

Corporate Governance Enhancement Activity carried out in 2022/23

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 2022/23, 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

- The Member Code of Conduct has been reviewed and approved by Council. The Code now aligns with the LGA's model code.
- The Council's Whistle-Blowing Policy was reviewed and approved by Audit Committee.
- Council agreed the appointment of John Oakley from 1st June 2022, as the Council's new Monitoring Officer in accordance with the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.
- Anti-Money Laundering Training was carried out in December 2022 and January 2023.

Principle B: Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

- 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
- A new Complaints Policy was agreed by Executive which incorporates the requirements of the new Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code as well as fulfilling the guidance of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. The new system will make it easier for customers to log and monitor progress of their complaints as well as for officers to record and track investigations.
- Consultation was carried out in relation to the large neighbourhood centre regeneration scheme at the Oval. There has also been consultation on the proposals for the Station Gateway Area Action plan. The previous round of consultation on the Station Gateway Area Action Plan was carried out in November 2021 and, as a result, new proposals were drawn up based on the feedback received. These new proposals are now being consulted on. There has also been consultation carried out to seek views on proposed new parking controls in the Old Town and revision of the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licenses.

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

General Fund Asset Management Strategy: A new Asset Management system which will be used to manage the Council's commercial assets has now been procured and implementation is scheduled to commence over the next few months.

Making Your Money Count: The Medium-Term Financial Strategy which included potential ongoing Covid impacts, cost of living crisis impacts and inflationary impacts was considered by Executive in September 2022. The report set out a Making your Money Count Target of savings of £3.03 Million for the period 2023/24-2025/25 with a saving of £1.5M being required for 2023/24. Officer and Member meetings were held to consider savings options to ensure the Council could present a balanced budget for 2023/24. The identified and agreed savings have ensured a balanced budget for 2023/24.

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

Commercialism: To ensure that the Council's ambitious commercial agenda can be achieved, the following action has been carried out: The process of applying for a garage has now been digitised. Digital garage lettings provide customers with a choice of where they would like a garage. It also provides information to help customers find the right garage. Garages Business Case for investment to deal with the backlog of voids was approved at September Executive. Some preliminary work has been undertaken to understand the amount of aged debt and this work will be fed into the wider workstream in the Transformation Programme around income and debt which will also consider processes around debt management. A new skip hire offer was launched in January 2023. A wholesale review of fees and charges was undertaken for 2023/24, starting with a workshop with service managers to discuss inflationary pressures and key considerations when setting charges. This resulted in the development of a number of new income streams and a full set of proposals for the General Fund was presented to the November Executive

COVID-19: The MTFS has been reviewed to reflect the impact of Covid on the Council's finances. The HRA Business Plan is also being reviewed and again the financial impacts of Covid will be included in the revised HRA Business Plan

Socio-Economic Impacts: As a result of the combined socio-economic impacts of welfare reform, the COVID-19 pandemic, and an economic downturn the following actions have been carried out:

The Community Renewal Fund bid 'Community Wealth Building Together' which was submitted in collaboration with colleagues from other Districts and Boroughs was approved for delivery by DLUHC and the Hertfordshire LEP on 3rd November 2021. All of the programme's outputs and outcomes have seen significant over achievement against the original targets, with no shortfalls against any indicators. This positive performance resulted in a £60K increase in project budget, to a total of £761,640. All spending is now complete.

An Arrears Action plan has been reviewed and is in place until end of March 2024. The plan is in year 3 and is on schedule to achieve most of the actions.

On 20th July 2022, the Council declared a cost-of-living emergency, with the Council calling on Government and Hertfordshire County Council to do more to help residents most impacted by the crisis. An Executive Member Cost of Living Task Force was set up which is working across the Council and with key local partners to identify the support needed in the community and ensure actions are in place to address the needs identified. Executive approved a draft Cost of Living Crisis Action Plan for Stevenage. The plan sets out how the Council and its partners will continue to respond to the cost-of-living crisis, and mitigate the potential impacts on residents, businesses, council employees and Council finances as much as possible. The Council is continuing to work with key local partners, including through the Stevenage Together Partnership, to develop a co-ordinated response across agencies. Executive received an update on the progress that the Council and partners have made in implementing the action plan in December 2022. The Council continues to monitor the impact of the cost-of-living crisis locally and share this information with partners. A cost-of-living dashboard has been developed jointly with Citizen's Advice Stevenage and includes information from other partners such as Mind in Mid-Herts as well as nationally available data.

Leisure Contract: The Council has entered into a new ten-year Active Communities Leisure Management contract. The new agreement with Everyone Active will begin on 1st April 2023. The UK leisure operator prides itself on being a community-focused organisation and will introduce this approach to residents of the town. Everyone Active aims to support the Council's vision for leisure across Stevenage by producing attractive facilities available to all age groups in the town's community and contribute to the health and wellbeing objectives of the Council.

<p>Council Housing Building and Acquisition: To ensure the Council can deliver new council owned homes as programmed, the following actions have been carried out: Viability assessments prior to lending have been carried out. Two potential schemes have been identified. Both schemes have now been approved and are now fully funded. The team is working with Homes England regarding grant funding opportunities. Ongoing governance and review is carried out by the Housing Development and Regeneration Working Group. This group meets once a month. In addition, regular updates are submitted to the FTFC Board. A set of key performance indicators are now being used and need to be met to unlock funding.</p>
<p>Repairs and Voids: A new materials supplier has been appointed. The Repairs Service review is now complete and has been implemented. A new repairs reporting portal is being implemented. A booking hub is also being built so that the CSC only needs to book appointments on one system which will streamline bookings.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Transformation Programme aimed at improving customer satisfaction, increasing workforce productivity, and delivering savings to sustain services is continuing.
<p>Principle E: Developing the entity’s capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The Modern Member Programme recommenced after having been stopped due to Covid.
<p>Principle F: Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management</p>
<p>Cyber Security and IT Resilience: Work is continuing to roll out new VDI and to migrate services over to Windows 10 and Microsoft 365. Cyber Security awareness e-learning has been rolled out to both staff and Members. Work continues to implement the recommendations made by the SOCITM quality assurance review and also the recommendations included in the Cyber Treatment Plan. IT have reviewed and updated the Password Policy in line with guidance from the National Cyber Security Centre to increase the security of IT systems.</p>
<p>Corporate Health and Safety: 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.</p>
<p>Compliance of the Council’s Non-Housing Property: The service has procured a new computer-aided facilities management system. The system is key to modernising the service and improving efficiency in respect of planning, delivery, and follow-up compliance work. A Stevenage Borough Council Compliance Group meets quarterly to oversee the Council’s approach to compliance.</p>
<p>Principle G: Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting and audit to deliver effective accountability</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">No governance enhancement activity is required.