

NHDC ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2019-2020

Introduction

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.

In discharging this overall responsibility, NHDC should have proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs in place. It is legally required¹ to review arrangements and prepare an Annual Governance Statement ('AGS'). It should prepare this Statement in accordance with proper practices set out in the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA)/ the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE) Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework 2016. This AGS explains how NHDC has complied with these requirements. The Finance, Audit & Risk (FAR) Committee Members have been informed of progress on producing this AGS and will review it and evaluate the robustness of the underlying assurance statements and evidence. FAR Committee approves the final AGS and monitors the actions identified.

Delivering good governance in Local Government:

The Governance Framework comprises of systems, processes, culture and values, by which the authority is directed and controlled. It enables NHDC 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.

The Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework (CIPFA/Solace, 2016) applies to AGS' prepared for the 2016/17 financial year onwards. The Principles are further supported by examples of what good governance looks like in practice. The Principles are set out in the diagram below:



www.cipfa.org/services/networks/better-governance-forum

- ❖ Council, Cabinet and Stronger Leader model that provides leadership, develops and sets policy.
- ❖ A decision-making process that is open to the public and decisions are recorded / available on the NHDC website.
- ❖ An established Shared Internal Audit Service (SIAS) that undertakes detailed reviews.
- ❖ Risk Management and performance procedures that enable risks to be identified and these to be monitored by Senior Management Team (SMT) and Members on a quarterly basis.
- ❖ Overview & Scrutiny (O&S) Committee reviewing performance and policies.
- ❖ An effective FAR Committee as the Council's Audit Committee that reviews governance and financial arrangements.
- ❖ A SMT, which includes the statutory officers and provides effective corporate management.
- ❖ Following a restructure in June 2018, a strategic officer leadership team has been established, which includes the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive and the six Directors (which again includes all statutory officers).

How NHDC complies with the 2016 Governance Framework

NHDC has approved and adopted:

- ❖ a [Local Code of Corporate Governance](#) in March 2019 which incorporate the Framework 2016 Principles.
- ❖ a number of specific strategies and processes for strengthening corporate governance

Set out below is a summary of *some of the central ways* that NHDC complies with the 2016 Framework Principles. The detailed arrangements, and examples are described / links provided in the SMT AGS self-assessment document on the Corporate Governance page: <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/council-performance-and-data/corporate-governance> or can be obtained from, NHDC, District Council offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City SG6 3JF.

Key Elements of the Governance Framework:

¹ Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and The Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015.

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

What NHDC has or does:

❖ Operates Codes of Conduct for Members and Employees, maintaining arrangements for sign off of those, awareness of key policies and reporting / investigating any allegations of breaching those Codes.

❖ Complaints concerning employees are dealt with according to the Managing Misconduct Policy, and/ or Employment Procedure rules for officer (for relevant officers will also potentially involve the Independent Person Panel, Employment Committee and Full Council).

❖ A Standards Committee which oversees and promotes high standards of Member conduct. It is composed 12 Councillors and 2 non-voting co-opted Parish Councillors. The IPs are invited to attend the meetings of the Standards Committee. The Committee oversees the Complaints Handling Procedure and Final Determination Hearings through a Sub-Committee. The Chairman of Standards Committee provides an annual report to Full Council in May. This is designed to promote shared values with Members, employees, the community and partners.

❖ The Council's Constitution includes a scheme of delegation and terms of reference for each of the Council's Committees and decision making practices are outlined. The Council's Constitution is reviewed annually.

❖ The Council's Fraud Prevention Policy, which includes the Anti-Money Laundering, Anti-Bribery, Anti-Fraud and Tax Evasion. In addition the Whistleblowing Policies, have been reviewed and are available on the internet.² Contract Procedure Rules in Section 20 of the Constitution underpin the Council's approach to Procurement. Standard Contracts include an obligation to adhere to the requirements of the Bribery

Act 2010 and the Councils' requirements as set out in the Councils' Anti-Bribery Policy.

