paid Service and are members of the Corporate Leadership Team.

- Internal audit reviews are designed to ensure services are complying with internal and external policies and procedures / statutory legislation. Where non-compliance is identified, this is reported to Management and to Members via the Council's Audit & Governance Committee.

- The Whistleblowing Policy was last updated in January 2022 and was agreed by the Audit and Governance Committee in April 2022. A counter-fraud unit working across Gloucestershire and West Oxfordshire helps prevent and detect fraud and corrupt practices, including misuse of power. The service reports to the Audit and Governance Committee and the Publica Board's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee twice a year.

- Training is compulsory for regulatory committees, that is, Development Control and Licensing.

- There are safeguards in the Constitution for handling planning and licensing applications from Members and Officers.

- During 2020/21 the Council put in place a robust set of emergency measures to monitor and respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, which had an extraordinary impact across the Council, our services, residents and communities. These measures were in line with national Emergency Management protocols. Whilst the World Health Organisation has declared the pandemic is over, we have good preparedness for any future pandemics.

- Meetings are minuted, with decisions and key actions recorded appropriately. The Council continues to publish key decisions, in line with legal best practice. The Council has continued providing regular updates to and conversations with Members and across the organisation. Although all Member decision making meetings have reverted to being face-to-face in line with legislation, we have maintained the option for people to join remotely where possible and appropriate. This facility will be extended soon with the planned alterations in the Council Chamber which will enable participants in meetings or events to join remotely where appropriate to do so.

- The Communications Service remains fully mobilised to ensure communications through all our channels to support public health advice / information / messaging and Council service and support information to reach audiences externally and internally. A bespoke Communications Strategy has been put in place to help all stakeholders feel 'informed, reassured, safe and inspired' through the current cost-of-living crisis. .

B. Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement
  - Openness

- Annual accounts are published in a timely manner to help communicate the Council's financial position and performance.

- The Council's Corporate Plan 2023 - 2027 was reviewed and adopted in January 2023. This is available on the Council website.

- All Committee, Executive (Cabinet) and Council reports clearly outline their purpose, so the community can understand what is trying to be achieved. Reports also address financial, legal, equalities, risk and climate change implications to aid understanding of the potential impact of their recommendations.

- The roles and responsibilities of the Executive (Cabinet), Non-Executive, Scrutiny and Officer functions are defined in the Council's Constitution.

- A Scheme of Delegation of powers to Officers is included within the Constitution.

- Communication channels for Publica staff include one-to-ones and team meetings, a weekly update email from Publica Directors (Keeping you connected) and an online portal (intranet).

- A Customer Feedback form is available publicly for handling comments, complaints and compliments and the Council's website includes different ways for customers to give feedback or access services. A customer satisfaction survey was carried out on the telephone service provided, with the Council receiving high satisfaction scores.

- Ensuring clear channels of communication with all sections of the community and other stakeholders

- The ability for members of the public to ask questions at Executive (Cabinet) meetings, Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings and meetings of the Full Council.

- A report is produced quarterly regarding the performance of the Council's services and the achievement of its aims and objectives. The report is presented to the Executive (Cabinet), discussed at the relevant Overview & Scrutiny Committees and published on the Council's website.

- The Council publishes transparency data on its website which includes supplier payments, senior management structure charts and the Annual Pay Policy Statement. Where data is not available in the published data sets, instructions are available on how to make a Freedom of Information requests and the procedure that will be followed to answer the requests.

- Some Committee meetings are webcast live and the recordings are available to view on the Council's website. Council and Executive (Cabinet) meetings will follow when the facility to do so has been installed in the Council Chamber.

- A Locality Leadership Team, comprising the Head of Paid Service, the S151 Officer, Monitoring Officer and Publica's Locality Lead Assistant Directors, meets monthly to discuss projects and reports.

C. Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits
- Defining outcomes
- Sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits

- The Council's vision and corporate priorities are contained within the Council Plan 2023 - 2027 which was adopted by Council in January 2023.This sets out the high level areas of focus, and what the Council hopes to achieve on its own or in partnership with others. These priorities are supported by the Code of Corporate Governance as good governance should underpin all the work of the Council.

