

ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2023/2024

I. 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 2024 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.

During 2023-24 the residents of West Oxfordshire have continued to face the challenges presented by the cost of living crisis. The council has adapted the delivery of its services to meet the changing needs of the residents whilst coping with the financial challenges faced by all local authorities. Single year settlements restrict our ability to confidently plan for more than one year in advance and there is continued uncertainty over the timing of funding changes, such as Business Rates reset and phasing out of New Homes Bonus.

The general and wage inflation also puts additional pressure on the financial position of the council and the possibility of a new government does nothing to alleviate this challenging financial outlook.

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, ensuring 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 Committee represents a public forum 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’s¹

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

Business Conduct rules which set out guidelines for staff on behavioural issues and the Council's Employee Code of Conduct.

- 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. The register of gifts, hospitality and sponsorship has been reviewed and approved at the Audit and Governance Committee on March 2024. All declarations received by Members are recorded 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.
- A new Council Employee Code of Conduct has been developed and was approved at the Audit and Governance Committee in March 2024.
- All HR policies, 29 in total, have been reviewed and approved by Council.
- 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 (A&G).
- 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, Standards Sub-Committee and Licensing.
- The annual summary of Member Code of Conduct Complaints was considered by A&G Committee in August 2023 and lessons learnt endorsed.
- There are safeguards in the Constitution for handling planning and licensing applications from Members and Officers.
- 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 was be extended in January with the planned alterations in the Council Chamber will enable participants in meetings or events to join remotely where appropriate to do so.
- A webcasting Protocol was approved by the Council in January 2024.

staff formerly employed by West Oxfordshire District Council are now employed by Publica which delivers services on behalf of the Council.

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- 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
- Engaging comprehensively with institutional stakeholders
- Engaging with individual citizens and service users effectively

- 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 setting out the Council’s vision and corporate priorities.
- A new communications protocol was approved by Council in January 2024 setting out the role of the Team and the way in which it supports the Council including during sensitive periods, such as pre-election periods, was approved by Council in January 2024.
- 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 and Council retained staff include one-to-ones and team meetings. A weekly update email from Publica Directors (Keeping you connected) and an online portal (intranet along with regular all staff briefings via Teams take place).
- 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 being ranked third in the country.
- Ensuring clear channels of communication with all sections of the community and other stakeholders.
- A new protocol for webcasting all Council Committee Meetings was approved in January 2024 at Full Council enabling greater transparency and community engagement in Council Meetings following the refurbishment to the Council Chamber into a multi-functional venue available for hire by the wider community.
- 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 format of the report has been enhanced to provide a narrative and clearer information on Council priorities and KPI's.

- 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.
- A Locality Leadership Team, comprising the Head of Paid Service, the S151 Officer, Monitoring Officer and Publica's Locality Lead Assistant Directors, meet monthly to discuss projects, performance and risks and reports to be brought forward to Executive (Cabinet).
- Introduction of a new partnership framework in response to External Auditor recommendations in 2023/24 was implemented on the website in March 2024 signposting to our Partnership vision, values and principles and how we monitor our partnership involvement and where this is reported (through the corporate risk register) and a list of the partnerships the Council is involved with.

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:
 - Putting Residents First
 - Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All
 - Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife
 - Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency
 - Working together for West Oxfordshire
- Detailed proposals arising from the corporate priorities are individually assessed and are included within decision making reports.
- Budget Procedure Rules have been adopted to ensure full engagement in the budget cycle.
- Contract Procedure Rules have been updated and approved by Council and will be reviewed in light of the Procurement Act 2023.
- 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 during the budget setting process. Variance to budget is reported quarterly.

- 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 continued financial pressure from general and wage inflation. These are being incorporated into subsequent iterations of the MTFS and mitigations regarding costs are being developed.
- A Transformation Group has been established to help steer the Council's response to the challenging financial environment, guide the preparation of a sustainable MTFS consistent with the Council Plan, and oversee the delivery of the Council's work programme in terms of service transformation, investment and revenue generation.