❖ The Council also has Policies and procedures for Members and Employees to declare interests, including Organisational ones. Members are obliged to comply with such arrangements under their Code of Conduct and employees sign an Annual Declaration Letter to ensure that they are aware of and will comply with key governance policies.

❖ The Council has a Monitoring Officer (MO) whose role is to ensure that decisions are taken lawfully, in a fair manner and procedures followed. After consulting the Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer (CFO) the MO has a statutory duty/ powers to report any proposal, decision or omission that he/she considers would give rise to unlawfulness or any decision or omission that has given rise to maladministration ("Section 5 report"). The MO is responsible for providing advice on ethics and governance to the Standards Committee and to the Members of this Council. A Legal advisor attends Full Council, Cabinet and regulatory Committees – such as Planning, Licensing and Standards to be on hand to provide advice. A Finance Officer attends Full Council, Cabinet and FAR Committee. Legal services/The MO maintain records of advice provided.

❖ The Council's CFO (s151 Officer) has a duty to the Council's taxpayers to ensure that public money is being appropriately spent and managed, and 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.

❖ All Committee reports and delegated decision templates have required areas for legal advice (as well as Finance, Social Value Act 2012 and equality and environmental requirement); part 1 reports are published and available for inspection as per the statutory requirements. Committee and Member Services provide support to the Council, Councillors and the democratic processes of the Council. The team organise the civic calendar of Committee

meetings dates, the Forward Plan of Executive Decisions, prepare and despatch agendas and reports in advance of the meetings and take and despatch minutes and decision sheets after the meetings. Delegated decisions are retained by them and they provide support for Councillor Surgeries.

Principle B: Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

What NHDC has or does:

❖ The Council's vision is one created by all partners of the North Herts Partnership and this and relevant documents are made available on the Council's website with Service Plans that show how the Objectives will be delivered in practical terms [[Council Objectives page](#)].

❖ Open Data is published on the NHDC website, and is available to re-use through the terms of the Open Government Licence [[Open Data page](#)]. Data Sets on NNDR (Full list and monthly credit balances) are also available [[Published Data Sets](#)].

❖ An Annual Monitoring Report is produced containing indicators and targets across the District to aid with future planning decisions and identification of local priorities [[Annual Monitoring Report 2018-2019](#)].

❖ NHDC have a duty to review air quality in the district to provide comprehensive information on the quality of air within the region Air Quality Annual Status Report [[Air Quality Annual Status report 2019](#)]

❖ There is a Committee administration process in places so that all Council meeting agendas, reports, minutes are available for inspection, and these, together with public meeting recordings, are available online and through the Modern.gov system [[Council meetings page](#)].

❖ There is a presumption of openness and transparency, with reports (or confidential parts of reports) only being exempt so long as statutory exemption requirements³ apply. Report authors

²<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/council-data-and-performance/policies/fraud-prevention-policy>

³ Under the Local Government Act 1972 Schedule 12A, and/ or Local Government Act 2000/ The Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012/2089

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consider such matters with the designated Constitutional “Proper Officer”. Meetings are open to the press and public (unless an exemption applies).

❖ There is a Council and Democracy page on the NHDC website. This links to information about the Council, Councillors, MPs, Council meetings, Council departments, Forward Plan of Key Decisions, Petitions, Notices of Part 2 (exempt) decisions that the Council intends to take in the near future, delegated decisions, recordings/ the right to record Council meetings and Notices of Urgent Decisions [[Council and Democracy](#)]. Public Registers and Delegated Decisions are available on the NHDC website for [Environmental Health Licensing](#), [[Public Registers and Delegated Decisions](#)] and Planning applications/ decisions [[View Planning Applications](#)]. Delegated Executive and Non-Executive decisions⁴ are on the Council’s website [[Delegated Decisions](#)].

