

Stevenage Borough Council's Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

What is Corporate Governance?

Corporate governance is both the policies and procedures in place and the values and behaviours that are needed to help ensure the organisation runs effectively, can be held to account for its actions and delivers the best possible outcomes for the community with the resources available. Good governance enables the Council to effectively achieve its intended outcomes, whilst always acting in the public interest.

Achieving the intended outcomes whilst acting in the public interest

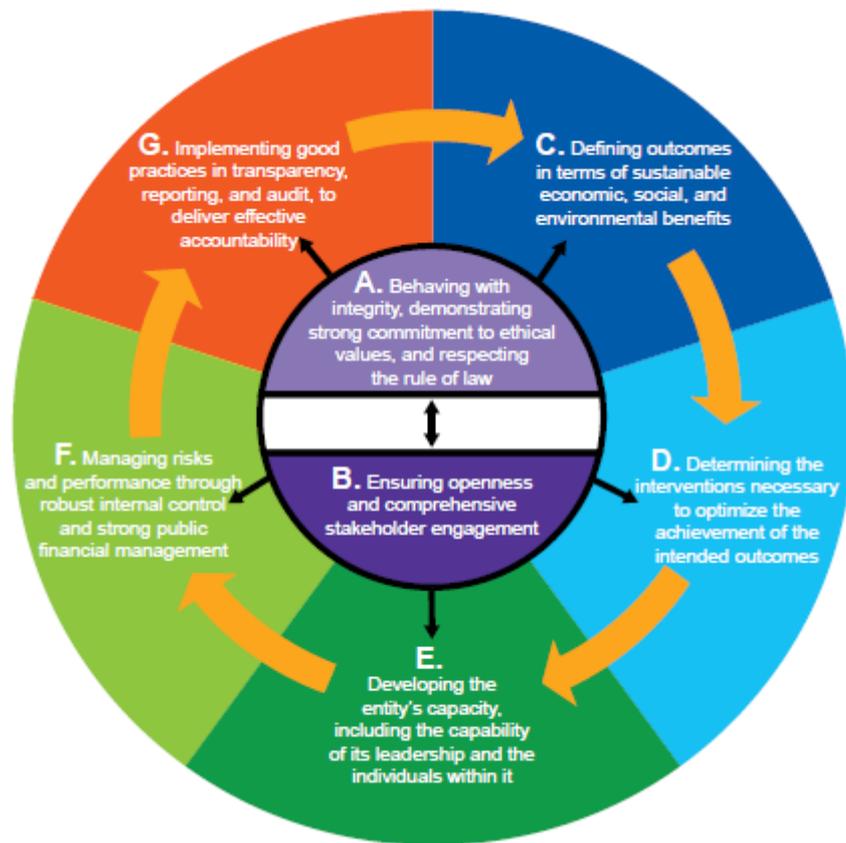


Figure 1: International Framework: Good Governance in the Public Sector (CIPFA/IFAC, 2014) 'Achieving the Intended Outcomes While Acting in the Public Interest at all Times' – The International Framework

The CIPFA/SOLACE* *Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework* sets the standard for local authority governance in the UK. The concept underpinning the framework is to support local government in developing and shaping an informed approach to governance, aimed at achieving the highest standards of governance in a measured and proportionate way.

(* CIPFA – Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, SOLACE – Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, IFAC – international Federation of Accountants)

The Framework is designed to assist authorities with the review of the unique local governance arrangements in place with the overall aim to ensure that:

- Resources are directed in accordance with agreed policy and according to priorities.
- There is sound and inclusive decision making.
- There is clear accountability for the use of these resources to achieve desired outcomes for service users and communities.

The Council's responsibility in relation to Corporate Governance

Identifying Local Governance Arrangements

Stevenage Borough Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and to proper standards and that public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently, and effectively. The Council also has a 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 this overall responsibility, Stevenage Borough Council is also responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, which include arrangements for the management of risk.

Stevenage Borough Council has adopted a Local Code of Corporate Governance that sets out a commitment to corporate governance and summarises the governance arrangements in place to enable the Council to monitor the achievement of its strategic objectives, to consider whether those objectives have enhanced delivery of appropriate cost-effective services and outlines the activities through which it accounts to and engages with its communities. The Local Code reflects the core and sub-principles outlined in the 2016 CIPFA/SOLACE Framework, 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government'

The Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance is reviewed and approved by Audit Committee each year. It was last approved by Audit Committee at its meeting on 6th June 2023 and has been reviewed and the revised Local Code is being presented to Audit Committee at its meeting in June 2024 for approval.

This Annual Governance Statement explains how the Council has continued to comply with the Local Code, summarises the review of its governance arrangements and identifies areas of governance to be strengthened and outlines actions to strengthen any areas identified. The Statement also meets the statutory requirements in section 6 of the 2015 Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations, which requires all relevant bodies to prepare an Annual Governance Statement.

How do we know our arrangements are working?

The Local Governance Framework – How the Council monitors arrangements in place

The local Governance Framework outlines the process the Council applies to review corporate governance arrangements. The system of internal control is a significant part of the 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 ongoing process designed to identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of the Council's policies, aims and objectives, to evaluate the likelihood of those risks being realised and the impact should they materialise, and to manage them efficiently, effectively, and economically.

Stevenage Borough Council has responsibility for conducting, at least annually, a review of the effectiveness of local governance arrangements including the system of internal control.

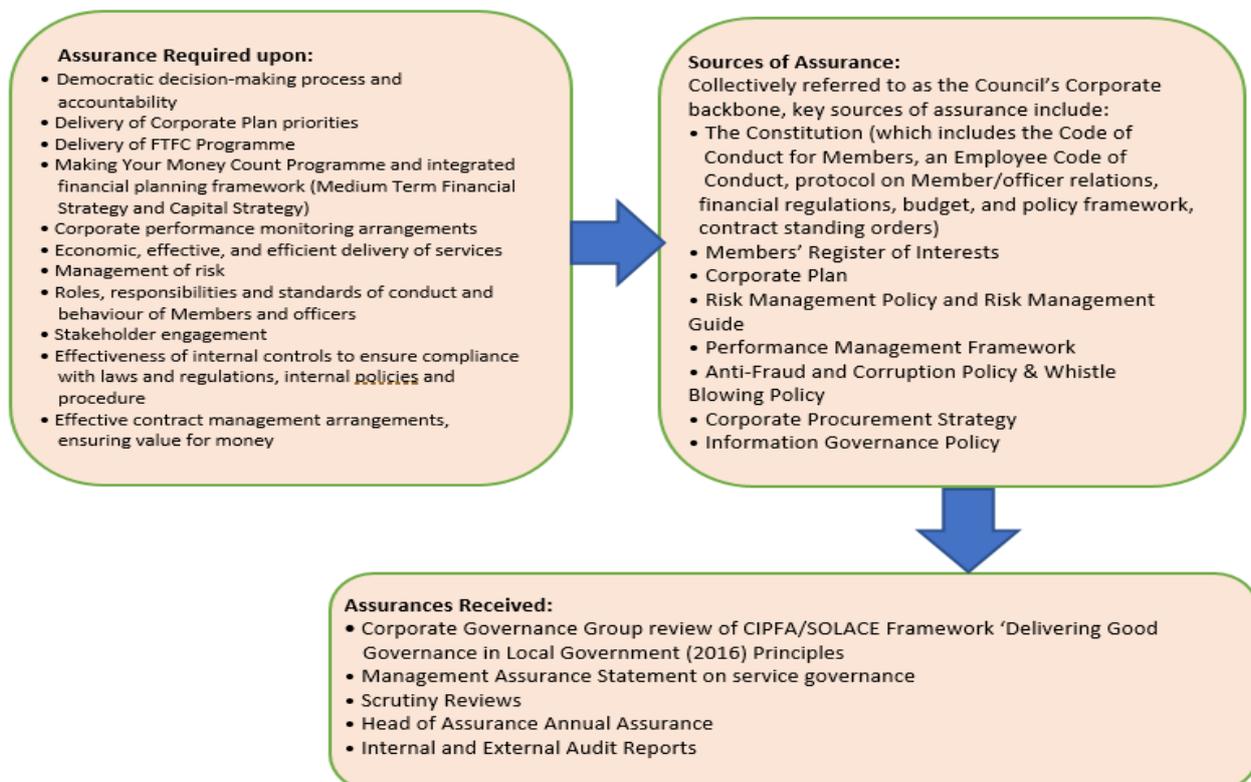
Governance monitoring and assurance arrangements

The review of effectiveness is informed by the work of the senior managers within the Council who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, the Head of Assurance's Annual Report, and by comments made by external auditors and other review agencies and inspectorates.

To monitor and maintain the effectiveness of the Council's governance arrangements and drive continuous improvement:

- A Corporate Governance Group meets four times a year to consider governance arrangements from the perspective of the seven core principles of corporate governance in the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework - the seven core principles are set out in the diagram on pages one and five.
- In addition to this proactive in-year review, an annual review of compliance with the behaviours that make up the seven core principles of corporate governance in the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework is carried out.
- At business unit level, assurance of compliance with the principles of good governance requires all Assistant Directors to complete, certify and return a Service Assurance Statement each year.
- Corporate Governance Group also consider whether any recommendations as a result of external or internal audit activity (and other review agencies and inspectorates), and the Head of Assurance Annual Report, require inclusion in the Statement.

All these mechanisms of review contribute to overall assurance for the 2023/24 Annual Governance Statement. A summary of the types of assurance required, sources of assurance, assurance received is represented below.



The preparation and publication of the Annual Governance Statement in accordance with the requirements set out in the 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government' Framework (2016)

fulfils the statutory requirement for the annual review of the effectiveness of systems of internal control meeting the requirement for 'preparation in accordance with proper practice'.

The Governance Framework summarised in this Statement has been in place at the Council for the year ended 31 March 2024 and up to the date of approval of the Statement of Accounts.

Assurance: Internal Audit Arrangements

Annual Audit Coverage

Delivery of the Council's Internal Audit is carried out by the Shared Internal Audit Service (SIAS) hosted by Hertfordshire County Council and managed by the Client Audit Manager. Annual audit coverage is determined through a risk assessment, which is influenced by external regulatory requirements and the strategic and operational risks of the Council. By reviewing the Council's systems of internal control, risk management and governance in accordance with an approved Audit Plan, Internal Audit contribute to the Council's corporate governance framework.

The SIAS operates to defined professional standards, i.e. the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) and the Client Audit Manager reports to the Council's Strategic Director (Chief Finance Officer and Section 151 Officer) providing updates on internal audit progress and issues at regular liaison meetings. The Client Audit Manager provides an independent opinion on the adequacy and effectiveness of the system of internal control, and this is reported annually to Audit Committee. The main responsibility of SIAS is to provide assurance and advice on the internal control systems of the Council to both Management and Members. The SIAS reviews and appraises the adequacy, reliability, and effectiveness of internal control within systems and recommends improvement where necessary. It also supports management in developing systems by providing advice on matters pertaining to risk and control.