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, all Shareholder Councils have jointly conducted 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 examined the priorities for service delivery, options for reduction or transformation and how the Publica model fits into this. See also the first paragraph in Section E.

- Development of a monthly Officer Transition Group with retained WODC and Publica Locality Leads and the Interim MD to progress the Publica Transition Review
- 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 wholly 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 has been reviewed 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. The Management Team reviews risk registers bi-monthly and escalates any emerging risks to the strategic register which is considered by Informal Executive and A&G Committee on a quarterly basis. Significant progress has been made this year in improving the identification and reporting of risks and improved communication and processes to ensure risks are appropriately escalated to the strategic register and visible to the Local Leadership Team.
- Key performance indicators are measured and reported quarterly. Significant work has been undertaken to develop service performance reports which are present to Executive and Overview & Scrutiny.
- A comprehensive service review has been undertaken of the shared Legal Service with additional resources being allocated to create additional specialised para-legal support and trainee/apprenticeship opportunity to free up fee-earners and grow your own talent along with the introduction of a case management system to assist with allocation, prioritisation and workflow of cases.
- Budgets are prepared annually in accordance with objectives, strategies and the MTFS, following consultation with residents, Members and Officers. The budget procedures rules, contained in the constitution, were reviewed and amended in November 2023.
- 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 cost-of-living crisis and how that may impact our strategic priorities. The Council will continue to work with residents and local businesses to review and respond to their changing needs.

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

- 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. This work is ongoing.
- 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, Standards 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 has been introduced for staff in 2023/24 and for Members approved by A&G Committee to be rolled out after the local elections in May 2024.
- 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 with CPD being undertaken by Officers accredited to professional bodies.
- 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.

- The Ihasco online training facility has been further developed to create a suite of mandatory and service specific training.
- Mandatory Officer Cyber Ninja training has been undertaken with a specific tailored on-line module created for and rolled out to Members.
- A Leadership Development Programme has been run for senior managers within Publica and the Council. All Senior Managers have received Carbon Literacy training with Silver accreditation being achieved.

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.
- The Local Leadership Team reviews the Strategic Risk Register on a quarterly basis and also presents the Strategic Risk Register to informal Executive. 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.
- The CIPFA self-assessment was carried out by the A&G Committee in the last quarter of 2023/24 with the results being assessed at Committee in March 2024 recommending to Council to reduce the numbers on the Committee, not to appoint Executive Members, to recruit up to two IP's and produce a tailored training programme.
- 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.
- A review was undertaken of Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committee Structures, which consolidated the number of committees from three to one and reviewed the meeting timetable, to ensure it was more effective in reviewing the decisions made by the Executive Committee. Now meeting on a monthly basis in advance of Executive to allow decisions to be feed into the Executive decision-making process.
- The Independent Remuneration Panel meet to consider recommending a special responsibility allowance for the Vice Chair of O&S given the enhanced role of the single committee and the workload and number of working groups on moving to a single Committee.

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 the Standards Sub-Committee taking into account the views of the Independent Person.

The Council have three Independent Persons ('IP's') as a result of appointing an additional two IP's, under the Localism Act 2011, during 2023/24 to ensure resilience if there was an absence or conflict of interest situation.

Induction processes are carried out for newly elected Members.

Training and awareness sessions are carried out for the Audit & Governance Committee in relation to Informal/External Audit functions, risk, counter fraud and the budget periodically and a training programme has been approved for the next municipal year.

Bishop Fleming have been appointed, by the Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA), as the External Auditors for the period 2023/24 to 2027/28. A formal handover process has been followed between the incumbent auditors (Grant Thornton) and Bishop Fleming.