❖ The Constitution also sets out what information is available to the public and how to engage with the Council [[Constitution](#)].

❖ The Council has a 5 year Consultation Strategy for 2016-2020 [[Consultation Strategy 2016-2020](#)] that sets out the methods that will be used to consult and practical considerations for doing so. This entails various approaches to consultation. A Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) sets out how the Council will involve the community in preparing the Local Plan and in considering planning applications [[Statement of Community Involvement - Adopted September 2015](#)]. A public [consultation](#) took place in early 2020 to amend the SCI

❖ The Council conducts a District Wide Survey every two years [[2019 District Wide Survey - Key Findings Report](#)]. Residents who take part in the District Wide Survey are invited to join the Council’s Citizens Panel, which is used for consultation.

❖ The Council also has an internal Staff Consultation Forum, a Joint Staff Consultative Committee (JSCC) and a Staff Consultation Policy [[Staff Consultation Policy](#)].

❖ The Council’s Customer Care Standards aims to put people first [[Customer Care Standards](#)]. The Communications Strategy and action plan [[Communications Strategy page](#)] set out the approach to communicating with residents, partners and the media. The Council has a multi-media approach to communication – on-line, in person, by phone, by post, and social media sites (on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). The use of social media sites and text alerts is geared towards engagement with the IT adept and/ or younger residents.

❖ The Council is also part of the [Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership](#) which aims to ensure a prosperous economy for the District’s residents and businesses. It also works with Town Centres in Partnership to co-ordinate and progress the work in the town, tackle growth and development challenges. It has assisted with the renewals of the 3 Business Improvement Districts (Hitchin, Letchworth and Royston) which will be in place for another 3 years

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

What NHDC has or does:

❖ The Council has a Council Objectives and Plan approval / review process and its vision is based on partnership aspirations. The Objectives provide the foundations for the Service planning process. Delivery is monitored through detailed Senior Management, Committee and Executive Member / Member procedures.

❖ The Corporate Equality Strategy contains equality objectives and contributes towards the Council’s vision of equality and diversity [[Corporate Equality page](#)]. These issues are monitored through the report / decision making process and Annual [Cumulative Equality Impact Assessment 2019-20](#)

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

What NHDC has or does:

❖ Decision making is effectively delegated through the Constitution (to Council, Committees, Cabinet, Executive Members and Officer). The Council has a set report / delegated decision template and guidance on how to complete these, which include standard areas such as an ‘options’ appraisal called “Alternative options considered” and risk analysis assists with optimising outcomes.

❖ The Corporate business planning programme is used to assess projects against criteria including the Council’s agreed Policy, its priorities, the outcomes of public consultation, demonstration of continuous improvement and changing legislative need.

❖ The Council has a Risk Management Framework, and Service Managers have to identify threats to service delivery/performance in their own areas, when undertaking projects, letting contracts, formulating or introducing new policies and engaging in partnership working. This is part of the [Risk Management Framework - Strategy](#) These are recorded on the Risk Register and monitored through the Council’s [Pentana performance/risk management system](#). Project management lessons are logged and detailed in a Corporate Lessons Log, which is available on the intranet.

❖ The Council’s Financial Regulations [[Constitution PART B Section 19 Financial Regulations](#)] are an essential part of risk management / resource control for delivery of services (whether internally, externally or in partnership). The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is reviewed annually to set an indicative 5 year financial plan for the longer term strategic vision as well as a detailed one year budget. The MTFS and annual budget are prepared in line with the agreed Objectives and Council Plan/ business planning process. Budget workshops are provided to Political groups prior to budget setting/ budget approval and these help to optimise achievements.

Principle E: Developing the entity’s capacity,

⁴ Made under The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014/2095

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including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it

What NHDC has or does:

❖ The Council recognises the importance of employees, planning recruitment and development. The People Strategy incorporates the Workforce Development Plan [[People Strategy 2015-2020; Workforce profile](#)] and was developed with the Corporate Objectives (Priorities as was), Corporate Projects and workforce demands anticipated. A vacancy management process provides a corporate overview of vacancy management and to ensure compliance with proper recruitment practices. The Council promotes ILM Leadership & Management qualifications and has Investors in People accreditation.

