



Annual Governance Statement

2012/13

September 2013

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Annual Governance Statement 2012 to 2013

1. Scope of Responsibility

- 1.1 North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) 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, and used economically, efficiently and effectively. NHDC 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, NHDC is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, and which include arrangements for the management of risk.
- 1.3 NHDC has approved and adopted a code of corporate governance, which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework Delivering Good Governance in Local Government. The Council reviewed its governance framework in 2011/12 and updated the Local Code of Corporate Governance.
- 1.4 A copy of the code is on our website at <http://www.north-herts.gov.uk> or can be obtained from the Customer Service Centre, NHDC, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City, Herts, SG6 3JF. This statement explains how NHDC has complied with the code and also meets the requirements of the Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2011 regulation 4(3) which requires all relevant bodies to prepare an annual governance statement.

2. The Purpose of the Governance Framework

- 2.1 The governance framework comprises the systems and processes, and culture and values, by which the authority is directed and controlled and its activities through which it accounts to, engages with and leads its communities. It enables the authority to monitor the achievement of its strategic objectives and to consider whether those objectives have led to the delivery of appropriate services and value for money.
- 2.2 The system of internal control is a significant part of that 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 NHDC's policies, aims and objectives, to evaluate the likelihood and potential impact of those risks being realised, and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically.
- 2.3 The governance framework has been in place at NHDC for the year ended 31 March 2013 and up to the date of approval of the annual report and statement of accounts.

3. The Key Elements of the Governance Framework

3.1 The key elements of the systems and processes that comprise the Council's governance arrangements are described in the following paragraphs:

3.2.1 Focus on the purpose of the Council and on outcomes for the community and create and implement a vision of the local area

3.2.2 The Council and its strategic partners are committed to the vision for the District, 'Making North Hertfordshire a vibrant place to live, work and prosper'. The Council recognises that achieving this vision requires a joint effort and has in place this mission statement, 'To work collaboratively with our partners and communities to deliver the vision for the district of North Hertfordshire'. The Sustainable Community Strategy was developed after extensive consultation with our partners and the public. It provides a vision for North Hertfordshire to 2021 and has recently been reviewed to ensure that it incorporates and reflects the latest priorities towards that delivery timescale, and within decreased resources for all members of the partnership.

3.2.3 The Council's "Priorities for the District" Document focuses on what the Council will contribute to achieving its three priorities. In 2012/13 these were:

- **Living within our means to deliver cost effective services**

This included initiatives on new ways of working, delivering value for money, reviewing service subsidies and reducing overall spend to match available income without reliance on reserves.

- **Working with local communities**

To allow the Council to recognise community development work in the widest sense and the existing work on our Town Centres, rural strategy and the Localism agenda.

- **Protecting our environment for our communities**

This priority demonstrates the Council's continuing commitment to care for the environment and do what it can to protect it within limited resources. This includes protection of the green belt, waste reduction, recycling, work on carbon dioxide reduction, energy efficiency and park renovation.

3.2.4 The Council ensures that its key priorities determine the allocation of resources to deliver its agreed activities. A robust Corporate Business Planning programme is used to score identified projects against criteria including the Council's agreed policy, its priorities, the outcomes of public consultation, demonstration of continuous improvement and changing legislative need. New funding (investment) or funding from services downsized or de-prioritised is allocated to projects based on the outcomes of this exercise. Agreed projects are then included in the relevant service plans which underpinned the Priorities for the District in 2012/13.

3.2.5 Achievement of the Priorities for the District has been monitored throughout 2012/13 via the Council's Senior Management Team and a mid-year update and end of year report to Cabinet. The Priorities for the District 13/14 included brief details of key achievements against these priorities when it was approved by Council in April 2013. The monitoring of delivery against the

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priorities ensures the Council's capacity to deliver agreed projects within the agreed cost, time and resources.