- An annual business planning process is also conducted by Publica, which is informed by the corporate priorities, legislation and government guidance. All the areas of focus (corporate priorities) are underpinned by the following principles:

  o Putting Residents First

  o Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All

  o Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife

  o Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency

  o Working together for West Oxfordshire

- Detailed proposals arising from the corporate priorities are individually assessed and are included within decision making reports.

- The financial implications of delivering against the Council's priorities are included within the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy ('MTFS'), revenue budgets and capital programme. These key financial documents are updated annually in advance of the forthcoming financial year. Variance to budget is reported quarterly and the MTFS and the Capital Programme are updated at appropriate intervals throughout the year.

- As part of its MTFS the Council assesses its forecast financial position and updates its assumptions about the resources available to, and the investment needs of, the Council.

- The Council is facing financial pressure from unprecedented inflationary pressures. These are being incorporated into subsequent iterations of the MTFS and mitigations regarding costs are being developed.

- A Recovery and Regeneration Investment Strategy ('the Strategy') was approved by the Council in 2020 which sought to close the Council's forecast funding shortfall by generating additional revenue streams while addressing Council priorities. The Strategy contains guidance on the type of investment that the Council could pursue and appropriate yield thresholds. Due to the high cost of borrowing and a shortage of appropriate investments, the Council has not been able to achieve the level of investment that it would have liked to and this is reflected in a lower expectation of investment, borrowing and yield in the MTFS with the factors limiting this explained in the Strategy papers.

D. Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes
- Determining interventions
- Planning interventions
- Optimising achievement of intended outcomes

- The Council has, with three other councils, created a company, Publica Group (Support) Ltd, to deliver more efficient and improved services. Where appropriate, processes have

been or are being aligned to ensure consistency across the partner councils, without compromising local priorities. In recognition that Publica is a significant contractor of the Council, the Council monitors its performance by:

— Considering Publica's Annual Report at Council;
— Considering Publica's draft Business Plan annually at the Overview and Scrutiny Committees and Executive (Cabinet) in February/March each year;
— Requiring representatives from Publica to attend relevant Overview & Scrutiny Committee(s) to support discussion on quarterly performance and other reports;
— Receiving monthly "Keeping You Connected" updates by email from Publica to all Members;
— Inviting Publica senior Officers to attend monthly Informal Executive (Cabinet) meetings to discuss progress against the Business Plan and Corporate Plan
— Creation of quarterly WoDC retained Officers/Publica Executives meetings where performance and progress against Corporate Plan priorities is a key agenda item.
— Develop informal mechanisms to share best practice, learning and Councillor development.

- In addition to the creation of Publica, the Council continues to secure savings through improved use of its assets and investments.

- Given the creation of Publica is five years on, over the coming year all Shareholder Councils will jointly conduct a robust review of future options to make sure the solutions needed for the council to achieve financial stability can be achieved, given the MTFS shortfall over the years ahead. This review will examine the priorities for service delivery, options for reduction or transformation and how the Publica model fits into this.

- The Council is also a Shareholder in Ubico, who deliver the Council's environmental services including waste and recycling collection services. The Council is focusing on ensuring effective governance arrangements are in place for this jointly owned company.

- The Council has processes in place to identify and respond to external changes, for example: changes to legislation and regulation, emerging risks and opportunities. Corporate processes such as risk management, performance management processes, budget monitoring and other management processes are designed to capture and incorporate these external factors and to enable the Council to respond appropriately.

- The Strategic risk register is reviewed regularly by the Local Leadership Team and reported to the Audit & Governance Committee. This is under review to ensure all required risks are escalated and reported.

- Projects and services retain their own risk registers and should elevate any high or strategic risks to the Local Leadership Team and Publica as appropriate for consideration. A Risk Group reviews risk registers each quarter and should escalate any emerging risks to the strategic register. Significant progress has been made this year in improving the identification and reporting of risks but further work is planned to improve communication and processes as there is a recognition that not all risks are appropriately escalated to the strategic register and therefore visible to the Local Leadership Team.

- Key performance indicators are measured and reported quarterly.

- Budgets are prepared annually in accordance with objectives, strategies and the MTFS, following consultation with residents, Members and Officers.

- The MTFS is a live document and can be reviewed, updated and reported as necessary, to respond to the changing environment.

