

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.

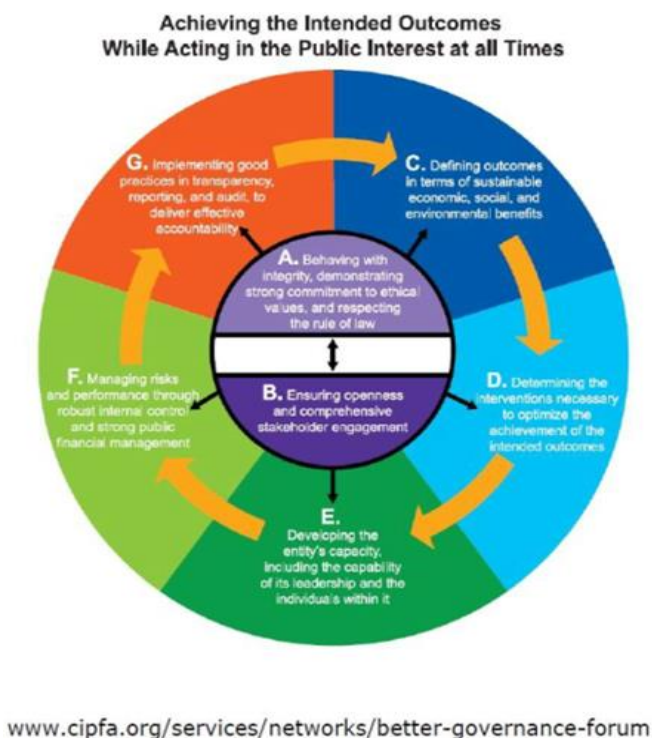
In discharging this overall responsibility, NHDC should have proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs in place. It is legally required to review arrangements and prepare an Annual Governance Statement ('AGS'). It should prepare this Statement in accordance with proper practices set out in 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:

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:



Key Elements of the Governance Framework:

- ❖ Council, Cabinet and Strong 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 the Leadership Team 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.
- ❖ The Council has a strategic officer leadership team which meets weekly. This includes the Head of Paid Service (Chief Executive) and Directors (which includes all statutory officers). The Statutory Officers also meet every 2 months.

How the NHDC complies with the 2016 Governance Framework:

NHDC has approved and adopted:

- ❖ a [Local Code of Corporate Governance](#) in March 2025 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 Leadership AGS self-assessment document on the [Corporate Governance](#) page.

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 (refreshed LGA model adopted in April 2021 and effective after the 2021 election) and Employees, maintaining arrangements for sign off of these, awareness of key policies and reporting / investigating any allegations of breaching those Codes. Code of conduct training took place after the 2024 local elections.

❖ The Council has a Member Training Protocol which sets out which elements of training are compulsory. The training programme was reviewed in anticipation of the 'all out' elections which took place in May 2024 and was delivered following this election.

❖ 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 of 12 Councillors and 2 non-voting co-opted Parish Councillors. The Independent Persons (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 provided an annual report to Full Council in July 2024. 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 and often in-year as issues arise. Constitutional amendments were made in April and September 2024, when amendment reports were taken to Full Council. Further to this, the Monitoring Officer and Chief Finance Officer were authorised to make the necessary amendments to the Council's Constitution following changes to the Leadership Team and Senior Management structure which were approved by Full Council in February 2025.

❖ The Council's Fraud Prevention Policy, which includes the Anti-Money Laundering, Anti-Bribery, Anti-Fraud and Tax Evasion. In addition, the Whistleblowing Policy, are kept under review and are available on the internet.¹ 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' Fraud Prevention 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 Managing Director and Chief Finance Officer (CFO) the MO has a statutory duty/ power 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. The MO/ or Deputy Monitoring Officer attends Full Council and Cabinet, and Lawyers attend 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 Head of Paid Service. 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, Risk, Social Value, and Equality and Environmental Implications requirements). Part 1 reports are published and available for inspection as per the statutory requirements. Committee Member Overview & Scrutiny 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 dispatch agendas and reports in

¹ <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/fraud-prevention>

advance of the meetings and take and dispatch minutes and decision sheets after the meetings. Delegated decisions are retained by them and are available on-line.

