

Corporate Governance Enhancement Activity carried out in 2020/21

Corporate governance activity included in the peach text boxes below are deemed significant. Activity is deemed significant if recommended for inclusion in the Annual Governance Statement by the Shared Internal Audit Service following their review of control arrangements to meet the Audit Plan or identified as key to the management of 'very high/high' level strategic risks. To provide a complete picture of governance enhancement carried out in 2020/21, activity pertaining to best practice has also been reflected below.

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

Governance for this principle is currently considered robust. The following governance activity pertaining to best practice has been delivered:

- The Council's Financial Regulations and Contract Standing Orders were reviewed and changes were agreed by Council.
- A new Anti-Bribery Policy and a new Anti-Money Laundering Policy has been produced, approved and are available to staff
- The Whistle-Blowing Policy has been reviewed and republished.
- The Officer Code of Conduct has been reviewed and is due to be approved by Council in 2021.
- Dr Robert Crawley was re-appointed as the Council's Independent Person for a further term of four years with effect from October 2020.
- Simon Banks, the new Borough Solicitor, was appointed as the Council's Monitoring Officer with effect from July 2020.

Principle B: Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

Governance for this principle is currently considered robust. The following governance activity pertaining to best practice has been delivered:

- The Annual Report and Performance Overview highlighting the Council's achievements over the past year and plans for the next twelve months was approved by Executive and published on the Council's website
- Implementation of the Council's new website is complete. The new website now provides a portal for new customer online services.
- To inform the Council's new Climate Change Strategy an array of traditional consultation as well as online methods, including a digital Facebook engagement campaign which received over 1400 responses was used.
- As part of the Council's commitment to addressing climate change, a citizen's panel has been established. The panel represents a broad and diverse range of views in the town and will help inform the Council's ongoing response to the climate emergency.
- The co-operative Inclusive Economy Charter to encourage residents and businesses to work together to help protect Stevenage's economy and support the Council's approach to Community Wealth Building was launched.
- The revised Strategy for resuming the development of Co-operative Neighbourhoods, following a delay as a result of the pandemic, was agreed by Executive in August. A Co-Operative Neighbourhoods Communications Plan has been produced as well as a Guide for Councillors. Strategic and operational leads have been appointed for each Co-operative Neighbourhoods area.
- Public consultation to inform the Amenity Tree Management Policy and the Stevenage Cemetery Policy was carried out via the Council's web pages and promoted via social media.
- As part of the development of the Workforce Strategy (2020-2023), consultation took place with members, SLT and Trade Unions.
- The themes for the Community Safety Strategy, which has recently been approved by Executive, were informed through engagement with residents and visitors to the town through a number of social media consultations, surveys with clients and data collected from the police Echo platform.
- Staff working from home were given the opportunity to participate in a 'Ways of Working' Survey. Through the insight of over 300 employees and survey responses, the Council has been able to plan its recovery from Covid in a way that suits the majority of staff and address staff concerns with this new way of working.
- Stevenage Together local strategic partnership held a Covid Recovery Summit in July to provide an update on shared resources to the Covid-19 pandemic and to identify how partners could best work together to support the recovery efforts in Stevenage. Subsequently a high level partnership recovery action plan has been developed.

Principle C: Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic and environmental benefits

Progress of significant governance (AGS) action:

General Fund Asset Management Strategy: Work on locality reviews is now well underway. All three tranches of land identified for disposal have now been agreed by Executive.

The following governance activity pertaining to best practice has also been delivered:

- Establishment of the Hertfordshire Growth Board Joint Committee and Hertfordshire Growth Board Scrutiny Committees as Joint committees agreed at December Council. A new Hertfordshire Growth Board Integrated Governance Framework has been adopted and incorporated into the Council's Constitution.

Principle D: Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes

Progress of significant governance (AGS) actions:

To ensure the governance of key regeneration projects the following action has been carried out: The SG1 Scheme gained planning approval at Planning and Development Committee in October 2020. The holding direction on the SG1 planning application has been lifted by the Secretary of State. This now allows the Council to finalise and conclude the Section 106 legal agreement with the developer Mace and to issue the planning permission.

Regeneration and Housing Development meetings have been separated to maximise the effectiveness of the meetings. Regular updates on key projects are provided at each meeting. This has included a session dedicated to Queensway/Marshgate which the Council's regeneration partner Reef attended and presented, and a number of sessions focussing on the Town Investment Plan.

Stevenage Development Board was set up in 2020 to prepare Stevenage's bid for government funding through the MyTown initiative. The Board has been successful in its bid and has been awarded £37.5 Million. This will bring about a once in a generation investment to revitalise and regenerate the town.