- As we move forward we will continue to analyse the impact of the current cost of living crisis and understand how that has impacted our strategic priorities. We will need to understand and manage a variety of impacts, including financial, service delivery, health and wellbeing. The Council will continue to work with residents and local businesses to review and respond to their changing needs and to help them protect themselves and others, as well as recover from the health and economic costs arising from the cost-of-living crisis.

E. Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it
- Developing the entity's capacity
- Developing the capability of the entity's leadership and other individuals

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- One of the reasons behind the creation of Publica was to increase service delivery capacity across the four partner councils by sharing common processes and procedures and eliminating (as far as possible) single points of failure. By working in partnership, the Councils are able to share the cost of commissioning bespoke and specialist advice. As part of the review cited at the third paragraph in section D above, the Council will consider how the Publica governance model and Executive arrangements support the Council's Retained Officers' capacity to lead the Council and develop ideas, strategies and political engagement.

- The move to provision of services via wholly owned companies provides the opportunity to engage with a number of Non-Executive Directors that bring a wealth of experience from a range of different economic sectors. Councillors also have a range of experience which is a valuable asset to the Council.

- There is a Scheme of Delegation at Member level covering the Council, Executive (Cabinet), individual Executive Members and other Committees. Similarly, there is a Scheme of Delegation for Officer decisions at Executive, Non-Executive and Regulatory meetings. These are reviewed and revised as structures change.

- Financial rules are in place and are reviewed and revised as required.

- An induction programme is available to new employees and Members. Training is also provided for both Members and Officers on an on-going basis as appropriate and necessary. Members on certain Committees (e.g., Planning and Licensing) are required to undertake training before attending the Committee meetings, and to attend further training to remain up to date and improve their knowledge. A new induction process is being introduced for staff in 2023/24.

- Officers undertake regular 121 meetings with their line manager. As part of these 121 meetings, Officers discuss work plans/tasks and any training requirements associated with the successful delivery of the work plan. Officers are encouraged to complete Continuing Professional Development as relevant to their professional qualifications and service areas hold budgets to ensure that training can be undertaken to maintain skills and knowledge.

- Training is also provided for Officers on an on-going basis as appropriate and necessary.

- The Head of Paid Service, the Section 151 Officer, the Monitoring Officer and the Leader of the Council have clear statutory responsibilities. Roles and responsibilities are contained within the Constitution along with the Member/Officer Protocol.

- A Leadership Development Programme has been run for senior managers within Publica and the Council and during 2023/24 will be further developed to ensure positive leadership.

F. Managing risks and performance through robust internal controls and strong public financial management
- Managing risk
- Managing performance
- Robust internal control
- Managing data
- Strong public financial management

- The Council explains and reports regularly on activities, performance and the Council's financial position through reports to its Executive (Cabinet) and Committees. Timely, objective and understandable information about the Council's activities, achievements, performance and financial position is provided. This includes publication of:

  ➢ Quarterly Performance Reports, publicly reported to the Executive (Cabinet)

  ➢ Externally audited accounts including an Annual Governance Statement.

- A Risk Management Group has been established to undertake quarterly reviews of risk registers, escalating any emerging risks to a strategic level. The Local Leadership Team reviews the Strategic Risk Register on a quarterly basis. The Strategic Risk Register is reported to the Audit & Governance Committee on a regular basis.

- Risks are identified when undertaking Internal Audit reviews and reported when necessary. The Council, through the S151 Officer, is able to flag any areas of concern to be added to the work of the Internal Audit team in the coming year.

- The work of the Internal Audit team is reviewed and challenged by both the S151 Officer and the Audit and Governance Committee.

- Performance Management measures the quality of service for users to ensure services are delivered in accordance with the Council's objectives and represent best use of resources.

- Performance is measured on a regular basis through the quarterly KPI dashboards and reported to Members and Executive (Cabinet).

- Minutes of meetings are published and highlight the challenge made by Members to Officers and to Executive (Cabinet) Members.

- The Internal Audit service is provided by South West Audit Partnership Internal Audit Services ('SWAP') and is run in partnership with other local authorities.

- A risk-based Audit Plan is drafted annually following consultation with Officers, Members and the S151 Officer. The Audit Plan is approved at the Audit & Governance Committee prior to the financial year.