- ❖ As part of the Corporate Peer Challenge recommendations, a Scrutiny Charter has been developed and adopted by Overview & Scrutiny Committee in September 2024 to define what scrutiny is and ensure meetings of the committee are conducted with independence, initiative, and integrity

Principle B: Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

❖ **What NHDC has or does:**

- ❖ The Council's vision and relevant documents are made available on the Council's website with a Council Delivery Plan that show how the Objectives will be delivered in practical terms [[Council Plan 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. We are awaiting the 2023-24 report. [[Annual Monitoring Reports](#)]
- ❖ NHDC have a duty to review air quality in the district to provide comprehensive information on

the quality of air within the region through the Air Quality Annual Status Report ([Air Quality Annual Status report 2024](#))

- ❖ There is a Committee administration process in place 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 requirements² apply. Report authors 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 [[Public Registers and Delegated Decisions](#)] and Planning Applications/decisions [[View Planning Applications](#)]. Delegated Executive and Non-Executive decisions³ 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's Consultation Strategy 2022-2027 [[Consultation Strategy 2022-2027](#)] was adopted in 2022. It sets out the methods that will be used to consult and practical considerations for doing so. This entails various approaches to consultation.

- ❖ The Council's community Hub consists of a climate change page 'North Herts Climate Hive' that has proved successful in engaging residents on topical climate projects, tips and news, the page has over 400 subscribers. Also 'Churchgate Conversation' was launched for engagement on the regeneration of Churchgate.

- ❖ 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 2023](#)]. The SCI was adopted in September 2023 following a public [consultation](#). A draft updated SCI was published in March 2023 and consultation was opened 11th May 2023 and closed 27th June 2023. The Statement was formally adopted by the Council on 19th September 2023.

- ❖ The Council conducts a District Wide Survey Community Survey with the latest taking place in March-May 2024. The digital survey will now run twice per year to give residents more frequent opportunities to engage. The survey was conducted by Zensity on behalf of the council and the report of key findings is available here: [Community Survey Results March – May 2024](#)

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

² 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

³ Made under The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014/2095

[\(JSCC\)](#) and a Staff Consultation Policy.

- ❖ The Council Inclusion Group continued to meet regularly. It aims to gain an understanding of the experiences of staff mainly but not exclusively in relation to protected characteristics and to input into the future direction of the organisation with regards to inclusion and diversity. The Group make recommendations to Leadership Team.
- ❖ The Council has an Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy 2022-27.
- ❖ The Council's Customer Care Standards aims to put people first [\[Customer Care Standards\]](#). The Marketing and Communications Strategy 2024-28 [\[Communications Strategy page\]](#) 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, X (formerly 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 [Hertfordshire Futures](#) 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).
- ❖ The Council is also a member of the Hertfordshire Growth Board (alongside the other 10 districts and borough councils and Hertfordshire Futures). The [Growth Board](#) is the vehicle in which the county is working together to manage future growth and support economic recovery. It has developed its 6 new missions, one of which is Sustainable County.

The HCCSP is specifically mentioned within this mission in relation to various action around sustainability, and is given a particular remit around developing a Local Area Energy Plan for Hertfordshire and developing a retrofit strategy.

- ❖ Since the pandemic, Committee meetings are streamed live to YouTube from the Council chamber, and remain on the Council's YouTube channel afterwards which has increased accessibility to members of the public.

- ❖ Councillor Surgeries, Community Forums and Environment Panel meetings are held virtually via Zoom to ensure continued openness and engagement with residents. Area Forums can meet virtually, hybrid or a set location.

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

❖ ***What NHDC has or does:***

- ❖ The Council has a Council Plan approval / review process, and its vision is based on partnership aspirations. The Priorities of the plan are Thriving Communities, Accessible Services, Responsible Growth and Sustainability. These provide the foundations for the Service planning process, and officers are required to indicate on their reports which priority the report relates to. Delivery is monitored through detailed Senior Management, Committee and Executive Member / Member procedures.

- ❖ [The Council Delivery Plan](#) supports the delivery of the Council Plan. It is set in March each year and then monitored and reviewed quarterly at the Overview & Scrutiny Committee. It sets out the key projects the Council is looking to carry out during the year and shows key risks and performance

indicators.

- ❖ The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy contains four equality objectives and contributes towards the Council's vision of equality and diversity [\[Equality and Diversity page\]](#). The Strategy was revised in December 2022.
- ❖ The Climate Change Strategy contains objectives and actions which guide the council's approach to dealing with climate and sustainability issues. The overarching objectives relate to Net Zero targets for the council's operations and the district, and ensuring council services as well as the district are resilient to the impacts of climate change. The new Sustainability Strategy will cover a broader scope of themes to align with the new Council Plan priorities.
- ❖ The Council's process for assessing Environmental and Equality Impacts. Report templates include sections on Equality and Environmental Implications which officers must consider and comment on. Where significant implications are considered likely, a fuller Impact Assessment form must be completed to understand the impacts in more detail and plan for mitigative action. Equality and environmental issues are therefore monitored through the report / decision making process and an Annual Cumulative Impact Assessments 2023-24 which can be found on the [Equality and Diversity webpage](#), and on the [Climate Change webpage](#).

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 Officers). 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 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 \(north-herts.gov.uk\)](#). These are recorded on the Risk Register and monitored through the Council's Ideagen performance/risk management system available to Councillors and staff. Project management lessons are logged and detailed in a Corporate Lessons Log, which is available on the intranet. Corporate risks are reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on a quarterly basis. The [Finance Audit and Risk Committee](#) receive reports to provide assurance over risk management processes.

❖ The Council's Financial Regulations [\[Constitution webpage – see Section 19\]](#) 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. Budget workshops are provided to Political groups prior to budget setting/ budget approval, and this helps to optimise achievements.

❖ The Investment Strategy (integrated Capital and Treasury) was considered by Finance, Audit, and Risk in January 2024 and approved by Full Council on 29th February 2024.

❖ The Council's Procurement Strategy 2025-2028 is currently in the approval process to replace the previous short term 2023-2024 strategy. The strategy aims to put in place some of the Council's aspirations for the district as they relate to the Council plan. The Procurement Rules (Section 20 of the constitution) and were updated in February to take into account the new Procurement Act.

❖ The Council has a Community Grants Policy and during 2024/25 gave grants to organisations working to support children and young people, older people, mental and physical health and wellbeing, arts and leisure, sport, and the environment. The Assessment Criteria ensures that funding is allocated to projects or activities and areas that will have the most beneficial impact on the residents of North Hertfordshire.

❖ In July 2024 the Council awarded launched a one off North Herts Prosperity Fund as part of the UK Share Prosperity fund allocation for 2022-2025. £210,000 was made available to community groups/organisations to improve pride in place and increase life chances across the district, investing in communities and place, supporting local business, and people and skills, all applications were assessed according to a criteria.

❖ The Council has an Investment Plan for the Shared Prosperity Fund which sets out proposals around improving town centres, supporting local businesses, and developing health and wellbeing initiatives, and capacity developing in the VCFSE sector.

❖ The Council has allocated government funding for [homelessness prevention services and interventions](#).

Principle E: Developing the entity's capacity, 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. Following the pandemic, the focus of HR strategy work has been on adapting to new ways of working and making this work for the Council and for staff. Issues around employee engagement and retention have also increased. To help address that we are looking at our staff benefits and our recruitment processes.

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

❖ 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. It has its own private holding company – Broadwater Hundred Limited, set up as a contingency matter.

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

❖ Weekly Leadership meetings are held where ongoing issues are discussed and during monthly business meetings, Policy, Projects, Performance and Risk are (amongst other things) monitored. The Council encourages close working liaison between Senior Officers and Executive Members.

❖ A process established for deputisation for the Chief Executive Officer, in the event of long-term absence.

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

❖ The Council has a Transformation Project which seeks to improve our services to residents using Artificial intelligence and development of self-serve systems. It also seeks to improve Council working and efficiency by automating processes that are currently manually handled.

❖ The Inclusion Group considers staff experiences and looks to drive forward the equality, diversity, and inclusion agenda within the Council. It also receives feedback from HR on the gender pay gap. A subgroup of the Inclusion Group has been formed to further consider the gender pay gap and actions for reducing it. The subgroup first convened in September 2023 and continues to report their progress to the Leadership Team.

❖ Staff Learning and Development sessions have been instituted on the morning of every first Friday of each month. These are a mixture of themed and non-themed sessions to enable them to be used by teams or individuals to focus on an area of development most useful for them.
The Values of the organisation were revised in 2022. The values shape how we aim to act as an organisation. They are: *TOGETHER: We work together and support*

LISTENING: We listen to and consider the views of each other, our partners and our customers

LEARNING: We learn from others and are open to change

ADAPTABLE: We are adaptable in finding solutions for each other, our partners and our customers.

INCLUSIVE: We are inclusive and value diversity

❖ The Recruitment & Selection Policy was last reviewed and updated in 2020/21 as part of the policy review process. This is currently under review.

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

❖ ***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 Policy Statement, the Risk Management Framework Policy, and operational guide. The Ideagen system supports the logging/monitoring process by identifying performance indicators, individual risks and relevant 'ownership'. These are reported to Leadership Team and O&S Committee 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 Risk Management Strategy is reviewed regularly and most recently was revised and approved by Cabinet in January 2025.

❖ SIAS' [Annual Assurance Statement](#) was delivered to Finance, Audit, and Risk Committee in June 2024. SIAS provided an overall assurance opinion of Reasonable Assurance. They also concluded that the corporate governance and risk management frameworks substantially comply with the CIPFA/SOLACE best practice on corporate

governance.

❖ The council maintains a [Data Sharing Statement](#) to ensure that information is handled and dealt properly when collected, recorded and used. This data handling is treated lawfully, correctly and adheres to the Data Protection Act. The Council has a Data Sharing Protocol which provides a framework for the Partner Organisations for the regulation working practices between Partner Organisations and is in accordance with the ICO's data sharing code of practice.

❖ Certain Service areas have their external emails encrypted by default (Housing, Revenues and Benefits, Systems Technical (Revenues and Benefits), Cashiers and Careline). Encryption occurs automatically when sending emails to certain domains, and the list of domains included on this list is reviewed regularly. Employees/ Members are instructed to encrypt an email if sending private, sensitive or confidential information to an external email address.

❖ The Council has a designated data protection (DPA) officer – the Revenues Manager and Data Controller is the Service Director - Customers [DPA - website Contacts information](#)

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, distributed biannually (Summer and Winter Edition).

❖ SIAS undertake numerous planned audits (additional on request) and presents quarterly progress reports against these. An Annual Assurance Opinion and Internal Audit Annual Report is presented to the first FAR Committee of each civic year outlining the work undertaken in the previous civic year. Based on the internal audit work undertaken at the Council in 2023/24, SIAS provided an overall assurance opinion of Reasonable for the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's control environment. This [Annual Assurance Statement was](#) delivered at the June 2024 FAR Committee meeting.

❖ On an annual basis SIAS is required to undertake a self-assessment of its conformance with the requirements of the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS). [Annual Assurance Statement and Annual Report 2023-24 presented in June 2024](#). The report found that SIAS generally conformed to the required standards; and that the external quality assurance assessors also held that SIAS conforms with the standards. An external review is required at least once every five years and this last took place in June 2022 and was reported at the December FAR meeting.

❖ In September 2024 SIAS presented their annual report for 2023/24 to FAR committee which highlighted that they had delivered 94% of planned days against a target of 95% and had issued 91% of audits in draft against a target of 90%. This was nevertheless a good outcome in view of recruitment and retention pressures. The last [Internal Audit Progress Report](#) of 2024/25 was delivered in February 2025 and reported that as of 17th January 2025 71% of the Internal Audit Plan Days had been delivered.

❖ [The Annual Report of the FAR Committee](#) for 2023/24 was brought to Full Council in July 2024. The report provided Council with assurance as to the

effectiveness of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee.

❖ The CFO follows: the CIPFA Code of practice on local authority accounting in the United Kingdom for each year and the CIPFA Statement on the role of the 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 Opinion on the work undertaken. During [24/25 SIAS](#) reported on 24 areas of which 1 received a Substantial assurance, 13 a Reasonable assurance, 3 a limited assurance, 3 not assessed, 3 unqualified, and 1 not complete. The limited assurance opinions related to Churchgate Landlord Compliance, Estates, and Agency Staffing, with three high priority recommendations being made. An overall assurance opinion of Reasonable Assurance was given, meaning a generally sound system of

governance, risk-management, and control is in place. Further details can be found in the [Annual Assurance Statement and Internal Audit Annual Report 2023/24](#). The Annual Assurance Statement and Internal Audit Report for 2024/25 are due to be presented at the June 2025 FAR meeting, with the report again highlighting an overall opinion of Reasonable Assurance.

❖ In the Annual Assurance Statement and Internal Audit Report 2023/24, reported to FAR Committee in June 2024, SIAS concluded that the corporate governance and risk management frameworks substantially comply with the CIPFA/SOLACE best practice guidance on corporate governance. Recommendations are in the process of being actioned and outstanding ones will be taken forward and monitored through reports to FAR Committee.

❖ In December 2024, SIAS brought their [report](#) on their review of the FAR committee to the FAR committee. They made three medium priority and one low priority recommendation in the areas of Self-Assessment Reviews; Practices of the Council/FAR Committee; Training attendance; and Refresher training.

❖ The Council's external auditors provide assurance on the accuracy of the year-end Statement of Accounts, the consistency of the Annual Governance Statement and the adequacy of value for money (VFM) arrangements. In September 2024, Ernst & Young (EY) provided a completion report for 2022-2023. As allowed under the Accounts and Audit (Amendment) Regulations 2024" (the SI) this provided a disclaimed opinion on the accounts due to the work they were able to complete by the backstop date of 13 December 2024. A full VFM review was carried out which found no significant weaknesses. In February 2025 KPMG provided a [report](#) for the 2023-24 accounts. As allowed under

the Accounts and Audit (Amendment) Regulations 2024 this provided a partially disclaimed opinion due to the work they were able to complete by the backstop date of 28 February 2025. A full VFM review was carried out which found no significant weaknesses. It should be noted that delays in the statement of accounts work and disclaimed opinion are not the fault of the council and are instead the result of the national issues around local audit backlog. This is outside of the council's control.

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 is responsible for producing their own assurance statements and where relevant for mitigating identified risks and governance weaknesses as part of the Service Planning process. The areas of governance reviews include but is not limited to: legislative compliance, project management, risk management, conduct, and conflicts of interest.

❖ [The Council Delivery Plan](#) highlights key projects to support achievement of our Council Plan.

❖ Leadership Team is composed of the Managing Director and the Service Directors and meetings are chaired by the Managing Director. The AGS self-assessment follows the CIPFA/SOLACE recommended self-assessment process of reviewing the Council's arrangements against the 2016 Framework Principles/sub-principles and providing examples. This is usually undertaken during March - June and taken to a Leadership Team meeting so that Leadership can confirm satisfaction that the appropriate governance arrangements are in place. The AGS Action Plan is developed to work on areas

for governance improvement. The detailed AGS self-assessment is available on the Corporate Governance page⁴.

Assurance from the Shared Anti-Fraud Service

❖ The Shared Anti-Fraud Service (SAFS) are responsible for all proactive and reactive counter-fraud activity at North Herts Council (NHC), and keep the Council informed of any actual, suspected or alleged fraud affecting the Authority. Where there is an impact on internal audit work, there is a mutual exchange of information to ensure that the control environment is strengthened.

❖ The knowledge of actual, suspected or alleged fraud is summarised in the regular progress reports from SAFS to the Council's Finance Audit & Risk Committee.

❖ Based on collaboration with SAFS, we have knowledge of 113 allegations of suspected fraud in 2024/2025. This included areas such as blue badge abuse, housing services, revenues and benefits, and business rates. The most commonly reported type of fraud related to council tax with 78 reports of fraud in this area. Housing fraud was the second most reported, with 19 reports. The majority of reports to SAFS are made by the public and council staff.

❖ SAFS continues to provide anti-fraud services to the Council through its contracted provision including fraud awareness training for staff, public campaigns to prevent/deter fraud, providing fraud alerts and insight into new and emerging fraud trends and proactive work including oversight of the National Fraud Initiative and local data matching/analysis to identify fraud through the Herts FraudHub.

Assurance from Risk Management

Projects, risks, and performance indicators have been amalgamated into the Council Delivery Plan which is taken to Overview & Scrutiny Committee each quarter. This is to ensure a more integrated corporate approach. In the Mid-Year Risk Governance update reported to Finance Audit and Risk Committee in January 2025, the top risks (scoring a 9 on the risk matrix) for the Council were Waste and Street Cleansing Contract; Financial Sustainability; and Resourcing. Other risks scoring highly on the matrix (8s) were: the Churchgate Project; Leisure Centre Decarbonisation; and Cyber Risks.

