

Annual Governance Statement 2024

Executive Summary

The Annual Governance Statement (AGS) provides an account of the processes and systems which give assurance for the effectiveness of the Council's discharge of its responsibilities. It covers the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

A narrative is given recording both key processes and in year developments against each of the seven principles on which the Statement is based.

2023/24 has seen key challenges around financial management which were largely addressed through efficiency initiatives during the course of the year. Though an overspend was recorded this was of a lower magnitude in comparison to neighbouring authorities and ameliorated through the use of reserves.

The Council has created a Business Change Programme which seeks to drive innovation and efficiencies across a range of activities including Climate Change, workforce, digitisation, neighbourhood assets and corporate improvement.

The development of the Council Plan has been a significant achievement and the setting of actions and indicators within each directorate creates a solid framework for performance monitoring over next 3 years.

The past 12 months also saw notable successes with the adoption of the Local Plan which will set the parameters for development in the borough until 2037 and the creation of a Climate Change Strategy. The Council has also worked closely with other Berkshire Authorities in setting up a Prosperity Board which will provide a platform for enhanced economic investment into the Borough through the work of a statutory Joint Committee.

Overall, the Statement provides good assurance that the Council's system of internal control is fit for purpose.

An update on the previous year's Annual Governance Statement Actions is included as **(Appendix A)**

Work underway or planned to address any governance issues for 2024/25 is set out in an Action Plan **(Appendix B)**

1 Scope of Responsibility

1.1 Bracknell Forest Borough Council ("The Council") is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and 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.

1.2 In discharging this overall responsibility, the Council is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs and facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, including arrangements for the management of risk.

1.3 This Statement explains how the Council has complied with the code and also meets the requirements of regulation 6 (1)) of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 in relation to the preparation of a statement on internal control.

2 The Council's Governance Framework

2.1 The governance framework comprises the systems and processes, culture and values by which the authority is directed and controlled. It underpins its activities through which it accounts to, engages with, and leads the community. It enables the authority to monitor the achievement of its strategic objectives and to consider whether those objectives have led to the appropriate delivery of services and value for money.

Diagram 1 Overview of Bracknell Forest Council Governance Framework



3. The CIPFA Governance Assurance Framework Principles

The CIPFA/SOLACE Framework 2016 - Delivering Good Governance in Local Government suggests that this Annual Governance Statement should include a brief description of the key elements of the governance framework that the Council has in place.

- 3.1 There are seven principles and sub-principles of Corporate Governance incorporated within the CIPFA/SOLACE framework and as set out in Diagram 2 below.

Diagram 2. -The seven CIPFA Principles of Good Governance



- 3.2 Each element of the governance framework is considered in this Statement within the context of the seven CIPFA Principles of Good Governance.

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

The Council has adopted structures, systems and processes which reflect consistency with high ethical expectations of those in its service, including Members, Officers, and outside Partners. A culture of compliance is also embedded with Code breaches, disciplinary issues, data protection infringements and whistleblowing referrals being reviewed, investigated, and determined in accordance with defined processes. Training has been provided to senior managers around the required competencies for working in a political environment and Member Officer relations.

Over the course of the municipal year 23/24 there were 17 Code of Conduct complaints though 11 of these related to Town or Parish Councils.

The Register of Member Interests is reviewed annually and both staff and Members are required to complete a declaration in respect of related party transactions

Legal requirements related to Information Governance, particularly the handling of personal data is firmly developed in the organisational culture with mandatory training in this field required of all new starters as well as refresher training for existing staff.

Examples of corresponding framework

- Councillor Code of Conduct
- Councillor Training Programme
- Whistleblowing procedure
- Anti Bribery Policy
- Member/Officer protocol
- HR Procedures
- Protocol for Members in dealing with Planning matters
- Information management strategy

B. Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

The Council exists to serve its residents and works effectively in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders. It has transparent decision-making processes in place. Formal decisions of the Council, Executive, and committees as well as officer decisions are made following a well-established and transparent decision-making process. Forthcoming executive decisions are published via the council's forward plan, at least 28 days prior to the decision being made and recorded. Within the reports the various alternative options are set out so that these are clear for the decision maker to see. Hybrid meetings have become embedded within the Council's meetings framework. In the absence of a legislative framework for remote decision making, the Council ensures legal compliance by reserving voting rights to a quorate in person cohort at formal meetings. Members of the Public continue to have live and recorded access to all formal meetings online.