The External Auditors present progress reports to the Audit and 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 2023/2024, 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 2023/2024

When preparing its 2022/2023 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 2024 is detailed in the table below:

	Key Area of Focus	Planned Actions	Responsible Officer	Completion due by	Progress
1	Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) refresh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	Director of Finance & I51 Officer	31/03/24	The Council has put in place a Transformation Group to manage the budget gap identified in the MTFS. This includes asset management planning and a review of key contracts (Ubico and GLL) on its' Work Plan. The MTFS is reviewed as part of the annual budget setting process.
2	Treasury Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	Director of Finance & I51 Officer	31/12/23	<p>We monitor and update daily cashflows for all 3 Councils alongside monthly actuals and monthly variance analysis. 2023/24 has not seen a significant decrease in working capital but levels are expected to drop in 2024-25.</p> <p>Regular meetings with Chief Accountants, S151's and advisors occur at a minimum of quarterly and ad hoc meetings and</p>

					communication occur between the Treasury team and accountants to make sure the cashflow forecast is as accurate as possible.
3	Service Transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	Chief Executive Officer	31/03/24	<p>A review was completed by Human Engine with the report and recommendation taken to Executive and Overview and Scrutiny.</p> <p>Interim Programme Director has been appointed and started w/c 22 January 2024</p> <p>Local Partnerships were commissioned to deliver a transition framework which has reported back to the Executive and Overview and Scrutiny during February and March 2024.</p> <p>Officer Transition Board established along with 5 key workstreams covering Finance, Legal, HR, ICT and Communications.</p>
4	Invoice approval hierarchies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To continue the review of invoice approval hierarchies ensuring that these are appropriately reflected on Business World (BW). 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 BW 	AD, Business Services	31/03/24	<p>Ongoing regular reviews of invoice hierarchies are already in place and are aligned in the BW system.</p> <p>Our investigation of BW capabilities are ongoing and we are always looking at ways to improve the efficiency of the system and avoid having to run parallel processes.</p>

		which does not allow for an appropriate audit trail to be preserved on the Finance system.			
5	Aged debt and credit control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	AD, Business Services	31/12/23	<p>Business Managers have received training, and this will now be completed for staff who have responsibilities for revenue generating services and debt recovery.</p> <p>A new booklet has been produced to detail how this should be managed, along with any additional guidance and forms.</p>
6	Project and Programme reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	Business Manager, Governance	31/03/24	<p>All Project and Programmes for WoDC are reported on a bi-monthly basis to the Senior Management Team. This ensures transparency and ownership. This is also presented quarterly to informal Executive.</p> <p>Project and programme governance is in place and is continually being reviewed and updated.</p>

7	Roles and responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	Chief Executive	31/03/24	This will form part of the detailed transition plans as part of the Transition of Services from Publica into the Council.
8	Raising awareness of the contract procedure rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 and Officer Training to ensure this new strategy is understood and embedded. 	AD Business Services	31/03/24	The new Contract and Procurement Strategy has been approved and briefing notes have been issued and a presentation provided to all Business Managers on their responsibilities under the new Strategy.
9	Financial Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To review the financial procedure rules and financial processes to be completed in 2023/24 against the CIPFA Financial Management Code. 	Director of Finance & Section 151	31/12/24	<p>The Publica review and transition process will influence the timing and nature of any review of financial procedures and processes.</p> <p>This action will therefore carry over into next financial year and will need a more incremental approach when structures and timings are agreed.</p> <p>Carry over into 24/25.</p>

10	Risk Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	AD Organisational Effectiveness	31/03/24	<p>Risk management training was launched in May 2023. New portal pages are now live for Risk Management.</p> <p>A new risk training presentation will be produced and added to IHasco mandatory training.</p> <p>A lot of work has been undertaken to ensure that Risks are identified, escalated, and mitigated. Risk is now taken to the Management Team meeting, and it is presented to informal Executive on a quarterly basis.</p> <p>The revised WODC Risk Register has been presented to Audit and Governance Committee and work is now being completed on the Risk Policy which will be presented early in the new Financial Year.</p>
11	Emergency Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 	AD Organisational Effectiveness	31/03/24	<p>Advice and support is provided to interested communities as and when requested. A stronger Local Resilience Forum (LRF) bid is currently at its final stages which will include a Business and Community role.</p>