An action tracker is now in place to monitor progress of actions. On a monthly basis the status of actions are reported in the Highlight Report to the Regeneration Steering Committee. Highlight reporting arrangements have been reviewed and enhanced. The Risk Register has been updated and is being reviewed quarterly. GD3 funding has now been released and Local Enterprise Partnership deeds agreed. Monthly meetings are held with the Local Enterprise Partnership. Meetings are attended by the Assistant Director, Regeneration Manager and Programme Manager which provides a robust and resilient structure.

FTFC milestones have been adjusted following Covid-19, although the majority of progress remains unaffected.

Regular Steering Group meetings are held with key members of the Mace and SBC teams, with two-weekly operational meetings between the project teams. This has been invaluable when dealing with challenging issues, and regular communication has been a real positive. The Queensway Limited Liability Partnership continues to run smoothly with regular board meetings and reporting with Reef.

To ensure that the Council's ambitious commercial agenda can be achieved, the following action has been taken: On 12th August 2020, Executive approved the Council's Co-operative Commercial and Insourcing Strategy 2020-2023 and associated action plan. A new Commercial and Investment Executive Committee has been established, terms of reference have been agreed and the first meeting was held on 22nd October 2020. Commercial key performance indicators have been agreed and these will be reported to the Commercial and Investment Executive Committee on a quarterly basis. A Commercial Culture and Skills Audit has been carried out and a Commercial Learning and Development Action Plan based on the feedback from this audit has been developed. Insourcing guidance has also been developed.

In response to the challenges which could result from the Government's Local Government Reform and Devolution White paper, the following action has been carried out: The Government's White Paper has been delayed and currently no date has been set for its publication. District/Borough Councils in Hertfordshire have worked together to consider appropriate opportunities for future reform. A residents' poll was carried out and demonstrated that the majority of residents in Hertfordshire are opposed to the creation of a large unitary council. MHCLG officials attended the Hertfordshire Growth Meeting in August to observe the collegiate way in which the ten Hertfordshire authorities are working together for the good of Hertfordshire communities. Discussions have taken place with other Local Authorities who have recently undergone or are considering devolution options to inform the debate in Hertfordshire.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis and to ensure the Council can reinstate and continue to deliver services, continue to meet its Future Town Future Council ambitions and enable recovery from the effect of the virus in the town, the following action has been carried out: IMT, Business Continuity and Coronavirus Emergency Committee meetings are being held as required to co-ordinate and manage the Council's response to the pandemic. Service changes have been made in accordance with the lockdown restrictions. Redeployment plans have been drawn up to assist with the Stevenage and County-wide response. The Chief Finance Officer is continuing to assess the ongoing impact of Covid-19 ensuring all applicable Government grants are applied for and received. Advice and guidance of funding and grant is being provided to businesses in the town. The January 2021 General Fund report set out the impact of Covid on the Council's General Fund budgets. The projected gap between government funding and losses has necessitated the MTFS to be updated with mitigating actions on three occasions during 2020. Members approved financial resilience measures that improved General Fund balances for this and future years. Executive in July 2020 approved the Council's Recovery Plan and actions are in place embedded in the Council's Future Town Future Council reporting process. Plans are developing for an Economic Taskforce to tackle the effects of the impending recession. Stevenage Together Partnership is working on a joint recovery action plan for the town, covering areas from health, to jobs and skills, environment, regeneration and support to those who need it most.

To ensure that the Shared Hertfordshire Home Improvement Agency (HHIA) service, operated by Hertfordshire County Council, can deliver its financial targets in the medium term, as well as ensure that minimum key standards are being met, enhance its governance structure and ensure the HHIA Board is offering value for money, the following activity has taken place: All of the key measures of outputs of the service have improved since 2018/19 and now represent an improvement over both that year and the last year it was provided in house by SBC. A follow up audit was completed by SIAS in August 2020. SIAS were satisfied that systems have been amended to improve the quality and accuracy of information recorded on the internal management information systems. The evidence from their testing demonstrated significant improvements since the last audit, as well as improved checks by management to review such progress. The HHIA, whilst addressing recommendations, have sought to identify other improvements that can be made to further improve the service. The Executive at its meeting on 6th October 2020 considered a report which provided information on the Council's second year of participation in the HHIA. The report proposed that the Council remains a member of the HHIA and this was agreed by Executive. This action is now complete as all the high audit recommendations have been actioned and will therefore not be carried over as an Annual Governance Statement action for 2021/22.