❖ Members and employees engage in various groups and benchmarking initiatives. These assist the Council in analysing/ improving its capability, such as the County Benchmarking LG Futures, HR Salary benchmarking, Sport England's National Benchmarking service and Customer Services.

❖ Service area employees attend / are part of groups – such as Legal PLP and Herts First where good practice can be shared.

❖ The Council also considers and participates in Shared Service/ commercial ventures to develop services and resilience, such as the CCTV Partnership, the Local-Authority Building Control Company, 'Hertfordshire Building Control, and has been a Lead authority developing the Herts Home Improvement Agency and shared Waste service with East Hertfordshire District Council.

❖ The Leader is part of Herts Leaders Group and East of England Leaders Group, has weekly Chief Executive/ Leader Briefings. Political Liaison Board (PLB) meetings are held and opposition Member/ shadow Member briefings provided by the Chief Executive/ Service Directors and other senior officers.

❖ Bi-monthly SMT meetings are held where Policy, Projects, Performance and Risk are (amongst

other things) monitored. The Council encourages close working liaison between Senior Officers and Executive Members. A strategic officer leadership team has been established, which meets to discuss corporate strategic issues.

❖ Statutory officers meet regularly with political leaders where relevant standard issues are raised. Service directors convene monthly briefings with relevant Executive Members

❖ Following the recently published Gender Pay Gap report, NHDC officers will take actions to implement the recommendations of the report.

❖ Following an [LGA Corporate Peer Challenge assessment](#), an Action Plan has been developed to ensure the benefits of the CPS process are realised through thorough Organisational Development -

Principle F: Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management

What NHDC has or does:

❖ The Council has extensive mechanisms in place to manage risk and performance, for example, through the Risk Management Team/Group/Member Champion and the [Risk Management Framework, Policy Statement Policy](#) and [Strategy](#) and operational guide. The Pentana system supports the logging/monitoring process by identifying performance indicators, individual risks and relevant 'ownership'. These are reported to SMT, FAR (risk) and O&S (performance) Committees and Cabinet for transparency and in Cabinet's case, overall management purposes. The Risk Management framework is embedded across all service areas and helps to inform decision making. [The Annual Report on Risk Management](#) (April 2018-March 2019) also proposes an action plan for 2019/20 to maintain the Council's effective and strong risk management processes.

❖ [SIAS' reviews of Risk Management and Financial systems during 2019/20](#) provided an overall

Satisfactory assurance. SIAS concluded that the corporate governance and risk management frameworks substantially comply with the CIPFA/SOLACE best practice on corporate governance.

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

What NHDC has or does:

❖ The Council's 'Outlook' Magazine is provided to all households in the District and is available on the Council's website. It contains information about the Council's services and events. The Autumn Outlook– Annual Residents Report contains a review of the previous financial year and summarises key achievements against priorities / expenditure and is a useful accountability mechanism.

❖ SIAS undertake numerous planned audits/ (additional on request) and present progress reports against these, an Annual Assurance Statement Internal audit/ opinion report of the Head of Internal Audit on the work undertaken. On an annual basis SIAS is required to evidence its conformance with the requirements of the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS). [Annual Assurance Statement and Internal Audit Report 2019/20 presented in June 2020.](#) An external review is required at least once every five years and this was last carried out in January 2016. In SIAS' Opinion report for 2016/17: 'The Head of Assurance has concluded, therefore, that SIAS 'generally conforms' to the PSIAS, including the Definitions of Internal Auditing, the Code of Ethics and the International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing. 'Generally conforms' is the highest rating and means that SIAS has a charter, policies and processes assessed as conformant to the Standards and is consequently effective and has the processes in place to deliver robust assurance work.