- 3.2.6 To further ensure that non-core resources are directed and / or redirected towards the achievement of agreed objectives and priorities within the Priorities for the District, there is an annual critical review of existing services and budgets. This process helps ensure the economic, effective and efficient use of resources and is undertaken within the framework of the Value for Money (VfM) Strategy. The process is overseen and scrutinised by the Challenge Board (made up of the Council's most senior officers).
- 3.2.7 The financial elements of our Corporate Business Planning Process are set out in the Medium Term Financial Strategy which looks five years ahead to ensure the Council's commitment to the delivery of its Priorities. The Council has a good track record of robust financial management and internal control but our resources are necessarily limited and efficiencies year on year continue to be required. There is, therefore, increasing reliance on excellent partnership working to ensure we demonstrate value for money in the delivery of our plans and actions.
- 3.2.8 The Council continues to ensure the accounts are compliant to the Local Authority Accounting Code of Practice for 2011/12. Performance against its budget is monitored quarterly and through the Corporate Business Planning Process, and it ensures that the level of reserves it holds is sustainable over the medium term. The Medium Term Financial Strategy will continue to take account of the current economic climate and the forthcoming changes to Local Authority funding.
- 3.2.9 The Council has a Treasury Management Strategy that is reviewed each year and monitored quarterly. This ensures the Council has sound processes and controls over the Treasury function that minimise risks to the Council.
- 3.2.10 The Council communicates the district vision and achievements against its priorities via a quarterly publication, 'Outlook' that is delivered to the homes of its residents. The 'Council Tax Information' leaflet gives further information on our performance, expenditure and efficiencies and is posted on the Council's website. For the autumn of 2013, 'Outlook' will contain a Council review of the 2012/13 financial year summarising key achievements against the priorities referred to in 3.2.3 with details of expenditure.
- 3.2.11 The Cabinet takes decisions on service and management matters. There are some exceptions to this such as statutory matters that are reserved to Council; strategy and policy; local issues delegated to Area Committees; and matters delegated to officers. Cabinet meets a minimum of 6 times per year. Portfolio Holders are councillors appointed to the Cabinet by the Leader of the Council, with specific executive responsibility for various Council services and functions.
- 3.2.12 The Council's Overview & Scrutiny Committee sets an agreed work programme for a number of Task and Finish Groups and reviews, which supplement scheduled meetings and ensure further Member scrutiny and analysis of how the Council deploys and utilises its resources. The Overview & Scrutiny Committee, having reviewed policy recommendations and completed task and finish reviews, can make recommendations to Cabinet

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which reflect their findings in order to further inform the decision making process. The public are encouraged to engage in the work of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

- 3.2.12 The Finance, Audit and Risk Committee and the Overview & Scrutiny Committee provide on-going monitoring and scrutiny of financial management, performance, policy and action plans. Further challenge is provided by Members through meetings with portfolio holders, area committees and Member workshops.
- 3.2.13 Scrutiny is provided at Officer level through the work of the Council's internal audit function which, since June 2011, has been delivered by a Shared Internal Audit Service (SIAS). The annual risk-based audit plan contributes to the review of the Council's key internal control systems, risk management processes and corporate governance arrangements. SIAS supports the design and effectiveness of the governance framework. Each internal audit is given an assurance level. The definition of each of the assurance levels are provided in Table 1 below:

Table1: Shared Internal Audit Service – definition of assurance levels

Level of assurance	Definition
Full	There is a sound system of control designed to achieve the system objectives and manage the risks to achieving those objectives. No weaknesses have been identified
Substantial	Whilst there is a largely sound system of control, there are some minor weaknesses, which may put a limited number of the system objectives at risk.
Moderate	Whilst there is basically a sound system of control, there are some areas of weakness, which may put some of the system objectives at risk.
Limited	There are significant weaknesses in key control areas, which put the system objectives at risk.
No	Control is weak, leaving the system open to material error or abuse.