❖ **Financial Sustainability** is an ongoing top risk which is reported through the Council Delivery Plan. The MTFS, budgets and capital programme are, however, noted as soundly based and designed to deliver the Council's strategic objectives.

❖ **Resourcing** has remained as a score of 9 on the risk matrix, having previously been rated as an 8 in 2022/23. It refers to issues around additional tasks/actions and the knock-on impact this may have on delivery of projects within the Council Delivery Plan. It also refers to staff shortages and difficulties in recruiting to some areas.

❖ The risks around the **Waste and Street Cleansing Contract** include insufficient resources/capacity to deliver mobilisation work in a shortened mobilisation timeframe, uncertainty over some cost elements, capability to develop/integrate new online forms, and public confusion around contract mobilisation and service changes.

❖ **The Churchgate project** refers to plans to regenerate a shopping centre and the surrounding areas. It is a high-rated risk, with the risk relating to the affordability of the regeneration, and the

⁴ <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/corporate-governance>

possibility of failing to meet the expectations of stakeholders.

❖ **Cyber Risks** refers to the possibility of disruption to or failure of IT systems and infrastructure as a result of breaches of cyber security, resulting in inability to deliver projects/services.

❖ *The risk around **Leisure Centre Decarbonisation** is around delivery of the works within the timeframe required by Salix, due to the large grant fund contribution, as well as potential additional costs during the course of the works.*

Assurance from Scrutiny

❖ As part of the previous Corporate Peer Challenge recommendations, a Scrutiny Charter was developed and adopted by Overview & Scrutiny Committee in September 2024 to define what scrutiny is and ensure meetings of the committee are conducted with independence, initiative, and integrity.

❖ Key considerations for the Overview & Scrutiny Committee during the 24/25 year included the leisure centre decarbonisation project; museum storage options; parking charges and on-street and off-street charging tariffs; key performance indicators for 24/25; the Scrutiny Charter, and the RIPA annual report. They made recommendations to Cabinet on increasing the capital expenditure for the leisure centre works; using portions of the allocated budget for museum storage for developing more details on particular options and discounting other options; reconsidering proposed on-street and off-street charging tariffs, and considering the increase in parking charges based on updated modelling; adoption of the KPIs; and adoption of the updated RIPA policy.

Assurance from Corporate Peer Challenge

❖ A Corporate Peer Challenge was conducted in autumn 2024. The report highlighted that the council

'performs well...and is delivering for its residents'. It made recommendations around the themes of Local priorities and outcomes; Organisational and place leadership; Governance and culture; Financial planning and management; and Capacity for improvement. The Action Plan was approved by Cabinet in March 2025. Progress will be monitored by the Leadership Team and Political Liaison Board (PLB), with oversight from Cabinet and Overview & Scrutiny.

Assurance from Complaints outcomes Local Government Ombudsman (LGO)

❖ The Council reports complaints to Leadership and O&S. The summary for the full period 2023/2024 was presented at the June 2024 Overview and Scrutiny meeting. The summary indicated that the number of complaints received by both the Council and our contractors decreased from 4173 in 22/23 to 384 in 23/24. Of the total 384, 2052 (53.46%) relate to services delivered by our key contractors. The LGO received 5 complaints during the 2024/25 period. These cases are shown in the LGO's Annual Review Letter. 2 of the 5 were upheld by the LGO. One required a formal Monitoring Officer report to Cabinet on the failings in relation to statutory nuisance which was reported on 14 January 2025 [\[Report\]](#). Recommendations have been complied with and a referral to Council on this matter led to amendments to the Constitution. Some further work is still required during 2025-2026 on the Complaints policy as per recommendation 2.4 and this work should commence in May – June 2025.

Standards complaints involving Councillors

❖ An update on Member complaints was given to the Standards Committee in a report delivered by the Service Director for Legal and Community in March 2025. During the 2024 calendar 19 complaints against Councillors within the District were received. This was an increase compared to 2023, where 11 complaints had been received, this remains lower than 2022 and 2021 where 30 and 50 complaints

were received respectively. At the time of the report, it was noted that 4 complaints had been received so far during 2024.