❖ The CFO follows: the CIPFA Code of practice on local authority accounting in the United Kingdom 2019/20 and the CIPFA Statement on the role of the

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Chief Financial Officer in Local Government 2016 by ensuring that the financial statements are prepared on a timely basis, meet legislative requirements, financial reporting standards and professional standards as reflected in CIPFA's Code of Practice.

❖ External Auditors provide key timetabling/ stage of audit reports to FAR Committee (Audit Fee Letter, Audit Plan, testing routine procedures, Audit on financial statement and value for money conclusions/ Audit completion certificate and Annual Audit Letter).

Review of Effectiveness

The Council uses a number of ways to review and assess the effectiveness of its governance arrangements. These are set out below:

Assurance from Internal and External Audit

One of the fundamental assurance statements the Council receives is the Head of Internal Audit's Annual Assurance Statement/ Opinion on the work undertaken. During 2019/20 SIAS reported on 27 areas of which 4 received a Good assurance, 11 received a satisfactory assurance and 1 received limited assurance, 4 not assessed and 7 not finalised. The limited assurance opinion related to the Time Recording System audit. A high priority recommendation was made and implemented. All key financial/ risk systems/ contract management were also reviewed and a satisfactory assurance opinion overall on financial systems was concluded. . Recommendations are detailed in the June 2020 SIAS report to FAR Committee [[2019/20 Annual Assurance Statement and Internal Audit Report](#)]. SIAS concluded that the corporate governance and risk management frameworks substantially comply with the CIPFA/SOLACE best practice guidance on corporate governance. Some of the recommendations have been implemented and outstanding ones will be taken forward and monitored through the 2020/21 reports to FAR Committee. SIAS also reviewed the

effectiveness of the FAR Committee. Their conclusions for 2018/19 were that overall the FAR committee was substantially compliant with guidance issued by CIPFA. SIAS intend to complete a more thorough review of the effectiveness of the Committee in future years

The Council's external auditors provide assurance on the accuracy of the year-end Statement of Accounts and the overall adequacy of arrangements for securing and improving value for money. The last Annual Audit Letter presented to the FAR Committee in December 2019 was very positive, with unqualified opinions on both the Council's financial statements and the value for money in use of its resources, [[NHDC Annual Audit Letter 2018-19](#)]. The most recent External Audit Update report issued [[External Audit plan for year ending 31/3/20](#)] indicated that there were no changes to the audit risks identified. The Audit Letter issued in December 2019 proposed to issue an unqualified opinion on its value for money conclusion. The ([NHDC Annual Audit letter](#)). The document set out the output of the Council's most recent financial statement; identified that there were no issues with the accounts. These arrangements are therefore deemed to be effective.

SIAS confirmed a substantial compliance level for corporate governance for the systems in place for 2019/20

Assurance from self-assessment

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. Each Service Director was responsible for producing their own assurance statements and an improvement action plan to rectify any identified governance weaknesses, as part of the Service Planning process. This process was reviewed

with an overall SMT assurance statement provided [see⁵].

SMT is chaired by the Chief Executive, includes the MO, CFO and key senior managers. It followed the CIPFA/ SOLACE recommended self-assessment process of reviewing the Council's arrangements against the 2016 Framework Principles/ sub-principles guidance examples. This was undertaken during March-June and SMT is satisfied that appropriate and overall Substantial 2016 Framework governance arrangements are in place. However, any improvement actions have been identified for 2019-20 in the Action Plan. The detailed AGS self-assessment is available on the Corporate Governance page⁶.