- 3.2.14 Quarterly monitoring meetings are held with the Head of Assurance from SIAS, the Council's Section 151 Officer and Head of Finance, Performance & Asset Management to ensure a high standard of internal audit support is maintained. In addition there are monthly meetings between the Audit Manager and Head of Finance, Performance & Asset Management. The audit plan was reviewed after six and nine months to identify any amendments needed to reflect changing priorities, emerging risks or resourcing changes. Amendments are made in the first six months of a financial year only if significant changes occur to one of these factors.
- 3.2.15 Further challenge is provided by the Senior Management Team, Challenge Board and the Senior Managers Group.
- 3.3 **Ensure that Members and Officers work together to achieve a common purpose with clearly defined functions and roles**

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- 3.3.1 The Constitution includes a scheme of delegation and terms of reference for each of the Council's committees. Responsibilities are recorded to make clear how the executive and non-executive functions operate within the Council. The Constitution reflects the legislative arrangements for defining executive and non-executive functions. To emphasise the separation of these functions, the terms of reference are divided into two sections: 'Council and Committees exercising Council functions' and 'Cabinets and Committees exercising executive functions'.
- 3.3.2 The Scheme of Delegation defines the general power to act granted to the Chief Executive and Strategic Directors within the areas of their service responsibility.
- 3.3.3 The Constitution is published on the Council's website. Training was given to the Council's Officer Senior Management Group (SMG) in December 2011 regarding the Council's Constitution.
- 3.3.4 Members are responsible for ensuring that effective policy making, scrutiny and monitoring of activities occur. A clear committee structure assists such responsibilities to be effectively carried out. Member expertise and involvement is further enhanced by the Portfolio roles of Cabinet Members and the on-going training and development of Members.
- 3.3.5 The Council has a statutory responsibility to have a Section 151 Officer, and a Monitoring Officer. The Strategic Director of Finance, Policy and Governance is the Section 151 Officer (Chief Finance Officer (CFO)) who has a duty to the Council's taxpayers to ensure that public money is being appropriately spent and managed. The Monitoring Officer is the Corporate Manager of Legal Services who acts as guardian of the Council's Constitution to ensure lawfulness, probity and fairness of Council decision making.
- 3.3.6 The CFO reports directly to the Chief Executive. The CFO ensures that appropriate advice is given on all financial matters, is responsible for keeping proper financial records and accounts and for maintaining an effective system of internal control.
- 3.3.7 Officer decision-making at a strategic level is led by the Senior Management Team, comprising the Chief Executive, Strategic Directors, Heads of Service and Corporate Managers. This met throughout 2012/13 and addressed at each meeting: finance, policy, governance, human resource issues and performance including the delivery of the Priorities for the District.
- 3.3.8 The Council's financial management arrangements conform with the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government (2010).
- 3.3.9 To ensure that a constructive working relationship exists between elected Members and officers, there is an agreed protocol which governs Member and Officer working relationships.
- 3.4 **Promotes values for the Council and demonstrates the values of good governance through upholding high standards of conduct and behaviour**