Overview and Scrutiny has established a structure that allows activity to better align with the themes of the Council Plan. The function has established and aims to deliver against a four year work programme that supports the council's objectives. The Overview & Scrutiny Commission meets regularly throughout the municipal year and considers reports from the scrutiny panels covering a range of issues. Scrutinising the budget and monitoring the performance of all Council departments through the Council Plan Overview Report are recurring actions each year. This year's budget consultation generated the largest response from residents seen by the Council, reflecting the efforts being made to increase openness and transparency.

Examples of stakeholder engagement included delivery of the Council's first climate change summit, gathering together over 120 representatives of different organisations around the borough to discuss tackling climate change together and the launch of the Joint Climate Action Board, which brings together representatives for 10 different sectors to drive progress on this key issue around the borough.

Several significant consultations were undertaken via the Council's portal, most notably relating to the 2024/25 Budget, Youth Strategy, Housing Allocation Policy, Economic strategy and the 2023 Polling District and Polling Place Review.

Examples of corresponding framework

- Transparent decision making in line with statutory and constitutional provisions
- Executive Decisions on Forward Plan
- Exempt status of reports subject to Monitoring Officer scrutiny
- Public participation scheme
- Pay policy statement
- Development of Contracts Register
- Contracts over £5000 on Data share

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

The Council has in place clear arrangements to define outcomes and monitor performance. In setting policies and strategies, it adopted a long-term view about outcomes in the 2023-27 Council Plan with Borough Priorities centred around Communities, the Economy, and the Environment. These priorities are underpinned by the following cross cutting principles:

- Equality, Diversity & Inclusion
- Health in all Policies
- Climate & Sustainability

Each Directorate Service Plan is framed around the three priorities with a number of annual actions and indicators which are monitored and reported against on a quarterly basis in both the Quarterly Service Reports and the Council Plan Overview Reports.

The Bracknell Forest Cambium Partnership joint venture with Countryside Properties is intended to help the Council's objective of ensuring Bracknell town centre remains a sustainable and popular retail and leisure destination as well as a home to increasing numbers of people. The re-development of the Coopers' Hill site was completed in Summer 2023 involving strong engagement with local residents as well as providing the impetus for the re-purposing of Time Square as a community hub. Of the fifty-two units, 25 per cent are in the process of being transferred to Abri Homes for the provision of Affordable Housing. Despite viability challenges driven by national economic factors the Market Street site has progressed with an emphasis on the social value it will provide to the Council's regeneration and affordable housing objectives. Eighty-nine of the one hundred and sixty-nine units will be designated as affordable housing.

The Council's Local Plan was adopted in March and sets out the vision and strategy for development in the Borough until 2037.

In June 2022, Ofsted rated children's services in Bracknell Forest as overall outstanding. Following a subsequent inspection in November 2023 it identified that children's social care services in the Borough have continued to positively develop.

The Council is in the process of publishing a Corporate Social Responsibility plan to ensure that its suppliers operate within the framework of its core values.

Examples of corresponding framework

- Council Plan 2023-27
- Corresponding Service Plans
- Quarterly Service reports and Quarterly Council Plan Overview reports
- Partnership working (e.g. Community Safety partnership, Cambium Partnership, Joint Waste Board, Public Protection Partnership)

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

Climate engagement

- Delivery of the Council's first climate change summit, gathering together over 120 representatives of different organisations around the borough to discuss tackling climate change together
- Launch of the Joint Climate Action Board, bringing together representatives from 10 different sectors to drive progress around the borough

Domestic energy efficiency

- Delivery of Solar Together joint purchase scheme which supports residents to install solar panels and battery systems – over 220 residents have accepted an installation offer through the scheme and at least 789 panels have been installed.
- Delivery of further Warm Safe & Well funding to support vulnerable residents with energy efficiency improvements
- Installation of solar panels on eight of the Council's properties, saving money and reducing emissions (note this stat is for the 2023 calendar year)

Transport

- The cumulative total of miles of sustainable travel logged through the Eco Rewards scheme, which gives people rewards and prizes for walking and cycling, exceeded 500,000 miles.
- Installation of eight new EV chargers in Great Hollands; The Council's network of on-street chargers saw a 40% increase in use in Q3 and a further 25% increase in Q4
- Delivery of Bikeability training to c400 schoolchildren or more, to support cycling
- Provision of free bus service offer on Saturdays in December which led to a 10% increase in bus use

Biodiversity

- Development of a new Biodiversity Action Plan which reflects the impact and relevance of climate change to the natural environment as a central theme
- Planting of 3,652 trees including on highways and to replace invasive species which had been cleared
- Purchase of new EVs for the natural estates team, with the proportion of vehicles which are EVs crossing the 50% mark
- Moving to constructing new fencing from wood from the Council's estates, a more sustainable material with a lower carbon footprint