Whistle Blowing Complaints

❖ In line with the published Whistleblowing Policy, we received no complaints during this period, The Policy, procedure and approach was undertaken by the Monitoring Officer and the Standards Committee in March 2025. A new form and information was circulated. Further work and training will be undertaken with staff during 2025.

Information Commissioner's Office (ICO)

❖ The Review time limit supplements the statutory one for handling requests (20 working days) and during the 2024 calendar year, the Council only failed to handle 1.5% of the 758 FOIs/EIRs requests within that period. There were 3 reviews, 1 of which were successful and the information released, 0 of which were partially successful, and 2 of which were unsuccessful. There were 0 ICO cases.

❖ In respect to requests for information under the Data Protection Act - 240 Data Protection cases (including 22 Subject Access Requests) were received in the 2024 calendar year, of which 100% were successfully answered within the 40-calendar day deadline.

❖ During the 2024 calendar year there were no complaints lodged at the ICO.

How we have improved our governance arrangements:

❖ Our most recent [update on the 2024/25 action plan](#) was brought to FAR committee in February 2025. This highlighted the actions we have taken to improve our governance arrangements. In terms of further update, the Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan was approved by Cabinet in March 2025, and the Leadership Team and Senior Management

restructure was approved by Full Council in February 2025 and was effective as of April 2025. Actions related to Social Value are not yet complete and are therefore being carried over to this action plan.

Forward Look on Governance:

❖ The action plan for 2025/26 aims to address the key governance challenges identified. As such we have proposed actions around essential training uptake, reviewing sub-delegations, and ensuring those who deputise for directors understand the relevant constitutional powers. Particular challenges remain with regards to cyber security and resilience and this is addressed in the action plan. Looking further ahead to devolution and local government reorganisation, we will be working with partners to ensure that appropriate governance arrangements are in place for any new authorities created in consequence of the ambitions laid out in the Devolution White Paper, ensuring new authorities are safe and legal when they launch.

Conclusion:

❖ No significant governance issues have arisen as a result of the review of effectiveness for the 2024/25 financial year. The Council is satisfied that it has appropriate arrangements in place. The Council proposes over the coming year to take actions set out in the Action Plan. Implementation will be monitored through the Finance Audit and Risk Committee.

Cllr Daniel Allen, Leader of the Council

Anthony Roche, Chief Executive

Action Plan 2025/26

1. Review and increase Annual Declaration Letter return rate to 95%, using internal communications and automatic chasers from the Learning Management System. (HR; Leadership Team)
2. Review and improve staff completion rates for all mandatory training, aiming for 85% completion in 25/26, 90% completion in 26/27, and 95% completion in 27/28. (HR; Leadership Team)
3. Review sub-delegations post organisational restructure, ensuring a 100% completion rate and updates made where required. (Each Director; the Monitoring Officer)
4. Provide training to ensure those deputising for the Emergency Planning Officer are aware of and understand the relevant emergency planning powers which they can or may need to exercise as per the Constitution. (Emergency Planning Officer/ Director – Resources)
5. Provide training for those deputising for Statutory Officers and Directors to ensure they understand the relevant Constitutional powers which they can or may need to exercise (Each Director; the Monitoring Officer).
6. Provide further training to staff and councillors on cyber security, aiming for a 100% compliance with simulated phishing exercises. (Cyber Security Board; Leadership Team)
7. Further develop the Cyber Resilience Plan and test once finalised (Cyber Security Board).
8. Continue to implement the Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan and review progress at the Local Government Association follow-up in autumn 2025. (Leadership Team)
9. Develop reporting and internal sharing of best practice for Social Value as outlined in the AGS 2023/24 [actions 6-8] (Procurement Team; Leadership Team).
10. Review and update the Gender Pay Gap Action Plan based on the latest pay gap figures. (The Gender Pay Gap Subgroup)
11. Finish developing and publish the new Sustainability Strategy 2025-2030 and establish a process for monitoring progress. (Director for Environment and relevant teams).
12. Review the process for considering and reporting Equality and Environmental Implications (Policy & Strategy; Leadership Team)
13. Review the 3 Cs (Comments, Compliments, Complaints) Policy to incorporate reporting mechanisms to the Monitoring Officer and two other Statutory Officers (Customer Services; Leadership Team).