- Audit reports, once completed, are discussed with the service manager. Executive summaries, including findings, and progress on the Annual Plan are reported to the Audit & Governance Committee, on a quarterly basis.

- Recommendations made in audit reports are followed up 6 months after the completion of the audit and priority 1 and 2 findings are reported to the Audit & Governance Committee. Recommendations not implemented within that time scale are reported to the S151 Officer and to the Audit and Governance Committee.

- The Audit & Governance Committee's Terms of Reference are contained within the Constitution. Training is provided where appropriate.

- A Counter Fraud Unit supports the Council and other third parties. Where investigations identify possible improvements to the internal control framework the Counter Fraud Unit will liaise with the Internal Audit team to ensure the improvements are followed up and implemented by management.

- An ICT Audit and Compliance Manager has been appointed as the Council's Data Protection Officer and therefore has responsibility for Data Protection policies and ensuring that Officers and Members are informed and appropriately trained.

- The Council has invested in its cyber security capability to increase its resilience against a cyber-attack, by implementing additional security solutions, recruiting additional staff and resourcing an ongoing training programme to maintain the impact of this investment.

- Audit reviews ensure data is held securely whether electronically or hard-copy.

- The MTFS is reviewed and updated on a regular basis by the Section 151 Officer to ensure that the Head of Paid Service, Monitoring Officer and Members are aware of the financial standing of the Council.

G. Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit to deliver effective accountability
- Implementing good practice in transparency
- Implementing good practices in reporting
- Assurance and effective accountability

- Data in respect of transparency is published on the Council's website.

- The Council's Statement of Accounts is produced and published annually in accordance with statutory legislation. Aligned with this is the production of the Annual Governance Statement which identifies how the Council has met its governance reporting obligations

- External Audit recommendations are reported to Audit & Governance Committee, following the completion of their annual audit process, follow-ups of recommendations are also reported

- Internal Audit processes ensure compliance with Public Sector Internal Auditing Standards. Internal Audit recommendations are followed-up and reported to the Audit & Governance Committee, further follow-up is planned if recommendations have not been actioned in full.

- The Council has a process for the receipt and processing of freedom of information requests made under the Freedom of Information Act and environmental information requests under Environmental Information Regulations.

- There is a presumption that all reports and the associated annexes to be considered in public meetings will be published. The Council's Legal Officer is consulted in circumstances where reports or annexes contain information which is considered to be exempt from publication.

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 senior managers, the annual opinion from the Head of Internal Audit, the Officer Corporate Governance Group and comments made by the External Auditors, other review agencies and inspectorates.

The Council's process for maintaining and reviewing the effectiveness of the governance framework has included the following:

Statutory Officers, Executive Directors, Assistant Directors and Business Managers are required to complete an Annual Assurance Statement at the end of the financial year. These governance declarations provide appropriate management assurance that key elements of the system of internal control are in place and are working effectively and help to identify areas for improvement.

The Local Leadership Team (including the Section 151 Officer, the Monitoring Officer and Locality Directors) review the Strategic Risk Register on a quarterly basis and Service/Project Risk Registers are maintained by each Group/Business Manager.

A Governance Group meets quarterly to discuss and action matters such as staff declarations of interests/gifts and hospitality, audit recommendations, cyber security and GDPR updates/breaches register and counter fraud updates.

The SWAP Assistant Director (Head of Internal Audit) provides the Audit & Governance Committee, as the Committee charged with governance, with an Annual Opinion on the control environment of the Council, which includes its governance arrangements.

Investigation of, and decisions on, allegations of failure to comply with the Members' Code of Conduct are considered and determined by the Monitoring Officer and/or an Independent Standards Panel taking into account the views of the Independent Person.

Induction processes are carried out for newly elected Members.

Training and awareness sessions are carried out for the Audit & Governance Committee periodically.

The External Auditors (Grant Thornton) present progress reports to the Audit & Governance Committee.

The External Auditor's Annual Audit Letter and follow-up of management responses to issues raised in the Letter or other reports are overseen by the Audit & Governance Committee.

Quarterly performance reports, including the budget position, are presented to the appropriate Member panel and Executive (Cabinet), demonstrating performance management against agreed performance indicators and budgets.

