

Division: **ALL**

AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE – 8 May 2024

ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2022/23 – UPDATE ON ACTIONS

Report by the Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Committee is RECOMMENDED to receive this update on the actions from the Annual Governance Statement 2022/23 and to make any comment upon them.**

Executive summary

2. On 19 July 2023, this Committee approved the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) for the year 2022/23. Local authorities are required to prepare an AGS to be transparent about their compliance with good governance principles and to give an opinion on the effectiveness of those arrangements. As part of the process, authorities are expected to highlight particular areas of focus for the year following.
3. The Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer presented an update to Committee on 10 January 2024 on the thirteen areas of focus identified for 2023/24. This report to Committee is therefore a report on only those actions where an additional update is required.

Annual Governance Statement actions for 2023/24

4. The thirteen actions were:

Service area	Action
1. Directorate Scheme of Delegation: Powers and Financial Powers	To review and update all outwardly facing documentation, as well as review the location of information.

<p>2. Cherwell-Oxfordshire Decoupling Programme</p>	<p>Following Decoupling in 2022, Cherwell District Council and the Council agreed a way forward for continued provision of certain services between Cherwell District Council and the Council</p> <p>Where appropriate for each council, revised partnership arrangements will remain in-place within the framework of new agreements.</p>
<p>3. HR policies</p>	<p>To review and update the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic abuse- supporting employees: policy and guidance (HR and Public Health) • Sickness/supporting attendance policy and process maps • Agile working policy • Additions to pay policy (to include honorariums, market supplements) • Capability policy and procedures • Disciplinary policy and procedures
<p>4. Governance Policies and Procedures</p>	<p>To review and update the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Register of interests • Gifts & Hospitality • Member representation on Outside Bodies • Social Media for Members (as part of the Council's Main Social Media Policy) • Officer Guidance on executive decision making and key decisions.
<p>5. Constitution</p>	<p>Reconvene the Constitution Working Group and continue the review of the Council's Constitution</p>
<p>6. Member training</p>	<p>To provide a further programme of Member training and briefings responding to the identified needs of Members.</p> <p>To act upon evaluation of Member feedback following training events.</p>
<p>7. Members' and Officers' fiduciary responsibilities and accountability, and legal status in respect of outside bodies including indemnities.</p>	<p>To review</p>

8. Customer Feedback	To review
9. Current culture of dealing with information requests and the expectations of the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO)	The Customer Feedback, and Governance Teams to review the joint working approach when dealing with requests for information under the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR), Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), and Subject Access Request (SAR) regimes. Teams to meet regularly to ensure the Council is working in accordance with the relevant legislation and to consult with the ICO during the year to assist with the monitoring of the Council's performance.
10. Recording of Decisions	
11. Proactive Training for Governance	Governance sessions to raise awareness and skills level within the Organisation to be carried out by Head of Legal.
12. Review of the Annual Governance Statement Process	
13. Financial Management Strategy	The Financial Management Strategy is in development which will set out the improvements required to enhance financial management capabilities including financial management reporting structures and the development of business objects dashboard reporting.

UPDATES

A. Directorate Scheme of Delegation: Powers and Financial Powers

5. The Scheme of Delegation as it stands will be published with the next version of the Constitution and taken to Council at the Annual Meeting on 21 May 2024. Any changes required following the Senior Management restructure will be completed as soon as practicable.
6. Financial Powers: Financial Powers: The Council's Finance Team are undertaking a complete update in relation to the financial scheme of delegation with the intention that going forward the schedule of authorised officers will be updated on a rolling basis rather than an annual update. The team are also working with the directorates to agree the principles of how their authorisations

will work going forward and documenting directorate specific schemes of financial delegation (like a financial powers documents). This was a more significant piece of work than originally expected due to significant changes that have occurred in the organisation. As with the completion of the directorate delegated powers documents, completing the finance directorate schemes and schedules has been a time challenge.

7. Updates as of March/April 2024:

- a) Intranet page has been updated with Finance scheme of delegation section.
- b) Awaiting comments from Governance on more detailed guidance shared.
- c) In relation to Directorate Schemes, there has been a focus on completing the Delivery Directorate's.
- d) Adults published.
- e) CEF - 80% there, delayed to due to Inspection/Year end - will be published by end of May 2024
- f) Public Health – completed, just requiring sign off, to be sent w/c 29/4/24.
- g) E&P - some issues with last version, now updated, to be sent w/c 29/4/24 to director for sign off.
- h) Property - Additional services moved, needed adding, then ready for Director sign off w/c 29/4/24.
- i) Enabling services - to be completed after above published/subject.
- j) Work still required on schemes of delegation across Governance, Finance, and Legal to align approach to delegated powers.

B. Cherwell-Oxfordshire Decoupling Programme

8. The documentation had been completed as of 14 December 2023.

C. HR policies to be reviewed and updated for 2023/2024

9. Completed action: Agile working policy launched 31/10/2023.
10. Completed action: Domestic Abuse supporting employees' policy and how to guide launched 12/03/2024.
11. Completed action: Sickness supporting attendance policy launched 31/01/2024.
12. Completed action: Market supplements guidance on target to be uploaded on the intranet by 31/03/2024.
13. Honorariums guidance and any required updates still under review.
14. Both the disciplinary and capability policies and associated toolkits will form

part of a wider project of work to improving performance capability and conduct across the organisation. These will be removed from the policy list for 2024/2025, whilst the Council focus on the organisation change policy suite.