		<p>respond in the event of a significant local incident.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 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. 			<p>New Locality based response teams are now in place for coordination and rest centre management. Regular meetings are in place with the volunteers. JESIP training has been completed and further training is scheduled for the Coordination Team, Rest Centre Team and Duty Manager / Officer.</p> <p>An overview of Emergency Planning responsibilities was delivered to Statutory Officers. Duty Officer and Manager refresher training scheduled.</p> <p>This is ongoing. Work is being undertaken with the LRF to ensure we are sighted on changes.</p>
12	Portal Content Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To review the Publica Portal content to ensure it is up to date, and includes the latest versions of all policies and procedures 	AD Commercial Services	31/03/24	<p>Portal pages are now complete and live. This is now 'business as usual' with updates being made as and when requested by services who own each of their portal pages.</p> <p>Staff portals will need to be reviewed in light of the Publica Review and will be likely that each council will need their own portal as staff are taken back in-house and therefore each council will need its own internal comms.</p>

13	Business Continuity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To further develop the Business Continuity Processes (BCP) to ensure they are robust and fit for purpose • To test the business critical Business Continuity Plans in 2023/24 	AD Organisational Effectiveness	31/03/24	<p>The Emergency Planning Officer has now completed BCP training, and a plan is being developed to review the Business Continuity policy to identify any additional areas for improvement. A rolling programme of BCP updates has been agreed for next financial year to enable a more detailed review of service area Business Impact Assessments and Business Continuity Plans. This action will be carried over into next financial year.</p> <p>The IT BCP was recently tested through an internal audit which assumed a successful cyber-attack and the off-premise rebuild of a business critical IT system.</p>
14	New HR Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rollout a new and revised suite of HR policies in 2023/24 • Ensure Managers are trained in the use of the new HR Policies 	AD Organisational Effectiveness	31/03/24	<p>A suite of HR Policies has been reviewed and Executive recommended approval by Council, with a further suite approved later in the 23/24 year.</p> <p>As HR policies are approved across the three partner Councils training will be completed.</p>

6. GOVERNANCE ACTION PLAN FOR 2024 - 2025

In preparing this statement for 2023/24 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 2024/25. These areas of work are planned to strengthen the control framework and are set out in the table below and due to be completed by 31/03/25.

	Key Area of Focus	Planned Actions	Responsible Officer	Completion due by
1	Freedom of Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve response times to Freedom of Information requests to ensure compliance with the relevant Act Publish a greater range of information to reduce the need to respond to regularly made Freedom of Information requests 	Business Manager Governance	31/03/25
2	Complaints Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce a revised customer complaints process which aligns to the new Customer Complaints Code issued by the Local Governance following a two rather than three stage process. 	Business Manager Governance	31/03/25
3	New service delivery models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conclude the 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 Insource services back from Publica and examine the priorities for a new service delivery model Implement options for efficiency and transformation Develop new values and behaviours 	Chief Executive	31/03/25
4	Council Constitution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undertake a full review of the Council's Constitution and Scheme of Delegation to reflect the new service delivery model 	Director of Governance	31/03/25
5	Emergency Planning and Business Continuity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure the Council has resilience and can respond effectively in the event of a significant local incident under the new service delivery model Further develop business continuity plans to ensure they are robust and fit for purpose under the new service delivery model To test the business-critical Business Continuity Plans in 2024-25 	Business Manager Governance	31/03/25
6	Risk Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To review the Risk Management Policy To complete a risk maturity self-assessment 	Business Manager Governance	31/03/25

7	Review of Audit and Governance Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To appoint two independent persons to Audit and Governance Committee • Restrict membership to Non-Executive members reducing the number on committee from 17 to 11 with up to two independent persons recruited. 	Director of Governance and Director of Finance	31/03/25
8	Financial Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To review the financial procedure rules and financial processes to be completed in against the CIPFA Financial Management Code. 	Director of Finance	31/03/25
9	Procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of the Procurement Act 2023 and subsequent revision of contract procedure rules • To train officers as required. 	Business Partner, Procurement	31/03/25

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
Leader of the Council**

**Giles Hughes
Chief Executive**

**Date:
(END)**

Date: