

Annual Governance Statement 2019/20

Introduction

The Annual Governance Statement explains how the Council has complied with the terms of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework (2016) for the year ended 31 March 2020, sets out the Council's governance arrangements and systems of internal control, and reports on their effectiveness. The statement also covers relevant governance matters as they affect those entities included as part of the Council's Group Accounts.

Scope of Responsibility

Midlothian Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for. The Council also has a statutory duty of Best Value under the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement and performance, while maintaining an appropriate balance between quality and cost; and in making these arrangements and securing that balance, to have regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

In discharging this overall responsibility, elected members and senior officers are responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of Midlothian Council's affairs and facilitating the exercise of its functions in a timely, inclusive, open, honest and accountable manner. This includes setting the strategic direction, vision, culture and values of the Council, effective operation of corporate systems, processes and internal controls, engaging with and, where appropriate, lead communities, monitoring whether strategic objectives have been achieved and services delivered cost effectively, and ensuring that appropriate arrangements are in place for the management of risk.

The system can only provide reasonable and not absolute assurance of effectiveness.

Framework for Good Governance

The overall aim of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government' (Spring 2016) is to ensure that: resources are directed in accordance with agreed policy and according to priorities; there is sound and inclusive decision making; and there is clear accountability for the use of those resources in order to achieve desired outcomes for service users and communities.

The CIPFA/SOLACE defines the seven core principles of good governance, namely:

- A. Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law;
- B. Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement;
- C. Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits;
- D. Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes;
- E. Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it;
- F. Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management; and
- G. Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit to deliver effective accountability.

The Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance, which is consistent with the principles and recommendations of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework and the supporting guidance notes for Scottish authorities (November 2016), was approved by Council in December 2017.

The Council's Governance Framework

The key elements of the Council's governance arrangements, as set out in the Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance, include:

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

The roles and responsibilities of elected members and officers and the processes to govern the conduct of the Council's business are defined in standing orders and scheme of delegation for officers, scheme of administration, and financial regulations.

Codes of conduct are in place for, and define the high ethical values and standards of behaviour expected from, elected members and officers to make sure that public business is conducted with fairness and integrity.

The Monitoring Officer is responsible for ensuring that agreed procedures are followed and that all applicable statutes and regulations are complied with. The Standards Committee is responsible for dealing with matters relating to conduct and ethical standards.

The Council seeks feedback from the public through its complaints and comments procedures for Corporate and Social Work (statutory) service areas, responds to the outcomes, as appropriate, and reports the results annually.

Professional advice on the discharge of statutory social work duties is provided to the Council by the Head of Adult Health and Social Care (Chief Social Work Officer). The CSWO promotes values and standards of professional practice and acts as the 'agency decision maker' taking final decisions on a range of social work matters including adoption, secure accommodation, guardianship, etc. The CSWO reports annually on the statutory work undertaken, regulation and inspection, workforce issues and significant social policy themes.

B. Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

Council meetings are held in public unless there are good reasons for not doing so on the grounds of confidentiality.

Unless confidential, decisions made by Council or other Committees are documented in the public domain. All decisions are explicit about the criteria, rationale and considerations used. The impact and consequences of all decisions are clearly set out.

The Council seeks community views on a wide range of issues and undertakes regular consultation and engagement with citizens and service users, including the Council's 'Shaping Our Future' plans, using a range of consultation and engagement methods adopted across Services.

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

The Council's vision, strategic objectives and priorities are set out in the Single Midlothian Plan developed through the Community Planning Partnership (of which the Council is a partner). The Council Change and Transformation programme and individual Service Plans outline how Midlothian Council will deliver its contribution to the Single Midlothian Plan.

Asset management planning (which is being developed) and capital investment is structured to consider and balance the combined economic, social and environmental impact of policies and plans when taking decisions about service provision. The Council fully supports community empowerment and recognises the importance of building community capacity and volunteering as a key factor in building stronger, safer, and supportive communities.

Implications are considered during the decision making process within the standard report template covering Resources, Risk, Single Midlothian Plan and Key Priorities, Impact on Performance and Outcomes, Adopting a Preventative Approach, Involving Communities and Other Stakeholders, Ensuring Equalities, Supporting Sustainable Development, and IT issues.

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

Decision makers receive detailed information indicating how intended outcomes would be achieved together with the risks, financial and other implications associated with the proposals, by way of the compulsory sections of the Committee report template.

In determining how services and other courses of action should be planned and delivered the Council is increasingly engaging with internal and external stakeholders. The Council fosters effective relationships, collaborative working and contractual arrangements with other public, private, and voluntary organisations in delivering services that meet the needs of the local community including the achievement of 'social value' (community benefits) through service planning and commissioning.