2023/24 Audit Report

The Client Audit Manager's Annual Internal Audit Report and Assurance Statement is being reported to the Audit Committee in June 2024. From the internal audit work undertaken in 2023/24, SIAS can provide the following assurance on the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's control environment, broken down between financial and non-financial systems as follows:

**ASSURANCE
OPINION:
FINANCIAL
SYSTEMS**

Our overall opinion is Substantial Assurance; meaning there is a sound system of governance, risk management and control exist, with internal controls operating effectively and being consistently applied to support the achievement of objectives in the area audited.

**ASSURANCE
OPINION:
NON-FINANCIAL
SYSTEMS**

Our overall opinion is Reasonable Assurance; meaning there is a generally sound system of governance, risk management and control in place. Some issues, non-compliance or scope for improvement were identified which may put at risk the achievement of objectives in the area audited.

Review of Effectiveness of Systems of Internal Audit

The Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 came into force from 1 April 2015; Paragraph 5 (1) states, “A relevant authority must undertake an effective internal audit to evaluate the effectiveness of its risk management, control and governance processes, taking into account public sector internal auditing standards or guidance”.

As part of demonstrating the efficiency and effectiveness of the internal audit activity and identifying opportunities for improvement, the Head of SIAS must develop and maintain a quality assurance and improvement programme that covers all aspects of the internal audit activity. This includes an annual self-assessment undertaken by the Head of SIAS against the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) for Internal Audit in Local Government in the UK. The self-assessment concluded that the system of Internal Audit employed at Stevenage Borough Council is effective.

In addition, PSIAS require that an external assessment or peer review is undertaken at least once every five years. An independent peer review was undertaken in 2021/22, which concluded that SIAS ‘partially conforms’ to the PSIAS, including the Definition of Internal Auditing, the Code of Ethics and Standards. Key recommendations made in the peer review were addressed in year, permitting SIAS to ‘generally conform’ to the Standards. ‘Generally conforms’ is the highest opinion within the scale of three ratings, and the peer review also identified areas of good practice and high standards.

The annual performance indicators for SIAS are set by the SIAS Board which is comprised of the Chief Finance Officers from the client authorities within the partnership. The table below sets out SIAS performance against the performance indicator relating to planned days delivery and planned projects delivery.

Indicator	Target 2023/24	Actual to 31 March 2024	Notes
1. Planned Days – percentage of actual billable days against planned chargeable days completed (excludes unused contingency)	95%	95%	262 days delivered out of the 275 days planned
2. Planned Projects – percentage of actual completed projects to draft report stage against planned completed projects by 31 st March 2024	90%	96%	26 projects to draft or final report from the 27 planned

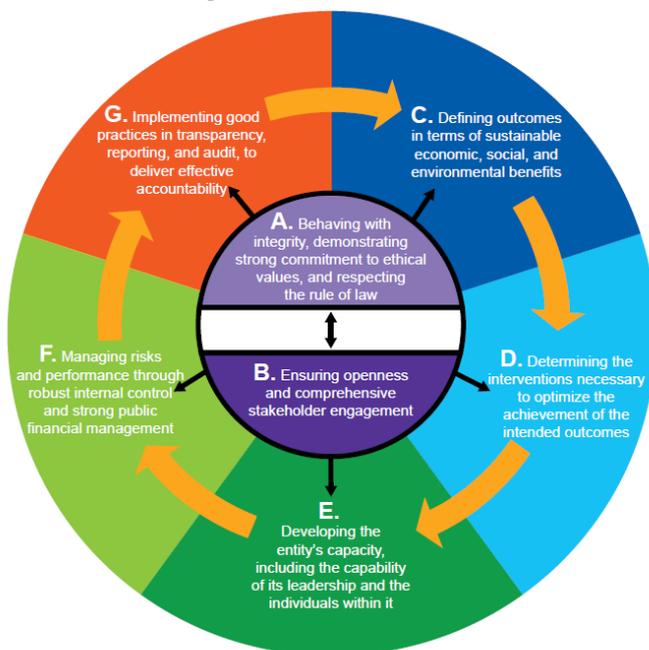
The assurance arrangements conformed with the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Head of Internal Audit (2010), as demonstrated through the assessment in the SIAS Annual Assurance Statement and Internal Audit Annual Report being reported to Audit Committee in June 2024.

The CIPFA/SOLACE Core Principles of Governance

The Council achieves good standards of governance by applying the CIPFA/SOLACE Principles of Governance set out in the ‘Delivering Good Governance in Local Government’ Framework (2016) represented in the International Framework.

The diagram below illustrates how the various principles for good governance in the public sector relate to each other. To achieve good governance the Council should achieve their intended outcomes while always acting in the public interest.

Achieving the Intended Outcomes While Acting in the Public Interest at all Times



As overarching requirements for acting in the public interest, Principles A and B apply across all other principles (C – G)

A summary of the review of effectiveness of local arrangements in place for 2023/24 against each of the principles is set out on the following pages identifying opportunities for governance enhancements.

Progress against the delivery of actions identified in the 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement is reflected in the coloured boxes throughout this Annual Governance Statement

Principle A: Behaving with integrity and respecting the rule of law

Principle A: Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values and respecting the rule of law is acknowledged as key to the delivery of good governance and underpins the delivery of Council priorities and services for the community.

Summary of 2023/24 Review of Effectiveness:

The Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance identifies the Nolan Principles (Standards in Public Life) as underpinning all local government activity.

The standards of conduct and personal behaviour expected of Members and Officers, its partners and the community are defined and communicated through Codes of Conduct and Protocols and the Council's Constitution. Arrangements are in place to ensure that Members and Officers are aware of their responsibilities under these codes and protocols.

The Council's website outlines the arrangements for making a complaint that a member of the authority has failed to comply with the Authority's Code of Conduct and sets out how the authority will deal with such allegations. Complaints about Members and allegations that a Member has breached the Code of Conduct would be dealt with by the Standards Committee and the Borough Solicitor (Monitoring Officer) under the Localism Act 2011. The Council has appointed an Independent Person, to consult on alleged breaches to the Member Code of Conduct.

The Council has a Standards Committee to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by Members of the Council and deal with any allegations that a member is in breach of the Council's Code of Conduct and to consider changes to the Code as required.

The Council's Constitution sets out the employment procedures for the Head of the Paid Service, Strategic and Assistant Directors, Monitoring Officer and Chief Finance Officer.

Organisational Values

The Council's six organisational Values shown here are underpinned by a behaviour framework for staff. The values are intended to influence the ways in which elected Members and officers think and behave in responding to future challenges.



The Values are embedded into Member and Officer Induction, regular officer meetings with their managers (REAL conversations), the Modern Member training programme, and management development programmes. A set of desired behaviours associated with each of the Values has been developed and form part of the Council's appraisal process for officers.

The Council has a Whistle-blowing Policy which is based on the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 as well as an Anti-Fraud and Corruption, Anti-Money Laundering, Anti-Bribery and Fraud Sanctions policies. The Council's website and intranet have options for the public and staff to report suspected fraud that link to the Council's Shared Anti-Fraud Service webpage.

The following governance activity pertaining to best practice has been delivered in 2023/24:

- New Independent person appointed to Audit Committee in September 2023
- Updated Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Act) (RIPA) Policy was approved by Audit Committee in November 2023. RIPA regulates the use of certain surveillance powers by public authorities

Arrangements reflect those summarised in the Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance – No significant requirements to enhance governance have been identified.

Principle B: Engaging with local people and other stakeholders

Principle B: Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement is considered essential in meeting the Council's corporate ambitions and framework of values and regarded as key to effective service delivery. Communication supports the decision-making process and helps to improve service quality and foster good relationships between staff, Members, and stakeholders.

Summary of 2023/24 Review of Effectiveness:

Stevenage Borough Council is a co-operative council which means working in equal partnership with local people to shape and strengthen communities.

The Council wants to hear views about Council services. The Council regularly provides local residents, partners, and other interested parties with opportunities to influence the planning, prioritisation, and monitoring of services. A variety of methods are used to engage the local community, such as: surveys and questionnaires, community roadshows, focus and action groups and stakeholder conferences.

Cooperative Neighbourhoods

Through the development of the Cooperative Neighbourhoods programme in 2020, Stevenage Borough Council has formed partnerships between elected members, council officers, stakeholders, and community groups to focus on the needs of the community. Six cooperative neighbourhood areas each have a dedicated team that concentrates specifically on the development and

Appendix Two

improvement of their area through community engagement and direct delivery. They are made up as follows:

- Bedwell and Almond Hill
- Chells and Manor
- Longmeadow & Roebuck
- Old Town, Symonds Green and Woodfield
- Shephall and Bandle Hill & The Poplars
- St Nicholas and Martins Wood

Each team functions in the following ways:

- Connecting staff from different departments who work in the same part of Stevenage so they can provide better services to residents.
- Responding more quickly to matters that residents are concerned about.
- Making it easier for residents to shape the services and projects in their neighbourhood by continuous engagement using a variety of opportunities including face to face, digital and email/telephone options.
- Supporting the activities of residents and communities who want to improve their neighbourhoods and create new opportunities for themselves

These teams also work together on the co-production of a variety of projects, initiatives, and developments across the town. Focusing on community collaboration and engagement, community wealth building and supporting local community groups and organisations, the Cooperative Neighbourhoods programme ensures healthy community relationships across the town.

In 2024/25 we will be providing a series of improvement elements for all of our neighbourhood centres plus additional resources for the following areas:

- Popple Way Shops (Pin Green/Almond Hill)
- Bedwell Shops (Bedwell)
- The Hyde (Shephall)
- Marymead Shops (Roebuck)
- Oak's Cross Shops (Longmeadow)

Shared Services

The Council has a number of shared service arrangements to provide efficient and effective shared service provision and governance arrangements facilitate effective stakeholder engagement to deliver agreed outcomes.

Customer Feedback

The Council has a system for recording customer feedback which enables learning from feedback and complaints to facilitate effective monitoring of information provided by customers to review future service delivery.

A Resident Survey was carried out in 2021/22 to survey how residents perceive Council services and their local area. The information gathered from residents has provided insight on residents' priorities for the town, the extent to which the Council is perceived to provide value for money and how well services are meeting residents' expectations. A STAR (Survey of Tenants and Residents) was also carried out. The STAR survey is used nationally by many housing providers to understand the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of council tenants and for them to tell their landlords what is important to them.

The Council is now required by the Regulator of Social Housing to conduct annual Tenant Satisfaction Measure surveys, which capture management data and tenant perception across a range of services. The Regulator will publish league tables and the Council will be expected to demonstrate what they are doing to increase satisfaction with the services being delivered. TSM's for 2023/24 are being analysed to inform priority areas of improvement for 2024/25.

Appendix Two

The Council will need to ensure that its policies and procedures for dealing with complaints complies with the new Complaint Handling Code which was launched in February 2024. Local Councils are encouraged to adopt the Code as soon as they are able to do so. The Local Government Ombudsman intend to start considering the Code as part of its processes from April 2026 at the earliest.

The Code sets out a process for organisations that will allow them to respond to complaints effectively and fairly. The purpose of the Code is to enable organisations to resolve complaints raised by individuals promptly, and to use the data and learning from complaints to drive service improvements. It will also help to create a positive complaint handling culture amongst staff and individuals. The Code will act as a guide for individuals setting out what they may expect from an organisation when they make a complaint. Organisations should seek feedback from individuals in relation to their complaint handling as part of the drive to encourage a positive complaint and learning culture. Organisations should have a single policy for dealing with complaints covered by the Code.

The principles, process and timescales in this Code are aligned with the Complaint Handling Code issued by the Housing Ombudsman. This means that organisations who fall under the jurisdiction of both Ombudsmen should be able to provide a co-ordinated complaint handling process across services covered by both Codes.

Communication

The Council uses a variety of media to communicate with its residents, businesses, and customers, for example Stevenage Chronicle which is the Council's quarterly magazine for residents which provides the latest information about Council initiatives and services, community news and events. The Council's website, press releases and social media are also used extensively to provide information to the public.



Peer Review

The Council is keen to demonstrate all the great work it is doing to deliver better outcomes for the community, and a Corporate Peer Challenge would provide an opportunity to do this. Following the implementation of a number of key strategic changes in 2024 such as the new Corporate Plan – Making Stevenage Even Better (2024-27), fulfilment of all-out elections, fruition of a number of joint-partnership 'Towns Fund' activities with the Stevenage Development Board, the Council is planning a peer review in 2025.

The following governance activity pertaining to best practice has been delivered in 2023/24:

- The Annual Report and Performance Overview 2022/23 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 in July 2023
- From 23 October to 4 December 2023 the Council consulted on the focus of the five strategic priorities and three cross-cutting themes within the revised Corporate Plan – Making Stevenage Even Better. The purpose was to understand if the areas of focus were representative of key issues in Stevenage, if the strategic priorities were correct, if the cross-cutting themes had the right focus, or if there was something else that needed to be included.
- We also consulted on the introduction of a Stevenage Cycle Share Scheme and public consultation was held in relation to proposed changes to the Oval which generated over 7000 responses in total.

Appendix Two

- In July 2023, the Executive agreed the 15 proposed actions in the Stevenage Borough Council Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan (2023-2024) as well as the recommendations of the Stevenage Equalities Commission (SEC) and the SEC Legacy Group Action Plan.

Equality and Diversity

The Council views equality and diversity to be about knowing and understanding the make-up of the town and the needs of its communities. The Council delivers services that are fair, accessible, and open to everyone. The Council communicates to staff, customers, communities, and our partners about the importance of treating people fairly and celebrating differences.

In 2022, the Council agreed the objectives that will promote equality, diversity and inclusion across its services, communities, and workforce over the next four years (2022 –2026) and in-line with the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) of the Equality Act (2010).

The council is working, together with its partners, to:

- Understand the diverse needs of our communities and how to meet them effectively
- Actively engage, encourage, and support local people, groups and organisations to participate in local democracy to improve opportunity and inclusion
- Promote equality, diversity and inclusion through our strategic partnerships, service delivery and supply chain(s)
- Use local data to shape services so that the needs of our diverse population are met
- Aim to improve the diversity of our organisation at all levels so that our communities are represented
- Ensure staff have the values, skills and knowledge to maintain a positive and inclusive workplace culture that values all employees equally

Alongside these objectives, in 2022 the council also made a commitment in its Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy (2022-2026) to deliver an annual EDI Action Plan 2023/24. These actions were agreed in July 2023 and covered a range of services which clearly set out how the Council will work with staff, partners, businesses, and residents to advance equality, diversity and inclusion across the community. A report setting out progress against the actions will be presented to the Executive in September 2024, and this will be accompanied by a new and revised EDI Action Plan for 2024/25. A key component to monitoring delivery of EDI activities is the active participation of staff, and the monthly meetings of the Officer Equality Group to share progress and identify new opportunities to build upon existing partnership working and deliver a meaningful equality programme. This is overseen by the member lead Equality and Diversity Governance Group (EDGG) and the Senior Leadership Team Equality Champion.

Building on the success of the EDI Action Plan, in 2024/25 the council introduced the cross-cutting theme of **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion** as part of its new Corporate Plan – Making Stevenage Even Better (2024-27). The EDI Cross-cutting theme demonstrates the council's commitment to making a difference across the workforce and community to advance EDI.

Arrangements reflect those summarised in the Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance – No significant requirements to enhance governance have been identified

Principle C: Defining outcomes – the Council’s vision and priorities

Principle C: Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable, economic, social and environmental benefits. The focus of the Council’s governance arrangements is to deliver the best possible outcomes for the community and the Council’s vision for the town. It is essential that the Council seeks customer feedback and works with partners, to pool resources and skills

Summary of 2023/24 Review of Effectiveness:

The Council’s vision:

Stevenage: a prosperous town with vibrant communities and improved life chances

Stevenage Together:

Stevenage Together is a range of diverse partner agencies who share a vision of Stevenage in the future. Its ethos is to foster innovative ways of working together, in order to improve the lives of people who live work and visit Stevenage.

Stevenage Together aims to:

- Generate pride in the borough
- Develop communities
- Help people feel safe
- Regenerate the economy
- Improve residents’ health

The work of Stevenage Together includes:

Improving the health of Stevenage residents by:

- Providing a healthy hub;
- Providing clean and green spaces and play opportunities; and
- Promoting good mental health.

Maximising opportunities to grow the local economy by:

- Encouraging volunteering.
- Developing opportunities for our young people;
- Supporting local businesses to grow; and
- Addressing child poverty.

Making Stevenage a safer place to live, work and visit by:

- Developing proactive solutions to antisocial behaviour;
- Consulting with communities to understand their concerns and needs; and
- Designing out crime.



Stevenage Development Board

The Stevenage Development Board was set up in 2020 to prepare Stevenage's bid for government funding through the MyTown initiative. The Board brings together voluntary key stakeholders from public sector organisations, private businesses, not for profit organisations and Heritage organisations to ensure a diverse range of views are represented. The work of the Development Board forms part of the wider 20 year £1bn regeneration of Stevenage Town Centre. The Board provides an environment for collaboration and innovation across a range of partners, especially in the skills sector, providing a strong platform to support the regeneration efforts in the town. As a result of the joint working of the Board, Stevenage secured the second joint highest bid in the country.

Future Town, Future Council

The Future Town, Future Council (FTFC) programme was the Council's main strategic planning approach to create a better Stevenage and great service for its people through 2023/24 and for the previous five years. The FTFC programme guided the Council's focus and resource allocation as defined in the FTFC Corporate Plan.

The FTFC Corporate Plan consisted of five priorities:

- Transforming our Town
- Making Your Money Count
- Co-Operative Neighbourhoods
- A Clean, Green, Safe and Thriving Town
- More Social and Affordable Homes



Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan

The Council has recently agreed a new three-year Corporate Plan, **Making Stevenage Even Better**. This new Corporate Plan, which will be effective from April 2024, sets out the Council's priorities, focus outcomes and actions for the next three years. It builds upon the long-term objectives of the above-mentioned Future Town Future Council Corporate Plan and reflects the need to prioritise effective delivery of services, whilst delivering on what residents have said matters to them.

In response to resident feedback and changing local demographics, five key strategic priorities were identified, all of equal importance, which the Council would like to see achieved over the next three years:

- **Transforming Our town**
- **More Social, Affordable and Good Quality Homes**
- **Thriving Neighbourhood**
- **Tackling Climate Change**
- **Balancing the Budget**

In addition to the above mentioned five strategic priorities, there are three areas of work which cut across delivery of all strategic priorities, these are **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Health and Wellbeing; Technology and Innovation**.



The inclusion of cross cutting themes represents the need to raise awareness of these areas when designing and delivering services. They have important social benefits and demonstrate the importance the Stevenage Borough Council places on effective partnership working and its existing commitment to tackle health inequalities, champion equality, encourage inclusivity and embrace diversity. They ensure that consideration of innovative solutions to empower residents is a key consideration in the Council's decision-making processes. By maintaining focus on these three themes, the Council can ensure a comprehensive rounded approach to delivering outcomes for the benefit of the community.

For each of the five strategic priorities and three cross-cutting themes, there are outcomes and actions, these will be reviewed annually to make sure that the Council is on track to deliver what it said it would.

Annual Report

Every year progress against the Council's priorities are considered and this informs important decisions about where to spend the budget. The Annual Report summarises the Council's achievements over the past year and outlines what it plans to do in the next twelve months and is published on the Council's website.

Financial and Asset Planning

The budget setting process should be considered against the backdrop of Government grant cuts which total £5.3Million since 2010. These cuts have required the Council to find cumulative savings of £11Million when inflationary costs are also taken into consideration. COVID affected the Council's finances during 2020/21-2021/22 (an estimated £4Million cost) as has the cost-of-living crisis due to higher inflation (estimated £1.4Million impact during 2023/24).

A number of local government journal and national press articles have recently highlighted concerns concerning the local government funding model. The Government has commenced an inquiry on financial distress in local authorities. This follows a number of Councils issuing a section 114 notice because they can no longer set a balanced budget for the year. The Local Government Association (LGA), District Council Network (DCN) and the County Council's Network (CCN) amongst other organisations have all warned that more Section 114 notices are likely unless the local government funding model is revised to reflect the pressures councils are facing across a range of services.

Medium Term Financial Strategy

The Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is the Council's key General Fund financial planning document and sets out the Council's strategic approach to the management of the General Fund including Council tax levels, capital funding and treasury management. This strategy underpins the Council's key priorities for Stevenage. The key aim of the Strategy is to facilitate the Council in achieving the outcomes by setting out MTFS principles, which generates the need for financial security targets, identifies financial pressures and any additional resources for priorities to ensure the Council has a financially sustainable plan.

Due to the significant level of savings required in recent years, this Council, along with many others has adopted a one-year budget setting process rather than taking a three-year view. Whilst the Council does not currently have a three-year budget, the Medium-Term Financial Strategy identifies the projected funding needs over a longer period and is reviewed annually.

The Council has taken significant steps over recent years to balance its budget and the current projections show that the on-going balanced budget will be achieved to 2027/28 ensuring inflationary pressures are matched by increases in fees and income or reductions in expenditure. However, this relies on significant savings targets being achieved each year and inflation reducing in the medium term and government funding in line with that projected in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy. The Council is continuing to deliver its ambitious programmes to redevelop and regenerate the town centre and to provide more social, affordable, and aspirational homes. Whilst both programmes offer great opportunities for the town and residents, they also carry the risk of

potentially needing more resources. There is a ringfenced reserve for Regeneration and further estimates of resources have been included in the General Fund MTFs.

Capital Strategy

The Council also has a five-year Capital Strategy. The purpose of the Capital Strategy is to show how the Council determines its priorities for capital investment, how much it can afford to borrow and sets out any associated risks. All capital schemes are regularly reviewed and prioritised to determine whether they should be included in the Capital Strategy. The Officers' Capital Group ensures that effective arrangements are in place for the design and delivery of capital projects.

For a number of years capital spend has been prioritised due to the limited availability of capital receipts and the Council's ability to afford borrowing costs. Accordingly, the council applied a 'fix on fail' approach to assets with no significant asset improvements being funded, except for those supported through external funding or partially through external funding (for example Garage Improvement programmes). This approach cannot be sustained in the medium to long term as it will lead to a gradual degradation of the Council's assets with reactive works only being undertaken to keep sites wind and watertight. Sustaining such an approach in the medium term will inevitably lead to closure of buildings even before consideration is given to the legal requirements in terms of Energy Performance Certificate (EPC's) and other legal and climate change requirements.

To address the issues above, The General Fund Capital Strategy Overview - Priorities versus Funding Requirement 2023/24-2029/30 report to Executive 15 November 2023 set out the Council's key capital regeneration and community asset ambitions and key land and asset disposals, to determine a funding strategy to meet corporate objectives and address the issues outlined above.

The following priority schemes / activities require a funding strategy:

- Regeneration SG1- Public Sector Hub, Leisure Centre and Theatre
- Climate Change - green fleet, buildings (operational, community and commercial)
- Towns fund programme where match funding is required
- Operational need investment in Community Assets
- Response to Legislative changes e.g. waste and recycling
- Protection of key income streams to ensure the financial resilience of the General Fund

Housing Revenue Account

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan is the Council's strategic plan for managing and maintaining its housing stock. It sets out the Council's short-to-medium term plans and priorities for its housing management services and provides a long-term (30 year) perspective on stock investment and financial planning. The plan was originally adopted by the Council's Executive in November 2014 following consultation with the Housing Management Board. The Business Plan is reviewed regularly to reflect changing circumstances as well as tenant and Councillor priorities. The HRA Business Plan was fully reviewed in 2023/24 to ensure a balanced HRA financial plan for the next 30 years and to ensure there are sufficient HRA funds to support the Council's Housebuilding and Acquisitions Programme as well as reflect new requirements placed on social housing providers under the Social Housing Regulation Act 2023, eg the decent homes standard and building regulations and environmental improvements like decarbonisation of the Council's housing stock as well as compliance with revised consumer standards and a new inspection regime. The latest version of the Business Plan was approved by the Executive on 15th November 2023.

The Council's HRA Medium Term Financial Strategy looks at these plans over a five-year horizon in greater detail setting out the principles which generates the need for Financial Security targets.

The Council's housing stock represents its most valuable asset and the largest liability in investment terms. The condition of properties is also of central importance to tenants, and they consistently select the improvement of their homes and a good repairs service as their top priorities. Ensuring finite resources are used in the most cost-effective manner is key to the Council's asset management and business planning approach. To reflect new government reforms such as the new

Building Safety Act and Social Housing Regulation Act 2023 as well as decarbonisation to limit climate change, the Housing Asset Management Strategy has been reviewed and a new Strategy was agreed by the Executive in November 2023. The new Housing Asset Management Strategy (2023 to 2028) sets out the framework under which the investment in existing stock detailed in the HRA Business Plan (2023) will be achieved. The Strategy will direct the Council's investment priorities. It identifies how the Council will ensure that residents living in Stevenage Borough Council homes will remain safe, involved, informed and have a good quality home. The strategy also sets out how the Council will meet the requirements of the new regulatory framework for social housing along with other legislation.

The Stevenage Borough Local Plan 2011-2031 sets out how Stevenage will develop in the future. The plan seeks to provide around 7,600 new homes, alongside new jobs and community facilities. It provides the basis for the regeneration of the town centre, which includes plans for new homes, shops, offices, coffee bars, restaurants and seeks to create a centre people can be proud of. It also protects green infrastructure and historic assets, to ensure people can continue to have a good quality of life in the town.

Climate Change

Climate Change has now reached a point where we must all take immediate action. With its declaration of a climate emergency in June 2019, Stevenage Borough Council is committed to tackling this. The Council has a holistic vision which focuses on cutting its own emissions to net zero and supporting the town's businesses and residents to do the same by 2030. The Council's Climate Change Strategy sets out how the Council plans to achieve this and the action everyone can take which will have the most far-reaching impacts. The steps the Council is taking to ensure a climate safe future will also have significant positive impacts on health and wellbeing within the community as the Council looks to champion warm, energy efficient housing and the protection of green space. Following the climate emergency declaration, the Council has been working to understand what action can be taken to not only reduce the carbon outputs of its assets and activity, but also in what ways it can act as a community leader to empower the whole town to take action. The declaration was a direct result of collective action from ordinary citizens, and therefore the Council believes the response should be community led.



Understanding the emissions will involve building up a detailed picture of what Stevenage's outputs are.

Lead the way by ensuring Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) is producing as little greenhouse gases as possible as quickly as possible

Advocating for and facilitating real change will see SBC lobbying for more drastic action at County and Central Government level, as well as aiding local stakeholders' efforts to shrink their carbon footprints.

The response to the climate change emergency will be resident led which means the community will be fully involved throughout the process.

SBC will utilise this opportunity to improve our residents' quality of lives, by striving to end fuel poverty, improve the built environment to encourage the shift to active travel and making healthy plant based food accessible.

Clear targets will be set with regular monitoring in place.

Progress of significant governance action to facilitate compliance with the CIPFA/SOLACE Governance Framework:

Balancing the Budget: A review of the 30-year Housing Revenue Account Business Plan has been carried out to incorporate new government requirements, welfare and social reforms and inflationary pressures. The new Business Plan was agreed at Executive November 2023.

The Council needed to find general fund savings of £1.2M to ensure a balanced budget for 2024/25. The identified savings were agreed at Executive in November 2023. The 'Balancing the Budget' priority has a number of workstreams. Both the Transformation and the Co-operative Commercial Insourcing Strategy have contributed significantly to achieving the 2024/25 'Balancing the Budget' savings target resulting in no service cuts being proposed for 2024/25 with the exception to changes to football pitches.

For a number of years capital spend has been prioritised due to the limited availability of capital receipts and the Council's ability to afford borrowing costs. Accordingly, the council applied a 'fix on fail' approach to assets with no significant asset improvements being funded, except for those supported through external funding or partially through external funding (for example Garage Improvement programmes). This approach cannot be sustained in the medium to long term as it will lead to a gradual degradation of the Council's assets with reactive works only being undertaken to keep sites wind and watertight. Sustaining such an approach in the medium term will inevitably lead to closure of buildings even before consideration is given to the legal requirements in terms of Energy Performance Certificate (EPC's) and other legal and climate change requirements. To address the issues above, The General Fund Capital Strategy Overview - Priorities versus Funding Requirement 2023/24-2029/30 report to Executive 15 November 2023 set out the Council's key capital regeneration and community asset ambitions and key land and asset disposals, to determine a funding strategy to meet corporate objectives and address the issues outlined above.

Principle D: Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of outcomes requires robust monitoring and decision-making mechanisms to ensure that actions identified are sustainable within available resources.

Summary of 2023/24 Review of Effectiveness:

Financial Governance Arrangements

The Balancing the Budget programme continues to enhance the financial resilience of the Council by ensuring resources are being used effectively and efficiently and through the development of commercial and entrepreneurial skills and services.

Internal financial control is based on a framework of management information, financial regulations and administrative procedures, which include the separation of duties, management supervision, appropriate staffing structure including appropriately skilled, trained and qualified staff, and a system of delegation and accountability.

The Council's framework of internal financial control is supported by Financial Regulations and Contract Standing Orders. The regulations provide the framework for managing the Council's financial affairs. They set out the procedures that the Council has adopted for financial planning, budgeting, risk management, auditing, treasury management and procurement of goods and services. The Council's Financial Regulations and Contract Standing Orders were last reviewed and agreed by Executive in July 2020 and are both scheduled for review in 2024/25.

Monitoring performance:

The performance and quality of each corporate priority was monitored via a set of performance measures and performance against the FTFC programme and was reported to Executive each quarter. In addition to tracking progress against the delivery of the FTFC programme, performance across all Council services was monitored through the year to highlight achievements and identify areas for improvement and this was also reported to the Executive each quarter.

A performance and governance system is used to monitor performance and risk and provides insight into corporate priority delivery. The system provides a range of corporate performance monitoring relating to service delivery, finances, staff, and customers, alongside consideration of the risks associated with the delivery of objectives to provide strategic insight and facilitate prompt implementation of any necessary improvement plans.

The status of performance for both the FTFC programme and the corporate programme with proposed improvement plans, where necessary, were discussed by senior management prior to Executive on a quarterly basis. In addition, the Executive received separate regular updates on the Council's financial position and quarterly overview reports.

Staff receive training on the Council's performance management arrangements and how to input to the Council's performance system, InPhase.

All of this information provides business insight that helps to drive improvement and deliver outcomes that benefit the community.

Data Quality

Data Quality checklists for strategic and operational performance indicators are completed twice a year to record and verify the systems in place for securing the highest data quality. Assurance and confirmation of the systems in place is provided at year-end through the assurance process for service governance.

The purpose of the data quality monitoring process is to ensure that consistency and quality of corporate performance data and collection methodology is regularly reviewed and that the principles of the seven data quality principles are fulfilled. This is in line with robust corporate governance best practice and the Local Code of Corporate Governance principles.

Housing Development Programme

Stevenage Borough Council has an ambitious house building target, to deliver more social and affordable Council rented homes. The Council's house building programme is now well-established providing benefits such as homes for social and affordable rent as well as private sale homes.

The Housing Development Working Group receives updates on the Housing Development Programme. Progress of the Housing Development programme against key milestones is reported to Executive each quarter as part of the quarterly Performance Report.

New build schemes within the HRA are incorporated into the HRA Business Plan, and the General Fund schemes are reported to Executive as part of the Capital Strategy updates as well as ongoing in quarter capital monitoring with the Finance team.

The numerous contracts for the building works commissioned by the Housing Development team are monitored through monthly site meetings attended by an officer representative as well as the contractor and an independent Employers Agent whose role is to administrate the effective running of the contract.