The Audit & Governance Committee reviews the Annual Statement of Accounts, including the final AGS, the Treasury Management Strategy and quarterly progress reports from both Internal Audit (SWAP) and External Audit (Grant Thornton).

Full Council approves the annual budget and reviews and approves the Treasury Management Strategy, following recommendations from the Audit & Governance Committee.

Internal Audit monitors the quality and effectiveness of systems of internal control. Audit reports include an opinion that provides management with an independent judgement on the adequacy and effectiveness of internal controls. Reports including recommendations for improvement are detailed in an action plan agreed with the relevant Business Manager/Group Manager.

The Annual Internal Audit Opinion for 2022/2023, in respect of the areas reviewed during the year, was one of low "Reasonable" Assurance, that there is a generally sound system of governance, risk management and control in place.

The Council's Financial Rules and Contract Rules are kept under review and revised periodically.

Other explicit review/assurance mechanisms, such as the Annual Report from the Local Government & Local Care Ombudsman and reports from SWAP or Grant Thornton are also reviewed.

5.   REVIEW OF GOVERNANCE ACTION PLAN FOR 2022/2023

When preparing its 2021/2022 statement the Council identified a number of areas which required focus and attention. These have been actively monitored throughout the year and progress by the end of March 2022 is detailed in the table below:

No.	Key Area of Focus	Planned Actions	Progress
1	Raising awareness of the contract procedure rules	● New Contract and Procurement Strategy to be approved and published to all Officers, linking to the Contract Procedure Rules. ● Planned audit of contract and procurement by SWAP will cover Officer awareness of the Contract Procedure Rules.	A new Contract & Procurement Strategy has been developed and is currently awaiting approval by Executive (Cabinet).
2	Accounts payable	Review of Accounts Payable (AP) on business world to cover: ● raising of requisitions and approval of purchase orders ● approval of invoices	This is work in progress and will be carried over to next financial year.
3	Risk management Training	● Training package to be finalised and rolled out. ● Full training package and other material covering the risk and opportunity guidance to be published on the Publica portal. ● Planned audit of risk and opportunity management by SWAP will cover Officer awareness of guidance. ● Processes and completeness of all Risk Registers.	A new Risk Management Policy / process has been approved and implemented. More work has been undertaken to ensure risks are captured and reported and this focus will continue into 2023/24.

4	Compliance with audit recommendations	• Improved reporting of outstanding Audit recommendations to Local Management Team, Audit & Governance Committee and Publica's Audit Risk and Compliance Committee.	Outstanding recommendations are a regular feature on the Local Management Team agenda. Executive (Cabinet) have agreed to the Chair of Audit & Governance recommendation that Officers with actions that are outstanding for more than six months should report to the Audit & Governance Committee
5	Business Continuity Plans, development and testing	• Completion of Business Impact Analysis. • Revised strategic and tactical plans to be developed. • Review of all operational plans prior to a complete desktop exercise. • New plans and programme to be signed off.	Business Impact Analysis is almost complete and revised plans are being developed. Operational plans have been updated. Testing of the plans took place on 3 October 2022 SWAP has undertaken a Business Continuity Audit which will be presented to Audit & Governance Committee.
6	Programmes and projects	• Review of the governance arrangements surrounding programmes and project management. • Improvement of consistency of project planning including milestones and detailed project plans. • Improved reporting of projects to increase consistency across the programme. • Evaluation of the sign off process and thresholds for new projects.	Governance for project and programme management has been developed, with monthly project governance meetings at Publica and locality Project Governance Meetings. A priority is now how this is embedded into business.

6.   GOVERNANCE ACTION PLAN FOR 2023 - 2024

In preparing this statement and reviewing the effectiveness of the governance arrangements as part of our continuous improvement approach, a number of areas have been identified where the Council needs to focus attention and improve arrangements over the next financial year. These areas of work are planned to strengthen the control framework and are set out in the table below.