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

The corporate management structure (March 2020) consists of the Chief Executive, two Executive Directors and Joint Director Health and Social Care, and six Chief Officers/Heads of Service. The roles of officers are defined in agreed job descriptions. Staff performance is reviewed on an annual basis in accordance with the 'Making Performance Matter' (MPM) process in place during the year.

The Chief Executive is responsible and accountable to the Council for all aspects of management including promoting sound governance, providing quality information/support to inform decision making and scrutiny, supporting other statutory officers, and building relationships with all Councillors.

The Elected Members Induction Programme is periodically supplemented by training events, seminars and briefings. Members appointed to certain committees have also received specific training related to the responsibilities on these committees e.g. licensing, planning, audit.

F. Managing risks and performance through robust internal control & strong public financial management

The Council has overall responsibility for directing and controlling the organisation. The Cabinet is the principal decision-making committee of the Council. The Performance Review and Scrutiny Committee is responsible for reviewing performance against policy objectives and commenting on decisions and policies and their impact.

The Council has a risk management policy and approach whose main priorities are the robust systems of identification, evaluation and control of risks which threaten the Council's ability to meet its objectives to deliver services to the public.

The Chief Officer Corporate Solutions (the Section 95 officer) is responsible for the proper administration of all aspects of the Council's financial affairs including ensuring appropriate advice is given to the Council on all financial matters.

The Council's system of internal financial control is based on a framework of financial regulations, regular management information, administrative procedures (including segregation of duties), management supervision and a system of delegation and accountability.

The Council has an approved strategy to tackling fraud, theft, corruption and crime, as an integral part of protecting public finances, safeguarding assets, and delivering services effectively.

A Medium Term Financial Strategy has been developed and approved by Council, and plans for revenue (5-year) and capital (10-year) based on strategic priorities are developed, led by the Corporate Management Team, and approved by Council in February each year.

Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring reports are presented to the Council on a quarterly basis for monitoring and control purposes including the annual outturn. The Management Commentary in the Statement of Accounts provides financial and other performance information regarding the operation of the Council, its wider achievements and areas for development.

G. Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, & audit to deliver effective accountability

The independent and objective audit opinion of the Chief Internal Auditor (Chief Audit Executive) is stated within the Internal Audit Annual Assurance Report 2019/20. This is based on work carried out by an in-house and shared services team in conformance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards to fulfil statutory Internal Audit provision.

The Council responds to the findings and recommendations of Internal Audit, External Audit, Scrutiny and Inspection bodies including associated Action Plans for improvement. The Audit Committee is integral to overseeing independent and objective assurance and monitoring improvements in internal control and governance.

Quarterly Performance Reports were presented to the Performance, Review and Scrutiny Committee for monitoring the achievement of strategic priorities and key performance indicators.

The Annual Accounts and Report for 2019/20, setting out the financial position in accordance with relevant accounting regulations, are being prepared.

Review of Adequacy and Effectiveness of the Council's Governance Framework

An annual review of the adequacy and effectiveness of its overall governance framework is carried out. The output is this Annual Governance Statement which is presented to the Audit Committee.

The review was informed by assurances from: Internal Audit annual opinion and recommendations; comments and recommendations made by External Auditors and other external scrutiny bodies and inspection agencies; and findings and recommendations within the Accounts Commission's Best Value Assurance Report for Midlothian Council (published July 2019).

In light of the Covid-19 emergency response by the Council commencing in March 2020 and the significant change in the Senior Leadership Team, only the written assurance statements from the

Directors and Chief Officers/Heads of Service were obtained. The self-assessment toolkits will be issued later in 2020 to be used on a continuous basis for 2020/21 annual assurance process.

Improvement Areas of Governance

The collective review activity outlined above has identified the following areas where improvement in governance arrangements can be made to enhance compliance with the Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance and to demonstrate Best Value, including financial sustainability, financial management and service transformation.