Executive, at its meeting in January 2021 approved the setting up of a Wholly Owned Company (WOC). This will allow the Council to meet the needs identified in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment commissioned by the Council, specifically with providing housing in the private rental market. These ambitions complete the wider ambitions to develop more affordable housing, achieve wider community improvements (than just housing) and generally improve the look, appearance and functioning of neighbourhoods that the town's communities enjoy. The WOC sits alongside the existing housing delivery methods deployed by the council in terms of resources and expertise, however it has its own accounting and governance processes.

Transforming Our Town

The Council, along with its development partners, are currently delivering a major, twenty year, £1bn regeneration programme designed to transform Stevenage. The programme will deliver [a](#) new transport infrastructure, commercial space, retail, spaces for leisure, arts and culture, and town centre living.

The council is working with private sector partners to deliver large elements of this transformation. This includes a partnership with Mace for the delivery of SG1. The £350 million SG1 scheme comprises a 14.5-acre site in Stevenage town centre which includes a minimum of 1700 new homes, 60,000 sq feet of ground floor retail and restaurant space, new public spaces and a public services hub, combining community assets such as health services, library, voluntary sector, café and Council offices.

Funding has also been secured through national Government opportunities. The Stevenage Development Board was formed in March 2020 to lead the development of a Town Investment Plan. In March 2021 the Board secured £37.5 million of 'Towns Fund' funding from the then Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to support the regeneration of the town through the delivery of a range of projects which will provide greater retail, culture, and work / skills development opportunities for local people.

Stevenage Development Board oversees the investment being made as part of the Government's Towns Fund initiative. The work of the board has prioritised projects in Culture & Heritage, Sustainable Transport, Town Centre Regeneration, and Skills & Employment. This includes improving the infrastructure in the town and investing in facilities, creating employment and skills opportunities for local people, and attracting investment in the internationally recognised life sciences sector.

Projects funded through the Towns Fund initiative include a new Multi-Storey Car Park which is adjacent to Stevenage Railway station, with secure cycle storage to improve connectivity and wider transport links for residents and visitors. The new parking facility, which opened in May 2023, almost doubles the capacity of the former surface level with 622 spaces, includes blue badge parking and spaces for electric vehicles.

Construction is underway on the former Matalan site. The Guinness Partnership is delivering new homes, and this is taking place in phases. As a result of additional funding from Homes England, the overall plans involve the construction of 526 one and two-bedroomed apartments along with flexible commercial space at street level which aims to create active street frontages. Lovell Partnerships, appointed by The Guinness Partnership, began work earlier this year on the first phase of the scheme. This will deliver 143 new homes which will all be affordable. This is expected to be finished at the end of 2024/early 2025, with further phases set to follow.

Community Wealth Building

Community wealth building is a new people-centred approach to local economic development, which directs wealth back into the local economy, and places control and benefits into the hands of local people. Stevenage Borough Council passed a motion on 29 January 2020 in support of Community Wealth Building. This included a commitment to launch a Cooperative and Inclusive Economy Charter.

Some examples of how the town can work together to bring about an inclusive economy include:

- Shopping locally;
- Officering work placements and apprenticeships, and
- Using local supply chains

The Council has produced a Community Wealth Building Strategy. Community Wealth Building focuses on how much money is held and reinvested in an area for the benefit of local communities. For the Council, this relates to how much business it does with local suppliers and how it supports local people to connect to, and drive forward, a sustainable and inclusive economy. At the heart of the

strategy is making sure that the economy works for everyone. This has identified four key foundations that underpin an inclusive economy:

- Procurement and social value
- Training and skills
- Cooperative and social economy growth and
- Tackling climate change.

The council has just successfully completed leading on the delivery of a £750,000 project to support the development of Community Wealth Building throughout Hertfordshire. Working with all District & Borough Council colleagues throughout the county. This project aimed to delivery a delegated grants scheme as well as projects around Procurement, Strategic Planning and the strengthening of the existing Hertfordshire Opportunities Portal. Building on this over the next two years will be the availability of UK Shared Prosperity Funding, with £185,000 directly supporting Community Wealth Building Endeavours in Stevenage. These activities are monitored by a cross-county working group comprised of colleagues from across Hertfordshire which in Stevenage reports to a Community Wealth Building Board chaired by the Portfolio Holder for Community Wealth Building.

To support the Council's approach to Community Wealth Building a Cooperative Inclusive Economy Charter for Stevenage was agreed by Executive in July 2020. A Cooperative Inclusive Economy encourages communities, organisations, and businesses to work together, helping to shape the economy and to share the benefits of growth. The Charter's aim is to create a fairer society and a more resilient economy for everyone, residents, organisations and businesses. The Charter is underpinned by an action plan and includes a space for communities and stakeholders to pledge their support.

The project is delivering against the following five work streams:

- Hertfordshire Opportunities Portal
- Procurement
- Grants scheme
- Planning
- Evaluation and Feasibility

Building on this work, in March 2024, the council approved the 'Stevenage Works: Skills Framework' which looks to build the councils ambitions around skills with a focus on providing opportunity for Stevenage residents in key sectors. At the heart of this approach is a connection with people-centric focus of Community Wealth Building and further helps to build on the Council's ambitions in this area. At its heart there are three key elements to the framework:

- Aligning & Co-ordinating Local Partners, Assets & Resources
- Augmenting Skills Provision to Create Further Opportunity
- Backing Skills Provision with Capital Investment link to our Regeneration Plans

Social Value Portal

The Council uses a social value portal to monitor, measure and manage the tendering and delivery of social value through contracts and other business-related activities. The aim of this is to understand what value business brings to society, according to the principles of the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012. The Social Value Portal uses the National Social Value Measurement Framework, also known as the National TOMs (Themes, Outcomes Measures), to measure social value. The National TOMS framework was developed by the National Social Value Taskforce and was the result of extensive consultation across its members and is endorsed by the Local Government Association.

Procurement

The Council adopted its Co-operative Procurement Strategy (2021-2024) in October 2021. The focus of the strategy is around five principle foundations including Community Wealth Building, Sustainability, Social Value and Ethical Procurement, Commercial and Insourcing and Pro-active Procurement. Each foundation is a building block of the consideration that need to underpin the procurement process and are embedded in the way the Council procures goods, works and services.

The Council has joined with other Hertfordshire local authorities and public bodies to work together in procurement and partnership projects for the benefit of all participating authorities. As part of this partnership, the Council has a portal called Supply Hertfordshire that holds information about advertised opportunities and participating authorities.

Transformation Programme

In August 2021, the Executive agreed a Transformation Programme aimed at improving customer satisfaction, increasing workforce productivity and organisational resilience, while achieving the savings required by the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy. This programme forms a significant element of the 'Balancing the Budget Programme and will help the Council achieve its financial security targets.

New Leisure Contract

The Council has entered into a new ten-year Active Communities Leisure Management contract. The new agreement with Everyone Active began 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 supports 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.

Progress of significant governance action to facilitate compliance with the CIPFA/SOLACE Governance Framework:

Commercialism: To ensure that the Council's ambitious commercial agenda can be achieved, the following action has been carried out: The Commercial and Insourcing Strategy 2023-2026 was agreed by Executive at its meeting in October. The strategy outlines the Council's approach to operating commercially

This will be achieved through maximising opportunities to insource services, the delivery of business process improvements and the generation of new or enhanced sources of revenue. The commercial culture across the organisation will continue to be developed, to ensure that staff are equipped with the right skills to deliver.

New fees and charges for 2024/25 were agreed by Executive in October 2023. Commercialisation work this year has included: aligning commercial and transformation (such as for Digital Garage Lettings and third-party tipping), enhanced income from concessions contracts based on a revenue share agreement (such as for advertising and sponsorship and parcel lockers). Options for new income streams are progressing and reports with proposals will come forward in due course. The Member-led Commercial and Investment Working Group continues to meet quarterly.

Information regarding continued enhancement activity proposed for 2024/25 is outlined in the Planned Improvement Activity for 2024/25 section at the end of this document

Progress of significant governance action to facilitate compliance with the CIPFA/SOLACE Governance Framework:

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:

Funding of £300K is being received in instalments and is being used to support local small businesses. This is part of the Mission 44 funding, and the Council is working with schools to encourage STEM learning to ensure better prospects for young people. The Social Inclusion Partnership has been set up under the umbrella of Stevenage Together to share information about services and applying for funding collaboratively. It is made up of voluntary sector organisations who have come together and is being supported by the Council and Citizens Advice Stevenage.

The Welfare Reform Group continues to meet. A dashboard is being used to inform the Council's understanding of the impact of the cost-of-living crisis locally. Data is collected from colleagues and partners who attend Welfare Reform Group meetings. The dashboard is made up of 13 different measures which are analysed quarterly to inform the Council's and partners' understanding of local trends.

The Council's website contains information to help residents to manage the cost of living and this is updated regularly with new advice and how to access grants and benefits.

A new Collection and Engagement IT solution to allow focus on high-risk Universal Credit claim cases is being procured. The new system will automate many tasks required to reach customers in arrears and will enable early intervention and assist with proactive management of arrears cases.

The Council has partnered with Sustainable X to deliver a fully funded Sustainable Support Programme for local businesses to support key learning of sustainable practices and opportunities for businesses. The programme includes skills and training support on sustainable supply chain management and wider stakeholder engagement. The programme launched on 28th September with a Sustainable Meet the Buyer event, providing unique collaboration opportunities for both buyers and suppliers. It also offers participants the chance to grow their network with potential supply chain connections too.

Information regarding continued enhancement activity proposed for 2024/25 is outlined in the Planned Improvement Activity for 2024/25 section at the end of this document

Progress of significant governance action to facilitate compliance with the CIPFA/SOLACE Governance Framework:

Council House Building and Acquisition:

- The Council has received grant funding of £10.6M from Homes England as part of their Affordable Homes Programme. This will be used to build a new Independent Living Scheme.
- Regular updates continue to be provided at Housing Development and Regeneration meetings.
- Performance indicators in relation to number of affordable homes delivered by the Council and number of private homes provided is included in the quarterly performance report which is reported to Executive.
- Delivery of 190 new homes in 2023/24, including the first phase of Kenilworth Close. This also sees the delivery of seven new retail units.
- Two new schemes for 156 homes at Brent Court and Shephall View have recently received planning permission. Consultation and submission to Planning has taken place on four new schemes for a total of 403 new homes which will form a key part of the programme going forwards.