The following governance activity pertaining to best practice has also been delivered:

- The Local Development Scheme 2020 was approved as the programme for the new Stevenage Local Development Document by Executive.

Principle E: Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it

Progress of significant governance actions:

Corporate Capacity: The Council's new Workforce Strategy was approved by Executive in October 2020. The Strategy is a critical enabler for delivering the Council's strategic ambitions over the next three years. The Strategy identifies actions that will improve employees' experiences and position the Council as an 'Employer of Choice'. The majority of the Council's business unit reviews are now complete. The business unit reviews within Digital and Transformation and the Garages and Markets service are now complete. Recruitment of key roles has continued during the Covid-19 pandemic to ensure corporate capacity is maintained. Four Assistant Directors were recruited in 2020 and have now all started (AD Digital and Transformation, AD Stevenage Direct Services, AD Finance and Estates, AD Regeneration). In light of the improved situation due to the completion of the business unit reviews and the recruitment of senior posts at the Council, this action will not be carried over as an Annual Governance Statement action for 2021/22.

The following governance activity pertaining to best practice has also been delivered:

- The Council has teamed up with the local Mind charity to deliver a number of Mental Wellbeing webinars to help staff to manage the negative impacts of the pandemic.
- Stevenage Anti-Fraud Service Managers now form part of the Council's Corporate Governance Group and also sit on the Joint Action Group, which is a partnership of police and the council set up to tackle various low level but prolific or persistent offending.

Principle F: Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management

Progress of significant governance actions:

Cyber Security and IT Resilience: Design of the Virtual Desktop Infrastructure, which will improve the user experience and is an enabler for Microsoft 365 and Windows 10 is complete and is currently being piloted. The design work for the upgrade of the ICT network, to increase IT resilience, is also complete and configuration and testing of the upgraded network is currently underway.

The installation of the microwave link between the Council's two data centres to almost eliminate chances of link breakage and therefore ICT interruption is now complete and is scheduled to go live once the network upgrade is complete. Microsoft 365, which will support new ways of working, team collaboration and video-conferencing, is currently being piloted by ICT to troubleshoot any issues prior to its full roll out. Work is also continuing to upgrade the Council's 50 plus servers. The roll out of the Windows 10 Operating system, which is a pre-requisite for Microsoft 365 and a key requirement of the Security Enforcement Programme is progressing well. Email and web filtering has also been replaced to increase ICT security. Meta-compliance which is a new platform that incorporates requirements of e-learning, policy compliance, cyber security and phishing awareness has been installed and will be rolled out soon. The replacement of the Council's firewalls and implementation of controls and management tools to monitor and control the ICT network are in the soft market testing phase.

Information Management: Improvement activity has continued to enhance and embed information management arrangements to ensure that best practice records management across the Council continues to be applied and customer data is stored securely and appropriately managed. The review of data sharing arrangements with local authority partners and public agencies to reflect GDPR requirements on information sharing obligations is now complete. All Supplier agreements which involve the processing of personal data have also been updated. Enhancement activity has decreased the information management risk to a medium level; therefore this action will not be carried over as an Annual Governance Action for 2021/22.

Corporate Health and Safety: A RAG monitor of all the Council's high health and safety risks is now being produced. All high risks are reviewed by the Strategic Health and Safety Group and reported to Corporate Risk Group and the Senior Leadership Team quarterly. The monitor is also reviewed by the Chief Executive at monthly HR meetings.

The Health and Safety team have assisted to ensure that all Council buildings are Covid Secure. New working arrangements for Daneshill and Cavendish Road have been implemented to ensure the health and safety of staff. The team have also provided support and advice to frontline staff to ensure their safety and the safety of customers. PPE requirements for specific operational settings have been identified and procured. Staff communication messages have been provided to advise staff of Covid-19 guidance. The usual scheduled health and safety training and audits have been affected by the response to the pandemic but are scheduled to resume in April 2021.

To ensure compliance of the Council's non-housing property, the following action has been taken: The Mears contract has been brought in house and responsible officers have now been assigned to all operational buildings. Compliance work continues to be progressed and regular compliance checks have been programmed. The compliance audit is nearly complete for all operational buildings, community centres and the depot. Risks have been identified and these are being prioritised.

The Assistant Director (Finance and Estates) has now started in post as well as a new Estates Manager. Recruitment for a permanent Facilities Manager is in progress. There is now a full procedure manual in place documenting work carried out by the team and work is progressing on a full suite of policies. Procedures for training staff, community centre managers and users are being produced. Preventative maintenance is being investigated and prioritised. Empty properties are now being inspected weekly for damage, leaks etc.

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

Governance for this principle is currently considered robust.