The Council at its meeting on 20 August 2019 approved the "Best Value Assurance Report: Midlothian Council Action Plan", following its consideration by the Corporate Management Team on 17 July 2019, to address the recommendations (1-8 below) in order to demonstrate Best Value. Progress has been made on improvement actions though these are not yet fully implemented:

- 1) As a matter of urgency, officers and elected members work together to develop and agree the medium term financial strategy and progress the council's transformation plans.
- 2) Develop and sustain more constructive relationships between members and between members and officers. Implement effective cross party governance arrangements to ensure that it delivers the medium term financial strategy and transformation plans.
- 3) Ensure that workforce planning reflects the medium term financial strategy
- 4) Undertake a review of its capital programme, to ensure that the timeframes for delivery are achieved going forward and that monitoring and reporting mechanisms are enhanced to drive more accurate analysis and planning around capital work.
- 5) Continue to implement financial planning arrangements to address budget gaps, underpinned by robust financial budgeting and monitoring arrangements.
- 6) Refine its vision in light of the outcome of consultation work through the Services with Communities transformation workstream and to ensure that it focuses its activity most effectively.
- 7) Ensure elected members exercise appropriate scrutiny at all times, take ownership for personal development plans and take up relevant training opportunities.
- 8) Continue to build on positive elements of community empowerment: Increase community ownership of local neighbourhood plans and work with communities to improve how they monitor progress.

In addition, other improvement actions (9-12 below) have been agreed during the year that are not specifically covered by the above in order to enhance compliance with the Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance:

- 9) Strengthen resource capacity and skills in the Procurement function to better support Service Managers to comply with the Council's procurement strategy and procedures, and to undertake contract monitoring to demonstrate delivery of value for money.
- 10) Enhance the Performance Management Framework through the full application of appropriate and proportionate self-assessment processes in all Council services as a self-evaluation tool to demonstrate achievement of Best Value.
- 11) Review and update the Financial Regulations and policies, procedures and guidelines of the key financial planning, management and administration processes linked to the Financial Regulations to reflect changes arising from organisation structures and systems.
- 12) Provide ongoing leadership training for officers relating to their roles and responsibilities to apply procedures and practices with a focus on new or refreshed policies.

These actions to enhance the governance arrangements in 2020/21 will be driven and monitored by the Corporate Management Team on a regular basis in order to inform the next annual review. Internal Audit work planned in 2020/21 is designed to test improvements and compliance.

Conclusion and Opinion on Assurance

The conclusion from the review activity outlined above and our opinion is that reasonable assurance can be placed upon the adequacy and effectiveness of Midlothian Council's systems of internal control and governance. Although areas for further improvement have been identified, the annual review demonstrates sufficient evidence that the Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance is operating effectively and that the Council complies with that Local Code in most respects to meet its principal objectives. Systems are in place to regularly review and improve governance arrangements and the system of internal control.

Covid-19 Response

The above assurance opinion reflects the assessment of governance in place during normal operations in 2019/20 prior to the significant Covid-19 pandemic response in late March 2020. The latter clearly had an impact on business as usual in the delivery of services. The Council moved to Critical Service delivery at 15.30 on Friday 20 March 2020. This means that as a Category 1 responder the Council carries out the following three essential functions: Caring for the Vulnerable; Liaising with Resilience Partners; and Supporting Economic Recovery.

The Council's Standing Order 19.2, i.e. decision-making responsibility delegated to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader, was utilised on a temporary basis during the Covid-19 pandemic incident as a more agile way of decision-making for urgent decisions within its governance arrangements. All formal Council and Committee meetings had been cancelled for an indefinite period, thus ensuring the safety of officers, elected members and the community.

New innovations, business processes, and technology solutions have been embraced in order for the Council to deliver services to the community in its Category 1 responder role, and in particular for new areas of activity as part of the national response with funding provided by UK and Scottish Government as relevant. For example, Non Domestic Rates reliefs including the Business Grants Scheme (Administered by City of Edinburgh Council on behalf of MLC), Hardship Fund, Scottish Welfare Fund, Food Fund, Supporting Communities Fund, and Third Sector Resilience Fund.

The logistics of delivering services in a radically different way, in order to keep staff safe, and adhere to social distancing and self-isolation measures at the same time, has meant significant changes in when and where services are provided, deployment of a large number of staff who do not deliver critical services to undertake alternative duties, rapidly modernised IT support, and significant partnership working across the community. This was achieved using amended governance arrangements, new ways of decision-making, leadership and implementation including daily Corporate Incident Management Team virtual meetings, conference calls, and systems remote access, weekly updates to Group Leaders, Chief Executive daily message to all staff and Elected Members, and a range of wellbeing supports.

Initial work is underway on assessing the financial impact on the Council and the longer term disruption and consequences arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. The Council will, at the appropriate time, carry out a Covid-19 pandemic response formal review, highlight any lessons learned, and implement associated improvements. It should be noted that a reflective approach has been applied to improve practices during the response phase on a continuous basis.

Grace Vickers
Chief Executive
mm 2020

Derek Milligan
Leader of the Council
mm 2020