Information regarding continued enhancement activity proposed for 2024/25 is outlined in the Planned Improvement Activity for 2024/25 section at the end of this document

Progress of significant governance action to facilitate compliance with the CIPFA/SOLACE Governance Framework:

Repairs and Voids:

- A fencing programme has been put in place by the Housing Investment team which aims to clear the historic backlog during 2023/24 and 2024/25.
- Changes to ways of working for the Repairs Supervisors and Maintenance Surveyors have been introduced to increase first time fix rates, productivity, and customer satisfaction.
- A service review of both Voids and Repairs was completed along with a scrutiny review of the Repairs Service by the Community Select Committee. The agreed recommendations have/will feed into improvement plans to be delivered over the next 12-18 months.
- Following a review of current arrangements, new interim contractors were appointed to support the Repairs Service, including for specialist works such as roofing, pending a procurement process to award longer-term contracts in 2024/25.
- ‘Booking Hub’ the new online reporting tool for repairs, which will allow customers to select their own repair appointment times, has been released in-house and testing is being carried out. Once this is complete, the system will be rolled out to residents.

Information regarding continued enhancement activity proposed for 2024/25 is outlined in the Planned Improvement Activity for 2024/25 section at the end of this document

Principle E: Leadership capacity and capability

Principle E: Developing the organisation’s capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it. The appropriate structures and leadership, as well as people with the right skills and values, enable the Council to operate efficiently and effectively and achieve the best possible outcomes for the community.

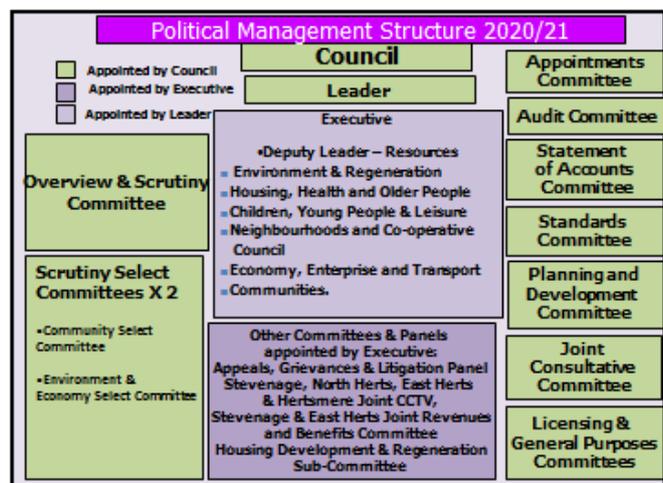
Summary of 2023/24 Review of Effectiveness:

The Council’s Political Management Structure:

The Political Management Structure diagram summarises the Council’s political structure.

All Councillors meet together as the Council. Meetings are generally open to the public and feature a main topical debate item.

The Council has an approved Constitution which details how the Council operates, how decisions are made, including delegation of decisions and the procedures that are to be followed to ensure that these are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people. The Monitoring Officer ensures that the Constitution remains fit for purpose, that legal requirements are met and that the public interest is paramount in all decision making.



Executive, Council and Overview and Scrutiny meetings are recorded and are available via You Tube which means that members and the public can view these meetings at a time convenient to them. This has the benefit of improving scrutiny and reaching a wider audience.

Appendix Two

Audit Committee meets quarterly, and its duties include advising and commenting on internal and external audit matters, treasury management, anti-fraud and corruption issues, risk management and governance, the Council's Constitution in respect of Contract Standing Orders and Financial Regulations and the Statement of Accounts and related Capital determinations. The Audit Committee has been constituted in line with best practice recommendations from CIPFA guidance.

The Council has structured its processes and procedures for the Executive and Scrutiny Committees plus other Committees such as the regulatory ones, to minimise the risk of it acting in contravention of its own policies and external laws and regulations. The Council also appoints officers qualified to undertake statutory responsibilities, such as:

- Chief Financial Officer (Strategic Director (Chief Finance Officer)) as contained within Section 114 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988.
- Monitoring Officer (Borough Solicitor) to meet Section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.

There is a Modern Members Programme which provides Members with a programme of training to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to ensure effective and informed decision making. This training programme covers essential skills such as understanding budgets as well as topical items and briefing on new legislation. The Modern Members Programme is arranged for all elected members, based on their feedback and requests. There is also a programme of induction training and meetings with key officers for newly elected Members.

The Council's Officer Structure:

The Council aims to create a flexible, collaborative, creative and modern workforce to ensure the Council can deliver the priorities set out in its Corporate Plan and give residents the standard of services they expect.

The senior leadership team has been structured to drive the development of a sustainable, customer orientated and commercial operating model. The model is focused upon delivering the right services to the right standards, at the right time for the town's residents and businesses, using the most cost/resource effective delivery models.

The Council uses a Human Resources Management system to support workforce planning, training, development and the implementation of the Council's competency framework structure. The Council's Competency Framework provides a map of the behaviours, as well as the skills, that are valued and recognised by the Council.

The Council has a staff Performance and Improvement Policy and Manager Toolkit, as well as associated policies (Absence Management, Dignity at Work, Disciplinary, Grievance and Appeals policies, Organisational Change Policy, Sickness Absence Policy, Social Media Policy) to encourage all employees to personally deliver the highest standards of service possible and for managers to proactively address performance issues. The Council has a rolling appraisal process called REAL Conversations with regular meeting arrangements providing a framework for achieving the best performance on a day-to-day basis. These conversations typically include objectives, development, engagement and wellbeing, but they are also tailored to individuals.

Arrangements reflect those summarised in the Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance – No significant requirements to enhance governance have been identified.

Principle F: Managing Risks – The Council's risk governance arrangements

Principle F: Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management. Risk management, together with a strong system of financial management are integral parts of a performance management system and are crucial to the achievement of outcomes.

Summary of 2023/24 Review of Effectiveness:



Risk Management

The Council consider and counter risk across a broad range of areas. The Council has an approved Risk Management Policy and a Risk Management Guide is available to all employees. Strategic risks are linked to the Council's priorities and the Strategic Risk Register is reviewed and monitored on a quarterly basis. Operational risks are also developed and monitored.

A Corporate Risk Management Group meets quarterly to oversee and review the process and development of the Council's approach to risk. Risks are reviewed by the Council's Senior Leadership Team each quarter and then reported to the Executive and Audit Committee quarterly.

To support service delivery improvements, the Council welcomes constructive challenge as a result of scrutiny from internal/external audit

activity, the work programme of Overview and Scrutiny Committee and other external review agencies and inspectorates.

The Council expects the highest standards of conduct and integrity from all who have dealings with it including staff, members, contractors, and the public. It is committed to the elimination of fraud and corruption and to ensure that all activities are conducted ethically, honestly and to the highest possible standard of openness and accountability to protect public safety and public money. To ensure this, the Council is a member of the Hertfordshire Shared Anti-Fraud Service which is operated by Hertfordshire County Council. The Shared Anti-Fraud service is a fraud prevention and investigation service. The service also works with the Council to ensure it has the right strategies, policies, training, awareness and understanding of fraud prevention methods and ensures that staff are skilled and trained appropriately to prevent fraud. The Shared Anti-Fraud Service's annual Action Plan ensures compliance with best practice issued by central government, National Audit Office and CIPFA. The Service reports quarterly to Audit Committee on its work.

To prevent or report fraud, the Council has an Anti-fraud and Corruption Policy as well as a Whistle-blowing Policy, Anti-Bribery and Fraud Sanctions policies.

Risk Management and Treasury Management Training was offered to Members of the Audit Committee in January 2024. Fraud prevention training was offered to all Members in February 2024.

Information Technology

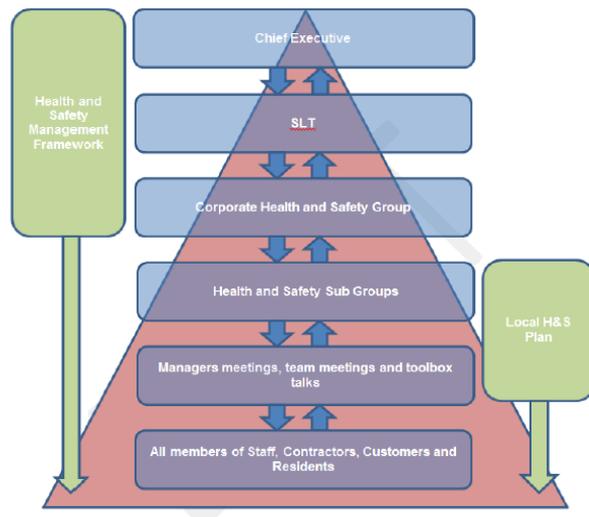
The ability to identify and assimilate new technologies is an integral part of the Council's aim to achieving its strategic objectives. The Council has a Shared ICT service with East Herts District Council. The shared ICT service is responsible for developing the shared ICT platform as well as delivering ICT services.

A joint Stevenage/East Herts ICT Partnership Board meets every month to consider the strategic direction of the service. A Joint (Member led) Committee Board, to review the ICT Improvement Programme meets quarterly.

The ICT service is committed to embracing new digital opportunities to better meet the needs of residents, achieve savings and transform services. A secure, resilient, effective, and forward-looking Technology Service is critical in delivering these aims.

Health and Safety

Figure 14: Council's Health and Safety Framework



To ensure and maintain corporate wide oversight and clarity on health and safety compliance and performance across the Council, a corporate health and safety governance structure is in place that provides assurance to senior management that health and safety assessments and activity across the Council are being effectively managed. Assistant Directors have ensured that health and safety responsibilities at each level of management within their business units are clear. An ongoing schedule of review by Assistant Directors and internal/external peers is providing assurance that key health and safety risks are being suitably controlled while identifying areas where improvements can be made and including these into the ongoing action plan. Senior management representation on the Strategic

Health and Safety Group ensures the group is providing senior management with the assurances that are required. The Council has a complete database of health and safety risk assessments for all services.

Embedding of the Health and Safety framework is being achieved by a process of internal and external audits, peer reviews, shadow health and safety inspections, risk assessment reviews, training to upskill managers, health and safety group meetings, hazard monitoring and action plans

Alongside e-learning health and safety packages there is now a range of toolbox talks available, plus courses on Risk Assessment, Construction, Design and Management Regulations, Manual Handling, COSHH, Hand Arm Vibration, Legionella, Needle sticks, Sharps and Diseases, Hot Works, and Noise.

Business Continuity

The Council has business continuity plans for all of its key services and a Corporate Business Continuity Plan is in place to manage the corporate response to an incident. A full review of each service's Business Impact Analysis has recently been carried out to reflect new ways of working since the Covid pandemic and these are currently being reflected in updated service business continuity plans.

Information and Records Governance

New General Data Protection Regulations were approved by the EU Parliament on 14 April 2016 and were enforced on 25 May 2018. The primary objectives of these regulations are to give citizens and residents control of their personal data and to simplify the regulatory environment.

Overall responsibility for information management at the Council has been assigned to the Council's Information and Records Governance Manager. The Council has identified and documented its information assets and data flows and developed an information asset register.