Waste and recycling

- Slight reduction in landfill rate and increase in recycling rate in the borough
- Launch of trial collections of flexible plastic waste to increase the range of recycling collected at kerbside

Other areas

- Drafting of a Social Value Policy which will help to incorporate climate change considerations into procurement
- Engagement with schools and parents to reduce idling outside schools, reducing emissions and improving air quality

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

- Adoption of the new Local Plan, which sets more stringent requirements for energy efficiency and climate preparedness for new-build homes and commercial space
- Creation of a Berkshire Prosperity Board in collaboration with neighbouring authorities to help drive further inward investment into the Borough.
- Publication of an Economic Strategy

Examples of corresponding framework

- Council Plan
- Service Plans
- Quarterly Service reports and Quarterly Council Plan Overview reports
- Outbreak Control Plan

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

Recruitment, retention and training are all key components of the Council's approach to creating a well-qualified and diverse workforce. Recruitment over the past few years has proved challenging and in cases the council has been unable to recruit those with the correct skills and training to key posts. Where this has occurred, the Council has made use of agency staff or short-term contracts to cover gaps in the structure. This is not the preferred method of recruitment but enables the Council to sustain services which are of importance to residents and service users and meet its statutory requirements.

Notable developments:

Retention & Recruitment Initiatives:

- Developing current staff and prioritising retention over recruitment
- Successful recruitment for senior leadership where assistant directors have retired recruitment was successful on the first round. All ADs are fully staffed.
- Safety valve – duties were reallocated

Leadership & Management Development Programme:

- Improving the skills of high performing managers
- Solving complex problems
- 45% of managers have completed this training due to lack of time

Leading a Culture of Wellbeing through Psychological Safety:

- This programme focuses on the wellbeing of managers and the psychological effects that their leadership has on their team.
- This programme has been well received by management

A broad internal training programme of courses is run each year for officers as well as specific professional training and this is supplemented by e-learning opportunities and also less formal learning such as mentoring and work shadowing schemes. Compliance with Continuing Professional Development requirements of staff is monitored by individual officers. The Council provides sufficient resources to fund this. As part of the performance appraisal process, each officer is required to identify their learning and development objectives.

Member Development has continued beyond the initial 12 months of the Member Induction Programme with regular Monday evening development sessions covering relevant themes.

Examples of corresponding framework

- Induction programmes for Officers & Members
- Member Development Programme
- Behaviours
- Role profiles

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

Bracknell Forest has maintained a culture of financial prudence since its creation as a Unitary Authority in 1998. Nonetheless pressures across its range of services, particularly Adult Social Care resulted in an overspend against its budget resulting in having to apply reserves to achieve a balanced outturn. The level of reserves held by the Council remains strong compared with most other authorities though the application of some of those reserves in the Safety Valve programme will present a new financial challenge for the Council in the coming years necessitating an even greater level of financial assuredness.

Notable developments:

Budgeting:

- The budgeting approach for 23/24 was different and was based on projected position and emerging issues. This approach enabled the council to identify the overspend early on.
- Tighter controls were brought in surrounding non-essential expenditure and recruitment.
- In the People Directorate, delegations were adjusted so that the Assistant Director had to approve all expenditure.
- Council tax was increased as it is a reliable income stream.

Financial Management:

- Audit undertook an advisory review on budgeting which raised a number of major observations to improve budgeting.
- Key themes included: roles and responsibility including engagement and accountability of budget holders, budgeting not being included in induction, over alliance within finance where responsibility hasn't been taken by budget holders regarding forecasts and budget setting, increasing the consistency of budget process, where profiling of capital spend is not happening it is resulting in underspends, no reflection of income
- Following the audit, budget holders have now signed up to their budget as recommended by audit

Strategic Risk Register:

- The Strategic risk register is reviewed quarterly at the Strategic Risk Management Group chaired by Executive Director: Resources. The Register is then considered by Corporate Management Team and goes to Members at Governance & Audit Committee twice a year for feedback.
- In 23/24 there was a major overhaul of the register following an away day session with CMT which also identified some new risks e.g. local economy resilience, impact of pressures from Health System, Safety Valve. The focus in the register narrowed down to eight risks where previously various risks repeated themselves so have been grouped e.g. Demand Management. The Register has been adapted to align with the new Council Plan more closely.