Assurance from Risk Management

The top risks for the Council, as reported to FAR Committee in March 2020 ([Risk Management report March 2020](#)), are: Brexit, Local Plan, Managing the Council's Finances, Cyber Risks, Delivery of the Waste Collection and Street Cleansing Services Contract, Impact of Anti-Social Behaviour on Council Facilities, Income Generation, Sustainable Development, External Factors Affecting the Future Provision of Waste Services, Increased Homelessness and Workforce Planning. It was also agreed to retain Route Optimisation of Collection Rounds as a top risk, to add Novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) as a top risk with a matrix score of 9 and to archive the top risk relating to the completed North Hertfordshire Museum & Hitchin Town Hall Project. Three of the other risks also scored 9 on the risk matrix:

❖ Delivery of the **Local Plan** has been and remains a top risk. The Planning Inspector published the Main Modifications arising from the Local Plan examination process in November 2018. These were reported to Cabinet in December 2018, when approval was granted for consultation on the proposals. The Council concluded consultation on the Main

⁵ <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/council-data-and-performance/corporate-objectives>

⁶ <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/council-performance-and-data/corporate-governance>

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Modifications in April 2019. Following the consultation on the Main modifications in January 2020, the Inspector arranged for further hearing sessions for March 2020.

❖ **Managing the Council's Finances** is an ongoing top risk which is reported through the FAR Committee and Cabinet process. The MTFs, budgets and capital programme are, however, noted as soundly based and designed to deliver the Council's strategic objectives.

❖ **Brexit** has been a top risk since March 2019, with the risk score reflecting the continued high level of uncertainty. The Council continues to analyse and assess the potential implications and to take proportionate actions based on the likelihood and potential impact.

Assurance from Complaints outcomes

Local Government Ombudsman (LGO): The Council reports complaints to SMT and O&S. The summary for the period 2018/19 (April to September) indicated that NHDC received 1947 complaints of which 1,006 were complaints regarding contractors. This was presented at the July 2019 Overview and Scrutiny meeting.

10 complaints were made to the LGO during 2019/20, of which 4 were upheld (3 upheld: maladministration

and injustice and 1 upheld: maladministration and no injustice).

Standards complaints involving Councillors

During the 2019/20 year there have been eleven formal complaints made to the Monitoring officer (one relating to a Town Councillor, one relating to a Parish Councillor, three relating to Community Councillors, five relating to District Councillors, and one relating jointly to a Parish Councillor and a District Councillor). These complaints were reported to the Standards Committee in a report delivered by the Service Director for Legal and Community on the 22nd October 2019. The report can be found here: <https://democracy.north-herts.gov.uk/documents/s8736/Standards%20Matters.pdf>

Information Commissioner's office (ICO)

During 2019/20 the Council received 837 requests for information with 96% of these handled within the statutory deadline. One complaint were made to the ICO during this period. This was put on hold by the ICO

awaiting the result of the First Tier Tribunal Hearing and subsequent Decision Notice - this was then closed due to the complainant not indicating that they wish to pursue the case further In terms of other reports/ issues there have been no formal Statutory reports issued by the MO or s151 (CFO). The Council is therefore assured that effective complaint handling and response measures are in place.

Conclusion

No significant governance issues have arisen as a result of the review of effectiveness for the 2019/20 financial year. The Council is satisfied that it has appropriate arrangements in place. The Council proposes over the coming year to take the actions set out in the Action Plan below to address/ enhance its governance arrangements. Implementation will be monitored through the FAR Committee.

Cllr Martin Stears-Hanscomb Leader of NHDC

David Scholes, Chief Executive of NHDC

Action Plan 2019/2020

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1. Ethical awareness training – increased staff/member uptake of the Anti-bribery e-learning module (Learning & Development)
2. Revised Grant Policy to be reviewed after a complete cycle of area committee meeting to assess awards across the voluntary sector (Community Engagement Manger;
3. Implement recommendations of Gender Pay Gap Report action plan for 2020/21 (Senior Management Team)
4. Implementation of LGA Peer Challenges recommendations; development of action plan; links to Organisational Development with reference to demonstration of NHDC compliance with relevant 2016 Framework Principles. [Senior Management Team].