The Council has a Data Protection Policy as well as an Information Security Incident Management Policy and Procedure which defines the Council's procedures in response to any actual or suspected data security incident. Specific guidance on records management with defined responsibilities of information asset owners has been developed. Document retention guidance has been produced and communicated to all members of staff, which includes a defined and enforced corporate records retention schedule in line with the requirement of the GDPR and good practice. There are also defined procedures in place for the disposal and destruction of information. All staff are required to complete GDPR e-learning and keep their knowledge up to date.

Building Safety and Social Housing Compliance

A current key focus for local authorities, housing associations and landlords is to ensure compliance with the new Building Safety Act and the Social Housing Regulation Act.

Building Safety Act

The new Building Safety Act received Royal Assent in April 2022. The Act focuses on the safety of 'higher-risk buildings (buildings which are at least 18 metres or 7 storeys high with 2 or more residential units) from design stage through to management once occupied. It is the government's response to the Grenfell Tower fire and recommendations from the subsequent Hackitt review.

The Act give residents and homeowners more rights, powers and protection. It will deliver protections for qualifying leaseholders from the costs associated with remediating historical building safety defects and a toolkit of measures that will allow those responsible for building safety defects to be held to account

The Act creates three new bodies to provide effective oversight of the new regime: the Building Safety Regulator, the National Regulator of Construction Products and the New Homes Ombudsman.

Many of the detailed provisions in the Act will be implemented through a programme of secondary legislation. The Building Safety Act 2022 will be fully enforceable by October 2024, although some areas of the Act will become enforceable earlier.

Fire Safety Act

In addition, on 1st October 2023, new fire safety guidance came into force for all buildings regulated by the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. The new regulations improve cooperation and coordination between Responsible Persons, increase requirements in relation to the recording and sharing of fire safety information, make it easier for enforcement authorities to take action against non-compliance, and ensure residents have access to comprehensive information about fire safety in their building.

These regulations make it a requirement in law for responsible persons of high-rise blocks of flats to provide information to Fire and Rescue Services to assist them to plan and, if needed, provide an effective operational response. The regulations also require responsible persons in multi-occupied residential buildings which are high-rise buildings, as well as those above 11 metres in height, to provide a range of additional safety measures. In all multi-occupied residential buildings, the regulations require responsible persons to provide residents with fire safety instructions and information on the importance of fire doors.

Social Housing Regulation Act 2023

The Social Housing Regulation Act received Royal Assent in July 2023. The Act forms a new era of regulation for the social housing sector, aiming to give tenants greater powers and improve access to quick and fair solutions to problems.). The measures will:

- Enable the Regulator for Social Housing (RSH) to intervene with landlords who are performing poorly on consumer issues, such as complaints handling and decency of homes, and to act in the interest of tenants to make sure issues are rectified.
- Enable the RSH to inspect landlords to make sure they are providing tenants with the quality of accommodation and services that they deserve.
- Guarantee timely action where the RSH has concerns about the decency of a home by only requiring 48 hours' notice to a landlord before a survey is carried out.
- Provide powers for the RSH to arrange emergency repairs of tenants' homes (following a survey and where there is evidence of systemic failure by the landlord), ensuring that serious issues are resolved rapidly where a landlord is unable or unwilling to act.

Appendix Two

- Remove the cap on the fines that the RSH can issue to a landlord who fails to meet required standards.
- Landlords must ensure that the accommodation they provide is free from serious hazards, including damp and mould, and that homes are fit for habitation. They must treat cases of damp and mould with the utmost seriousness and act promptly to protect their tenant's health.
- Require Landlords to report against Tenant Satisfaction Measures which will allow tenants to see how their landlord is performing compared to other landlords and help the RSH decide where to focus its attention.
- Ensure tenants of housing associations will be able to request information from their landlord in a similar way to how the Freedom of Information Act works for tenants of Local Authority landlords

Pages 30 to 33 outlines the proposed actions for 2023/24 and for 2024/25 to ensure compliance with the above new Act.

Progress of significant governance action to facilitate compliance with the CIPFA/SOLACE Governance Framework:

Cyber Security and IT Resilience:

- Work has been carried out to complete the actions identified in the Cyber Treatment Plan.
- SOCITM were commissioned to design the Future Operating Model for the Joint IT Service. The recommended Future Operating Model was agreed by the Joint Information Communication Technology Committee at its meeting on 2nd October 2023 and by the SBC Executive in November 2023. Funding to implement the review has been agreed by both Stevenage Borough Council and East Herts District Council.
- Work has commenced to gain Cyber Assessment Framework accreditation. The Framework provides a systematic and comprehensive approach to assessing the extent to which cyber risks to essential functions are being managed.
- The roll out of Microsoft 365 is now complete as well as the removal of unsupported servers.
- New procedures are being implemented to enhance recording, management and monitoring of software licence information and the Council's software licensing policies are being reviewed.

Information regarding continued enhancement activity proposed for 2024/25 is outlined in the Planned Improvement Activity for 2024/25 section at the end of this document

Progress of significant governance action to facilitate compliance with the CIPFA/SOLACE Governance Framework:

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.

Information regarding continued enhancement activity proposed for 2024/25 is outlined in the Planned Improvement Activity for 2024/25 section at the end of this document

Progress of significant governance action to facilitate compliance with the CIPFA/SOLACE Governance Framework:

Compliance of the Council's Non-Housing Property: The new Asset Management System has been uploaded with commercial properties and data checks of the information are being carried out. The new Computer Aided Facilities Management System is now live.

Information regarding continued enhancement activity proposed for 2023/24 is outlined in the Planned Improvement Activity for 2023/24 section at the end of this document

Appendix Two

Progress of significant governance action to facilitate compliance with the CIPFA/SOLACE Governance Framework:

Building and Fire Safety Acts: To deliver the proposals set out in the new Building Safety/Fire Safety Acts, which have established new legal duties for landlord and building owners of higher risk residential buildings to keep their buildings safe, the following action has been taken in 2023/24:

- Housing staff have received initial training to enable them to complete Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans and are completing these for residents of flat blocks in scope of the Act. Training continues as required.
- All buildings within scope of the Act have been inspected and this has identified remedial work. It is anticipated that remedial work will commence in 2024/25.
- The fire door inspection programme is up to date and is now an ongoing programme. Essential repairs have been carried out at the five high rise buildings pending replacement of doors.
- Floor and building plans have been developed for buildings within scope of the Act and uploaded to Fire and Rescue website, added to each building's Security Information Box and will be kept under review and amended as necessary.
- The Fire Risk Assessment Prioritisation Tool has been implemented.
- Wayfinding and signage in flat blocks within scope of the legislation has been installed or is part of an ongoing programme.
- All the required building safety cases were submitted to the Regulator by the deadline of April 2024.

Information regarding continued enhancement activity proposed for 2024/25 is outlined in the Planned Improvement Activity for 2024/25 section at the end of this document

Progress of significant governance action to facilitate compliance with the CIPFA/SOLACE Governance Framework:

Social Housing Regulation Act: To deliver the proposals set out in the new Social Housing Regulation Act, which aims to drive landlords' compliance with new consumer standards the following action has been taken in 2023/24:

- Briefed the Council's Executive, senior leaders and managers on the new Act and what the Council needs to do to comply.
- Completed a consumer regulations self-assessment toolkit provided by the Housing Quality Network
- Produced an action plan. The main themes are around policies and procedures
- A communication plan has been produced to promote housing work and encourage engagement
- Held two away days to go through specific areas of the consumer regulations with managers across the Council involved in Housing workstreams
- Implemented new tenant satisfaction measure reporting from April 2023.
- The Council's Shared Internal Audit Service carried out review of compliance with the tenant satisfaction measures, specifically data quality, accountability, reporting arrangements and governance
- Tpas (external tenant engagement consultants) have been commissioned to provide a resident engagement framework for the Council to implement.
- Bi-weekly complaints clinic has been set up to review handling of complaints
- SLT group set up to consider new complaints system, revision of policy/procedures required by the Ombudsman and the Regulator

Information regarding continued enhancement activity proposed for 2023/24 is outlined in the Planned Improvement Activity for 2023/24 section at the end of this document

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

Principle G: Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit to deliver effective accountability will ensure that the Council provides information regarding the completion of actions in a timely and understandable way.

Summary of 2023/24 Review of Effectiveness:

Reporting on performance, value for money, the stewardship of resources and the assessment of robust corporate governance arrangements are provided throughout the year through:

- Quarterly financial monitoring reports to Executive
- Quarterly FTFC and corporate performance status reports to Executive
- Annual publication of Statement of Accounts
- Publication of the Annual Governance Statement
- the Council's Annual Report

Compliance to provide information as outlined in the Local Government Transparency Code 2015 is monitored throughout the year by Corporate Governance Group.

The Council's internal audit provision is delivered by the Shared Internal Audit Service hosted by Hertfordshire County Council. A summary of 2023/24 arrangements is set out on pages 5 to 7 of this Statement outlining assurance for both financial and non-financial systems.

For 2023/24 the Shared Internal Audit Service assigned 'substantial' assurance for financial systems and 'reasonable' assurance to non-financial systems. Actions to enhance governance for the areas highlighted have been identified and prioritised.

Due to audit delays, at the time of writing, the Council's External Auditors, Ernst and Young, have not as yet provided their Annual Audit Letter for 2022/23, advising whether the Council's financial statements give a true and fair view of the financial position of the Council at 31 March 2023 and its expenditure and income for the year then ended. The Auditors have also not as yet confirmed their opinion as to whether the Council has put in place proper arrangements to secure value for money in our use of resources and that our Annual Governance Statement for 2022/23 was consistent with Ernst and Young's understanding of the Council.

Arrangements reflect those summarised in the Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance – No significant opportunities to enhance governance have been identified

Planned Improvement Activity for 2024/25:

Best Value Self-Assessment

The statutory Best Value Duty is set out under section 26 of the Local Government Act (1999) and requires local authorities 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 July 2023, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) launched a consultation on draft Best Value Duty (BV) guidance. In 2023/24, to help inform understanding of its own best value position, the Council undertook a self-assessment against the 7 principle 'characteristics of a well-functioning authority':

- Continuous Improvement
- Leadership
- Governance
- Culture
- Use of Resources
- Service Delivery
- Partnerships & Community Engagement

As part of this work, opportunities where the Council could build on existing good practice were identified:

Continuous Improvement

- In response to the Office for Local Government's (OfLoG) publication of local authority data, the OfLoG District Council Metrics will be added to the Council's Performance Management System in 2024/25 for quarterly monitoring and review by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT)
- The Council will undertake a review of its approach to coordination of Government Single Data List returns to ensure that there is a central log of comparative data for key services
- To enhance the Council's existing approach to using data to inform business insight, an assessment of all existing business insight tools will be undertaken
- The SLT will continue to retain priority focus on workforce matters through its Workforce Strategy with specific focus on promoting the link between individual staff objectives (as captured through REALs) and the council's wider MSEB strategic priorities i.e. 'the golden thread'
- Audit of Service Assurance Statements to be added to the 2025/26 SIAS programme of work.