	Key Area of Focus	Planned Actions
1	MTFS refresh	• Continue to regularly update the MTFS to reflect the current financial forecast. The current iteration shows a significant budget gap and while some mitigations have been identified, they are insufficient to resolve the budget shortfall. The emerging Action Plan which links to the revised Council priorities will inevitably increase pressure on the budget so even more savings / additional income will need to be found in order to close the gap and balance the budget. A Transformation Group has been set up to review potential savings on a service by service basis and this group must work quickly to identify and implement savings if the forecast budget gap is to be closed.
2	Treasury Management	• As the Council's cashflow becomes tighter, an increased focus on Treasury Management is required with more frequent and timely updates allowing for management of a reduced level of working capital and maximum foresight of any borrowing requirements.
3	Service Transformation	• Conduct a robust review of future service delivery options to make sure the solutions needed for the Council to achieve financial stability can be achieved, given the MTFS shortfall over the years ahead. This review will examine the priorities for service delivery, options for reduction or transformation and how both the Publica and Ubico models fit into this. The review should determine which service provision is statutory and non-statutory, fits with current priorities or is legacy, and where there are opportunities to reduce even the level of statutory provision.
4	Invoice approval hierarchies	• To continue the review of invoice approval hierarchies ensuring that these are appropriately reflected on Business World. • To investigate whether Business World would support the workflow of approvals thus removing the need to gather information on whether invoices should be paid or not via email or other means

		external to ABW which does not allow for an appropriate audit trail to be preserved on the Finance system.
5	Aged debt and credit control	• To retrain all service areas in the handling of aged debt. A review of the process has identified that processes are not being followed. These need to have a stronger focus and to be re-embedded in service areas, supported centrally by a stronger emphasis on credit control. Much work has been done in 22/23 to assess and write off uncollectable debt but work is required on current debt processes to ensure that timely interventions are made.
6	Project and Programme reporting	• This area has improved but more work still needs to be done to ensure that there is transparency of information and that mitigations are owned and time bounded and that the implications of delays or overruns is clearly documented and communicated. • Guidance on governance frameworks has been written but more work is required to ensure this is embedded.
7	Roles and responsibilities	• The External Auditors have recommended that as part of the upcoming external review of Publica, there is a clarification of roles and responsibilities, where decisions should appropriately sit (in Publica / Ubico or the Council) and more clarity around not just the services being delivered but the level of those services.
8	Raising awareness of the contract procedure rules	• A new Contract & Procurement Strategy has been developed and is currently awaiting approval by Executive (Cabinet). A priority this year will be to rollout Management Training to ensure this new strategy is understood and embedded.
9	Financial Management	• To review the financial procedure rules and financial processes to be completed in 2023/24 against the CIPFA Financial Management Code.
10	Risk Management	• To rollout the Risk Management Training to all relevant Officers (Launched in May 2023) • To build risk management into the new Leadership and Development Training • To ensure the existing Risk Policy and process enables effective reporting, escalation and mitigation.

		• To continue to improve the Risk Registers and the processes by which risks are escalated to the Strategic Risk Register to ensure that all risks are escalated allowing Local Management Team and Members sight of them for monitoring and inclusion in decision making information.
11	Emergency Planning	• To further increase community resilience in line with the new Resilience Framework, published in December 2022. • To further develop our Emergency Response Framework by putting in place a Locality Response Team for WODC who are trained and able to respond in the event of a significant local incident. • To ensure Statutory Officers are trained and competent in their role as Gold (Strategic) Commander in the event of a significant local incident, and relevant Officers are trained in Silver (tactical) and Bronze (operational response). • To ensure the Safety Advisory Group considers any implications from Martyn's Law when considering planned events.
12	Portal Content Management	• To review the Publica Portal content to ensure it is up to date, and includes the latest versions of all policies and procedures
13	Business Continuity	• To further develop the Business Continuity Processes to ensure they are robust and fit for purpose • To test the business critical Business Continuity Plans in 2023/24
14	New HR Policies	• Rollout a new and revised suite of HR policies in 2023/24 • Ensure Managers are trained in the use of the new HR Policies

7.   APPROVAL OF LEADER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE

We have been advised on the implications of the result of the review of the effectiveness of the governance framework and that the arrangements continue to be regarded as fit for purpose in accordance with the governance framework.

Signed on behalf of West Oxfordshire District Council:

Andy Graham   **Giles Hughes**
Leader of the Council   **Chief Executive**

Date: **Date:**

(END)