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- 3.4.1 To ensure Councillors, co-opted Members of the District Council and all Town, Parish and Community Councillors in the District behave in a way that exemplifies high standards of conduct and effective governance, the Standards Committee promotes and maintains high standards of conduct. Council Officers are likewise expected to maintain such high standards of conduct.
 - 3.4.2 Following the changes to the Standards Regime, a new Member Code of Conduct was approved by Council in 2012.
 - 3.4.3 The Council has a staff Code of Conduct that is on the Council's intranet in the same way as all Council policies.
 - 3.4.4 Regular records of advice on Code issues are kept by the Monitoring Officer. The Standards Committee oversees the number and types of complaints dealt with through the local referrals process.
 - 3.4.5 Declaring interests under the Code of Conduct is a standing item on the agenda at every committee meeting and declarations are minuted by the clerk. A legal adviser attends all Council, Cabinet, Planning and Licensing Committee meetings to advise on Code and other issues where this is requested or otherwise considered appropriate. Advice on Code-related issues is also given in the Members Information Service when necessary (a weekly briefing also produced on the intranet that gives Members regular updates on civic engagements, press releases and other items of interest or that need to be noted by Members etc). A Planning Code of Conduct is in place and is adhered to by Members who sit on the Planning Committee.
 - 3.4.6 Members and Officers comply with a Gifts and Hospitality policy and the Registers are reviewed by the Strategic Directors. They can also be called in at any time by the Monitoring Officer.
 - 3.4.7 There is an internet page explaining how complaints can be made against Councillors. This can be done by either downloading a complaint form or making a complaint on line. The web page also has links to the Code of Conduct within the Constitution. A confidential Monitoring Officer email inbox continues to be available to receive complaints.
 - 3.4.8 A register of Council contracts is published on the Council's website. In addition details of the Council's spend above £500 (excluding VAT) is published on a monthly basis.
- 3.5 Take informed and transparent decisions which are subject to effective scrutiny and managing risk**
- 3.5.1 Underpinning the Council's financial management arrangements is a regulatory framework comprising Financial Regulations, Contract Procurement Rules, annual audits of key financial systems, audits of other systems undertaken on a risk-based basis and the role of the statutory Section 151 officer.
 - 3.5.2 There are some corporate groups that collectively monitor a range of Council processes and procedures. The Contracts and Procurement Group monitors the Contract Procurement Rules and the Procurement Strategy. The Statutory

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Officers Group reviews internal and Member governance issues. The Risk Management Group monitors the Council's risk register entries and the Risk and Opportunities Strategy.

- 3.5.3 An annual review and update of Financial Regulations and Contract Procurement Rules is undertaken. These reviews are led by the Head of Finance, Performance and Asset Management and involve relevant key Officers. Key financial systems have supporting procedure notes and manuals, which are regularly reviewed to ensure they remain current.
- 3.5.4 The Risk and Opportunities Management Policy and Strategy was reviewed in 2012/13 and will be reviewed triennially unless there are significant changes that require the documents to be updated in the interim. In addition to the Risk Management Group, monitoring is provided by the Finance, Audit & Risk Committee and if necessary referrals are made to Cabinet. An annual report is presented to Full Council.
- 3.5.5 The strategic importance of robust risk management is further emphasised by the designation of a Senior Officer (Head of Finance, Performance & Asset Management) and Member (Portfolio Holder for Finance and IT) as 'Risk Champions'. Both 'Champions' attend the Risk Management Group and oversee the implementation of the Risk Management Strategy.
- 3.5.6 The Monitoring Officer has processes for review of legislative changes which feed into the annual review of the Constitution. Consultation meetings and other forms of communication between the Monitoring Officer and senior managers as appropriate ensures that managers can contribute to revisions of the scheme of delegation and terms of reference. The annual review of the Council's Constitution which includes all terms of reference and scheme of delegation is discussed with the Leader of the Council and opposition group leaders and is formally agreed by Council. The Monitoring Officer retains overall responsibility for monitoring the Constitution.
- 3.5.7 The Council's policies and procedures are drawn up and regularly reviewed to ensure compliance with current legislation and regulations. Legal Services assists with updating and amending relevant policies and advises on legal implications including legislative impacts on decisions put forward in committee reports. Equalities implications are also considered as part of the committee reports.
- 3.5.8 Concerns regarding non-compliance with policies, procedures, laws and regulations can be reported through the Council's Anti-Fraud and Corruption and Confidential Reporting (Whistleblowing) policies. Concerns raised are investigated and acted on following clearly defined guidelines.
- 3.5.9 The Whistleblowing policy is published on the Council's intranet and internet to raise awareness and outlines procedures in place to staff, contractors and the public and features in the induction for new staff. The Anti Fraud and Corruption and Anti-bribery and Corruption policies are on the intranet and are given to all new members of staff as part of our comprehensive staff induction process.