Leadership

- The Council will implement a budget process development model for 2025/26 which is aligned with key outcomes identified in Service Plans
- All Service Plans (currently held corporately) will be made accessible online to the SLT throughout the year via Microsoft Teams

Governance

- To enhance Member knowledge and insight of Council matters, the Council will review the scrutiny subject topics for 2024/25 and identify opportunities for future Select Committees covering a range of subjects (including site visits and external visitors where appropriate)
- Through the new Member training programme, a session on the importance of scrutiny and existing scrutiny functions will be arranged
- Introduce a single annual performance and forecast review report for Stevenage Borough Council companies
- Introduce a twice yearly SLT Complaints Report on key complaints themes identified through the Annual Complaints and Service Improvement Report

Use of Resources

- Undertake a review of the Council's approach to project management to ensure that the Council's ability to check the intended outcome of projects is assured and this is communicated to key stakeholders

Actions identified under the **Service Delivery, Culture and Partnership & Community Engagement** principles are currently being delivered through other programmes of work for 2024/25, this includes activities within Service Plans 24/25, such as commissioning the Residents & Tenants Survey 2024, the work being delivered through the IT Strategy and Action Plan, and the 5 Year Transformation Plan.

In May 2024, the Government formally published updated Best Value Guidance and work is underway within the Council to review requirements to ensure that it continues to build upon existing good practice and demonstrate ongoing fulfilment of the continuous improvement principle of the best value duty.

Significant Internal control and governance actions

Significant internal control and governance issues identified as part of the 2023/24 review of the Governance Statement identified in the relevant section throughout this Statement and set out in the following Action Plan.

Enhancement activity is deemed significant if recommended for reflection in the Annual Governance Statement by the Shared Internal Audit Service following reviews of control arrangements to meet the Audit Plan, or if identified as key to the management of 'very high/high level' strategic risks. By adopting this approach, any concerns over key controls that have a material effect on corporate governance arrangements and the associated delivery of priority outcomes should be addressed.

Action

To ensure that the General Fund Asset Management Strategy can deliver an effective mechanism to manage incoming investment as well as disposal of the Council's assets, the following activity is planned:

- Complete the implementation of new property data management software to manage the Council's assets
- Continue the review of the council's commercial portfolio
- Create a Facilities Management Service Strategy that defines the services provided, to what standard and who is responsible for delivery
- Enhance contract management arrangements with compliance contractors
- Produce a training plan for the Facilities Management service
- Produce a programme of remedial work with contractor
- Review structure for Property, Facilities Management and Estates to ensure they are adequately resourced to support the future needs of the organisation
- Procure appropriate call off contracts to support the Property and Estates functions by providing additional professional expertise
- Produce a Corporate Framework of internal responsibilities outlining the role of the corporate landlord and the occupying organisation service functions

Making Your Money Count: To ensure that the Council has sufficient resources to fund its medium and long-term service plans and corporate priorities the following activity is planned:

- Continue to find savings as part of the 2025/26 budget setting process, incorporating the work around the four transformation themes and the work of the Commercial Team
- Robustly undertake budget monitoring to ensure all costs are accurately forecasted and profiled
- Continue to look for new revenue streams

Action

Commercialisation: To ensure that the Council's ambitious Co-operative Commercial and Insourcing Strategy can be achieved, a programme of work is required:

Commercial activity in 2024/25 will focus on the growth of income from existing commercial services and concessions contracts and will see the launch of new commercial services into the marketplace. Workshops with service managers for fees and charges setting 2025/26 will commence in June 2024. As per the Insourcing Roadmap 2023-26, a review of all services provided to or on behalf of the Council by external suppliers or third parties will continue. There will also be an accompanying review of contract management processes across the Council.

As a result of the combined socio-economic impacts of welfare reform, the Covid-19 pandemic, and an economic downturn the following action is planned:

- Continue to develop and update the online Cost of Living information hub on the Council's website
- Continue to work with partners including Citizen's Advice and the Money Advice Unit to offer residents a comprehensive advice and support service
- Continue to operate and promote the Warm Spaces scheme, utilising public, community, and other buildings to offer comfort during the winter months
- Continue to promote availability of local employment opportunities and skills and training courses (including funding available to support access) to help raise awareness and confidence for people to increase income and improve their financial wellbeing.
- Develop and implement decarbonisation schemes to reduce Council and tenant costs.
- Continue to work through the Stevenage Together partnership to share learning and best practice and to co-ordinate activity where appropriate.
- Continue to work with the County and district and borough councils in Hertfordshire to share learning and best practice and to co-ordinate activity where appropriate.
- Further develop the use of the Social Value Portal to divert funding from Council contractors to local skills development and key local investment priorities.

IT Resilience and Cyber Security: The Shared IT Service to continue to implement the IT Strategy and Action Plan to enhance IT infrastructure, cyber security, IT resilience by:

- Complete the implementation of the new ICT structure
- Implement the agreed new Target Operating Model for the ICT service (the new structure and roles and governance structure).
- Further develop cyber security policies
- Gain Cyber Assessment Framework Accreditation
- Complete the actions contained in the Cyber Treatment Plan
- Continue the work to implement new procedures to enhance recording, management and monitoring of software licence information and review the Council's software licensing policies

Health and Safety: Continue to enhance and embed health and safety compliance and performance by:

- Continue the rolling programme of internal and external audits for medium and high-risk services
- Complete the implementation of health and safety enhancements for the Council's identified health and safety risks

Action

Council Housebuilding and Acquisitions Programme: To ensure the Council can deliver new council owned homes as programmed the following action is planned:

- Appointment of principal contractors for pipeline schemes currently progressing through Planning
- Completion of Dunn Close and Courtlands schemes for a total of 44 new homes
- Ongoing work to secure additional external funding for major projects including The Oval

Repairs and Voids To enhance the Repairs and Voids service, the following action is planned:

- Deliver improvement plan for Repairs including:
 - Continue to consider opportunities to upskill the workforce and maximise productivity.
 - Procurement of support contractors – to demonstrate VFM and ability to deliver to required quality and timescales in accordance with agreed service standards.
 - Make best use of technology – for example leverage the benefits of mobile solutions to capture tasks and manage workflow. Frontline teams to be enabled to view existing repairs and raise new repairs.
 - Improve diagnosis of repairs at first point of contact.
 - Customer engagement – to help shape new service model, demonstrate learning from complaints. Improve communications with customers and their perceptions of and satisfaction with the service.
 - Service delivery framework - to enhance collaboration between asset management and repairs teams balanced with clear accountabilities.
- Deliver improvement plan for Voids including:
 - procurement of voids contractor
 - business case for future delivery model to be presented to Executive for approval
- Cross-cutting actions:
 - establish client/contractor functions and review staffing resources.
 - review policies, processes, and procedures.
 - set out clear service standards for which we can be held accountable for by customers.
 - benchmarking: costs, standards, and performance

Corporate Capacity: To ensure the Council has the capacity to carry out all of its priorities as well as provide its core services and implement new government requirements as they arise the following actions are planned:

- Creation of service plans for 2024/25 in all service areas to ensure resource planning
- HR team to continue working with service leadership teams to prioritise recruitment and associated support plans
- Roll out of new Workforce Strategy

Social Housing Regulation Act: To deliver the proposals set out in the Social Housing Regulation Act which will give tenants greater powers, improve access to swift and fair redress and enhance the powers of the Regulator of Social Housing, the following action is planned:

- Development and implementation of an engagement framework 'Working Cooperatively to give Tenants a Voice Strategy'

Action

- Through the work of the Executive Housing Working Group implement the process for benchmarking the 12 Tenant Perception measures and 10 management data measures which local authorities will be required to report on from March 2024
- Continue with the rolling 5-year stock condition survey programme.
- Develop and publish a new Communications Plan
- Review and approve new Damp, Mould and Condensation Policy
- Review end to end processes to ensure compliance with the Social Housing Regulation Act including Awaab’s Law once enacted and improve customer experience
- Procurement of new support contractors
- Make better use of technology including mobile solutions
- Setting and monitoring of KPI’s to manage performance (proposals for inclusion in strategic KPI suite for 2024/25)

Building and Fire Safety Acts: To deliver the proposals set out in the new Building Safety/Fire Safety Acts which have established new legal duties for landlord and building owners of higher-risk residential buildings to keep their buildings safe, the following actions is planned:

- Contractors to be appointed to carry out remedial works identified as a result of building inspections via procurement process
- Remedial work to be carried out by contractors
- Ongoing compliance monitoring to be carried out to ensure requirements of the Building and Fire Safety Acts are being met

Climate Change: To ensure Stevenage can meet the government’s net zero target for the town by 2050, the following action is planned:

- Creation of a Climate Change Risk Register to assess the effects of climate change for SBC/Stevenage
- Generation of Pathway 1,2 and 3 reports to outline current working areas and recommendations to SLT
- Launch of Climate Action Plan portal
- Produce a Climate Change Action Plan based on the Climate Change Risk Register
- Promote government schemes and grants to the public to encourage decarbonisation town wide
- Upgrade the SBC Local Plan to include improved Climate Change considerations
- Work with businesses in Stevenage to encourage sustainable procurement
- Bid to central government for funding SBC lead carbon reduction projects.

Digital Switchover: To ensure that there is no disruption as a result of the changeover from analogue to digital lines the following action is planned:

- Convert careline telephone lines at the Council’s Independent Living Schemes by October 2024
- Identify and convert any remaining analogue lines within the Council’s commercial and housing stock.

Action

Court Cost Management: To enhance arrangements for managing court costs, the following actions is planned:

- Procedures for capturing and recording expected income from court costs/compensation awarded and assigning associated roles and responsibilities
- Mechanisms to monitor cases where judgements have been made in favour of the Council and costs/compensation awarded.

Approval of Statement:

Approval of Statement by Chief Executive and Leader of the Council

We have been advised on the implications of the result of the review of the effectiveness of the governance framework by the Strategic Leadership Team, relevant officers and the Audit Committee, and that the arrangements continue to be regarded as fit for purpose in accordance with the governance framework. Areas to enhance the governance framework already addressed are summarised in this Annual Governance Statement. Areas to be addressed and ensure continuous improvement are set out in the table above on pages 31-35.

We propose over the coming year to take steps to address the above matters, to further enhance our governance arrangements. We are satisfied that these steps will address the need for improvements that were identified in our review of effectiveness and will monitor their implementation and operation as part of our next annual review.

Signed
 Date
 Cllr Richard Henry
 Leader of Stevenage Borough Council

Signed
 Date
 Matthew Partridge
 Chief Executive of Stevenage Borough Council