Examples of corresponding framework

- Financial Regulations
- Annual Budget setting process
- S151 Officer role
- 2021/22 Audit programme
- Head of Audit and Risk Management's annual opinion
- The Strategic Risk Management Group (SRMG)
- Risk Management Strategy
- Strategic Risk register

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

Internal Audit provides an independent and objective annual appraisal of key financial systems through routine compliance testing and by undertaking a number of audit reviews within service departments in accordance with the Internal Audit Plan. The Head of Audit and Risk Management develops the Annual Internal Audit Plan which is then delivered by the in-house team supplemented by the use of the Internal Audit Team at Wokingham Borough Council under Section 113 of the Local Government Act 1972. The Head of Internal Audit and Risk Management reports outcomes for all audits to the Corporate Management Team and the Governance and Audit Committee on a quarterly basis. For audits where an inadequate or partial assurance opinion has been concluded, she provides details of the significant findings to the Corporate Management Team and the Governance and Audit Committee and follow-up audits are generally carried out within 12 months to ensure that actions have been taken to address the areas of concern.

For other audits, the Head of Audit and Risk Management obtains management updates on the progress on implementation of agreed recommendations and this information is also reported to the Corporate Management Team and the Governance and Audit Committee. To assist management, the Head of Audit and Risk Management has put in place a recommendation tracker which can be accessed by service areas to provide an update to directors on the progress against proposed management actions to address weaknesses identified by Internal Audit.

Based on internal audit work undertaken, the Head of Audit and Risk management has been able to confirm that progress on the internal control environment was sustained during 2023/24 and that she is able to give a **partial** assurance opinion on the adequacy of the internal control, risk management and governance framework for 2023/24. This opinion is partly due to the number of areas of weakness identified in the reviews undertaken during the year, which indicate improvements are still required to reach a sound or satisfactory position across the organisation overall.

Examples of corresponding framework

- Council Scheme of Delegation, Procedural rules, Standing Orders and Financial Regulations as set out in constitution.
- Governance and Audit Committee terms of reference
- Executive Forward Plan
- Council Plan overview reports
- Scrutiny arrangements
- Information Governance Framework

APPENDIX A

2023/24 Annual Governance Statement Action Plan Update

	Item	Proposed action	Owner	Implementation deadline	Update
1	Dissolve Downshire Homes Limited (c/f from 2022/23)	Review position in light of prospective changes to MRP rules and if proposal remains to dissolve company to take all appropriate steps to achieve this	Executive Director: Resources	31 March 2024	Achieved
2	Whistleblowing Policy (c/f from 2022/23)	Review/Redraft to improve awareness and accessibility.	Borough Solicitor	31 Dec 2023	Not achieved c/f 24/25
3	Contract Monitoring (c/f from 22/23)	Development of Corporate Contracts Register.	Head of Corporate Procurement	31 Dec 2023	In progress
4	Constitution	Undertake review of Constitution to reflect current working practices	Borough Solicitor	31 Dec 2023	Constitution Review Group set up with quarterly work plan for Municipal year
5	Council Plan	Implement new Council Plan and corresponding Performance Framework including Directorate Service Plans	CMT	31 Dec 2023	Achieved
6	Budget Setting	Ensure smooth running of the Council's budget setting meeting based on prior scenario planning in light of the new multi-party arrangements	CMT and Assistant Director Democratic and Registration Services & Borough Solicitor	21 Feb 2024	Achieved

APPENDIX B

2024/25 Annual Governance Statement Action Plan

	Item	Proposed action	Corresponding Principle	Owner	Implementation Deadline
1	Whistleblowing Review (b/f from 23/24)	Review /Redraft to improve awareness and accessibility.	A	Borough Solicitor	31 March 25
2	Financial Management	Ensure all weaknesses identified in 23/24 Budget Monitoring Internal Audit are remedied.	F	Executive Director-Resources	31 March 25
3	Procurement	Ensure compliance with requirements of Procurement Act reflected in internal procedures and training	A and E	Head of Corporate Procurement	28 October 2024
4	Budget Meeting Procedure Rules	Develop rules to provide clarity for Members and Officers around conduct of Annual Budget Setting meeting	B and E	Borough Solicitor and AD Democratic and Registration Services	February 2025
5.	Scheme of Public Participation	Review current schemes of public participation and consider developing single version for all formal meetings	B and E	Borough Solicitor and AD Democratic and Registration Services	March 2025
6.	Member-Officer Protocol	Review of Effectiveness in light of changes in political balance	A and E	Borough Solicitor and AD Democratic and Registration Services	July 2025
7.	Remote Meeting Procedure Rules	Review rules to ensure they effectively reflect post covid requirements	B	Borough Solicitor and AD Democratic and Registration Services	April 2025

Signed:

Councillor Mary Temperton



Susan Halliwell

**Leader of the Council
July 2024**

**Chief Executive
July 2024**