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- 3.5.10 The Monitoring Officer, after consulting with the Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer, has statutory powers to report to Council or Cabinet in relation to any function, any proposal, decision or omission, that he or she considers would give rise to unlawfulness or any decision or omission that has given rise to maladministration. Such a report will have the effect of stopping the proposal or decision being implemented until the report has been considered.
- 3.5.11 The Finance, Audit & Risk Committee receives regular reports from the Council's External Auditor, the Shared Internal Audit Service, Risk Management Group and the Accountancy Manager. Where appropriate, comment is made on non-compliance with legislation that has been identified as part of a routine audit. The Chief Financial Officer has direct access to this Committee as well as to external auditors.
- 3.5.12 All members of the Finance, Audit & Risk Committee have received formal training in risk management so as to allow them to appreciate the nature of risk presented to the Council through its activities. Training on internal audit has been given to augment the Committee's knowledge of this function.
- 3.6 Develop the capacity and capability of members and officers to be effective:**
- 3.6.1 The Council's Appraisal Process not only identifies progress and performance, but also skills gaps. Any identified gaps are then addressed through an individual's personal development plan. Personal development and delivery against agreed personal objectives are monitored through agreed six monthly appraisal reviews for managers and ongoing one to one discussions. This process ensures that the Council continually has in post individuals equipped to carry out their functions with due regard to law, policy and regulation.
- 3.6.2 As part of the business planning process, each service plan includes learning and development needs linked to specific actions. This ensures that the skills sets required to deliver the key priorities and actions for the Council are identified and training and development planned and provided.
- 3.6.3 Changes to and development of training programmes are disseminated to relevant staff through the Council's training and development programme published on the intranet and more broadly using the Council's other internal communication mechanisms.
- 3.6.4 The Council fully supports the development of Members and the budget for member training has been delegated to each of the political groups. Members are encouraged to have personal development programmes.
- 3.7 Engage with local people and other stakeholders to ensure robust public accountability**
- 3.7.1 The Overview & Scrutiny Committee is, as are all our committees, held in public to take into account the views and needs of local people. The Scrutiny process allows councillors from all political parties to challenge Council policy and actions democratically and additionally considers the performance of statutory partners dealing with Crime and Disorder matters. The Overview &

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Scrutiny Committee has topic specific Task & Finish Groups. The chairmanship of these groups rotates between the political groups. The Overview & Scrutiny Committee publishes an annual report as both evidence of its activities and its contribution to the Council's policy making process. The Overview & Scrutiny Committee, having reviewed policy recommendations, can make representations to Cabinet which reflect their own findings and those of the communities the Council represents.

- 3.7.2 Our Corporate Business Planning process includes an annual timetable of formal consultation events, ensuring our statutory, voluntary, community parish and town council, and business partners have the opportunity to comment on budget proposals (both investments and efficiencies) under consideration.

4. Review of Effectiveness

- 4.1 North Hertfordshire District Council has responsibility for conducting, at least annually, a review of the effectiveness of its governance framework including the system of internal control. The review of effectiveness is informed by the work of the Senior Managers within the authority who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, the Head of Assurance for SIAS' annual report and also by comments made by the external auditors and, where relevant, other review agencies and inspectorates.
- 4.2 The Senior Management Team, chaired by the Chief Executive, reviews the Council's governance framework and control environment and is responsible for the preparation of this Annual Governance Statement (AGS).
- 4.3 Each Head of Service and Corporate Manager is responsible for producing their own assurance statements and developing an improvement action plan to rectify any identified governance weaknesses within their service areas. The Chairman of the Finance, Audit & Risk Committee has prepared and signed an assurance statement for the Committee as part of the overall assurance framework supporting the AGS. The Monitoring Officer reviews all of these documents. The Finance, Audit & Risk Committee members have been informed of progress on producing this Annual Governance Statement and will review it and evaluate the robustness of the underlying assurance statements and evidence.
- 4.4 No cases of maladministration were found against the Council by the Local Government Ombudsman during 2012/13. This demonstrates that the Council delivers appropriate cost effective services.
- 4.5 The Finance, Audit & Risk Committee has reviewed progress against the AGS 2011/12 action plan that was implemented in 2012/13. Some of the key areas of work that were completed include:
- The completion of revisions to the Officer/Member Protocol. This ensures the common purpose and roles and responsibilities of Officers and Members are agreed and understood;
 - The production of an overarching guide on information sharing requirements to inform staff, members, partners and contractors of their responsibility for effective data management;