D Governance policies and procedures

15. The Policies and procedures have been reviewed and currently with the Director of Law & Governance to approve.

E Constitution

16. Constitution Working Group – The officer group has been established and is formed to work alongside the member group. The Officer group is formulating the schedule of work to be considered by members.

F Member training

17. Training to date and information is being provided to Members through regular briefings. An improved and responsive training programme reflecting the evolving requirements of elected Members will be in place by 31 March 2025 as part of the induction programme following the elections in May 2025.

G Review of members' and officers' fiduciary responsibilities and accountability, and legal status in respect of outside bodies including indemnities

18. It is important that the legal status of and responsibilities and accountabilities of Members are clearly understood in relation to outside bodies they are appointed to by the Council. This work has not yet commenced and will be carried forward to 2024/25.

H. Review of customer feedback

19. From April to November 2023 there has been a heightened level of engagement and communication about the complaints (statutory and corporate) process and the need to have an improved performance in terms of responsiveness and quality.
20. Actions included:
 - a) A complaints (and FOI) report has been produced for each monthly Business Monitoring and Management Report (BMMR). This was reviewed, signed off and owned at Council Management Team (CMT) level. On a bi-monthly basis, the report is also taken to Cabinet.
 - b) On 5 July 2023, the Director for Customer Experience and Cultural services wrote to all Extended Leadership Team (ELT) colleagues

requesting the cascade of the message to all colleagues to improve the current responsiveness rates; this was followed by articles in the Managers' Briefings and on the intranet.

- c) On 30 July 2023, the Director for Customer Experience and Cultural Services wrote to all ELT colleagues asking for them to provide feedback on the draft revised complaints process.
- d) In November 2023, the newly updated complaints policy was launched.

21. In addition, the Customer Feedback team have provided the following information:

- a) Stage 1 training has been provided for Children's Social Care. There were around 90 attendees, and a further session took place at the end of November for those staff unable to attend the original training.
- b) The Customer Feedback Team is working closely with the Partnership Youth Development Manager to support stage 1 responses within the relevant timeframe.
- c) Work is being undertaken with Head of The Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)/front door to provide a face-to-face training session on the quality of responses. This training will be rolled out in early 2024 and will become mandatory in future.
- d) The team have provided Statutory Stage 2 training to SEND colleagues to provide an overview of the process should any complaints become part of the statutory process.
- e) The team have created guidance to support staff with writing responses until the they are able to provide in-person training.

I. Review the current culture of dealing with information requests and the expectations of the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO)

22. Six-monthly meetings have taken place with an ICO Case Worker to assist in the understanding of the Council's performance against other similar authorities. The last meeting with the ICO took place in January 2024.

J. Recording of decisions

23. A paper was taken to the Council Management Team (CMT) setting out the approach to key decisions and officer decision notices. This detailed the need for consistency in decision making and reminded colleagues of the importance of making and retaining records of officer decisions where such matters were not taken before a political decision maker. Internal communications regarding the approach to key decisions has been publicised and guidance added to the intranet. A similar exercise is now required for officer decision notices.

K. Proactive training for governance

24. Following a review of the Governance policies, training will be put in place including raising awareness about the Council's whistleblowing process and

amended policy. The training materials are in development.

L. Review of the Annual Governance Statement process

25. Complete. The Director of Law and Governance presented the AGS process to the Council Management Team (CMT) on 5 December 2023.

M. Financial Management Strategy

26. The Financial Management Strategy action has been integrated into the Business Services Transformation Programme (BST). This new programme, which is running for 12 months, until October 2024 is reviewing Financial Management, Procure to Pay and HR activities performed across the Council, focusing on improvements in three key themes; People Change (roles and responsibilities, training); Process Improvement; Data and Reporting.
27. A Programme Board headed by the Executive Director of Resources is established and this will report to the Strategic Transformation Board as a priority A programme. This programme of change will run for 12 months, ending 31 October 2024.

Financial implications

28. There are no direct financial implications directly relating to, or arising from, the recommendations in this report.

Checked by: Kathy Wilcox, Head of Corporate Finance and Deputy Section 151 Officer

Legal implications

29. The Council has a legal duty to agree an Annual Governance Statement. This report does not itself raise legal implications but is an update on the actions arising from last year's AGS and is consistent with the responsibility of this Committee to ensure the effectiveness of the Council's governance.

Checked by: Anita Bradley, Director of Law and Governance

Equality and inclusion implications

30. The recommendations in this report do not themselves raise equality implications. However, the effectiveness and inclusivity of the Council's governance arrangements are integral to the effective running of the Council and of the outcomes for the community.

Anita Bradley

Director of Law and Governance & Monitoring Officer

Contact Officers

Sarah Smith, Senior Governance Lead

governance@oxfordshire.gov.uk

May 2024