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- Clearance of documents from the Secondary Centre and Letchworth Town Hall to further enhance compliance and future compliance with the Data Protection Act;
 - The implementation of changes to the standards framework flowing from the Localism Act 2011 was highlighted to Members by reporting to Full Council on the standards framework and the introduction of a revised Member Code of Conduct. This ensured that the current high standards of conduct and behaviour of Councillors is maintained;
 - The roles and responsibilities for procurement were agreed. This ensures the best outcomes are obtained for the local community as Officers will be provided with support and advice to ensure successful procurements of goods and services through the development of the roles of the Contracts Solicitor and Procurement Officer.
- 4.6 The review of the Contract Procurement Rules, which was not completed in 2102/13, will be completed by September 2013. This will ensure that the Rules are current and compliant with procurement legislation.
- 4.7 The Shared Internal Audit Service (SIAS) ensures that internal audit duties are performed independently. On the area of risk management & governance there were two specific audits undertaken in 2012/13. These were on Corporate Governance which gave a substantial* level of assurance and on Authorisations and Delegations which provided a moderate* level of assurance. The agreed recommendations that remain outstanding from these audits will be implemented in 2013/14.
- * see Table 1 in section 3.2.13
- 4.7.1 In particular the following actions will be undertaken in response to the internal audit recommendations referred to in 4.7:
- consideration of making a single department responsible for the identification, provision and recording of Member training;
 - amendment of job descriptions to ensure they reflect Strategic Director's responsibilities under the Contract Procurement Rules;
 - register of sub-delegations to be finalised.
- 4.8 A thorough review of the Constitution to make it clearer and more accessible to all will be concluded in 2013/14. The review process will include a number of Senior Officers and will include a member working party to give final consideration to the proposed new Constitution ahead of Full Council debating the proposal on 5 September 2013. This defines and documents the roles and responsibilities of the executive, non-executive, scrutiny and officer functions, with clear delegation arrangements. It will also include the procedures for convening meetings, including extraordinary meetings, of all relevant committees.
- 4.9 In order to reinforce the message that the Council has a zero tolerance of fraud, an e-learning module on fraud awareness will be essential learning for all staff. This will also be available to Members.
- 4.10 Universal Credit, which is intended to simplify the benefits system and bring all working-age benefits into a single payment, is to be progressively rolled out by the Department of Work and Pensions starting in October 2013. The Council has not currently been advised when this will be introduced in North

Hertfordshire but this will impact upon Housing Benefit claims. As soon as further information is made available, the Council's Benefits Team will work in conjunction with the benefit system software suppliers to ensure a smooth transfer to the Universal Credit payment to ensure minimal impact on benefit recipients.

- 4.11 An interim pension fund valuation exercise suggests that the Superannuation contribution increase for the Council will require an annual increase of £200k over the next three years in order to meet the liability in the pension fund. The final valuation for 2014/17 will be available later in 2013 and options to meet this liability will be included within our Medium Term Financial Strategy 2014/17 to be referred to Cabinet in July 2013.
- 4.12 We have been advised on the implications of the result of the review of effectiveness of the governance framework by the Finance Audit and Risk Committee and that the arrangements continue to be regarded as fit for purpose in accordance with the governance framework.

5. Significant Governance Issues

- 5.1 The supplier of the Council's payroll system has given notice that the system will not be supported from 1 April 2014. The Council has explored various options to ensure that a dual system is in place prior to the year end and a report on the preferred option was taken to Cabinet in July 2013 . This will ensure the risk of fines from the HMRC for failure to make submissions on time and breach of contract for failing to pay staff is managed. There is also an opportunity to increase the resilience of the service.
- 5.2 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:

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Leader of the Council on behalf of
North Hertfordshire District Council

Signed

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Chief Executive on behalf of
North Hertfordshire District Council