

Hastings Borough Council

Annual Governance Statement 2014/2015

Scope of responsibility

1. Hastings Borough Council 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. Hastings Borough Council also has a duty under the Local Government Act 1999 to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
2. In discharging this overall responsibility, Hastings Borough Council is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, facilitating the effective exercise of its functions which includes arrangements for the management of risk. Hastings Borough Council has approved and adopted a code of corporate governance, which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE framework "Delivering good governance in local government" (2012 Edition).
3. A copy of the code is on our website at www.hastings.gov.uk.
4. This statement explains how Hastings Borough Council has complied with the code and also meets the requirements of regulation 4 of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2011 in relation to the publication of a statement on internal control.

The purpose of the governance framework

5. The governance framework comprises the systems and processes, culture and values for the direction and control of the authority and its activities through which it accounts to, engages and leads the community. It enables the authority to monitor the achievement of its strategic objectives and to consider whether those objectives have led to the delivery of appropriate, cost-effective services.
6. The system of internal control is a significant part of that framework and is designed to manage risk to a reasonable level. It cannot eliminate all risks to the achievement of policies, aims and objectives and therefore provides a reasonable rather than an absolute assurance of effectiveness. The system of internal control is based on an ongoing process designed to identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of Hastings Borough Council policies, aims and objectives, to evaluate the likelihood of those

risks being realised and the impact should they be realised, and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically.

7. The governance framework has been in place for a number of years at Hastings Borough Council and, in particular, for the year ended 31 March 2015, up to the date of approval of the Statement of Accounts.

The governance framework

8. The key elements of the systems and processes that comprise the authority's governance arrangements include arrangements for the following:
 - Hastings Borough Council continues to have an established Corporate Plan setting out a strategic overview and the priorities that guide our investment and activities. Part II of the Corporate Plan sets out the Council's work plan for the current financial year with targets and performance indicators which are monitored and reported on publicly every quarter.
 - Hastings Borough Council facilitates policy and decision-making via a Cabinet Structure with Cabinet Member portfolios. There are two Overview and Scrutiny Committees which cover all portfolios. An Audit Committee provides independent assurance to the Council on risk management and control, and the effectiveness of the arrangements the Council has for these matters. It undertakes the core functions of an Audit Committee as identified in 'CIPFA's Audit Committees: Practical Guidance for Local Authorities'. The Constitution is reviewed at least annually by the Monitoring Officer and is codified into one document that is available on the external web pages.
 - Hastings Borough Council ensures compliance with established policies, procedures, laws and regulations – including risk management. There is a corporate induction programme and service induction routines are in place for new staff. Information regarding policies and procedures are held on the intranet which continues to be enhanced and developed.
 - The Council has an Internal Audit function and informal protocols for working with External Audit. External Audit also reviews compliance with policies, procedures, laws and regulations within their remit.
 - Hastings Borough Council has continued to enhance and strengthen its internal control environment through the introduction of new policies and procedures.
 - The Council's Risk champion, who chaired the Corporate Risk Management Group that meet regularly and discharge further work, which is acknowledged as necessary, retired on 31 March 2015. This gap is being addressed by the Council through its restructuring exercise.

- The Corporate Risk Management Group also incorporates the Health & Safety framework.
- The Council has a Whistle Blowing Policy based on the British Standards model that enables staff, contractors or members of the public to confidentially raise with the Council any suspicions they may have. There is also a customer complaints system that is monitored by management.
- Hastings Borough Council's Internal Audit function continues to support managers at all levels to give a better understanding of how to enhance risk management in their area of responsibility and to have some understanding of the process throughout the Council. The high-level risk management methodology was designed to provide more focus to member and senior officer management of risk. The Strategic Risk Register is formally reviewed at least once a quarter by Corporate Management Group (CMG) and the Operational Risk Registers are regularly reviewed at Directorate Management Team (DMT) meetings.
- The Audit Committee perform an annual rigorous review of the Strategic and Operational Risk Registers and also when new emerging risks arise.
- Hastings Borough Council ensures the economical, effective and efficient use of resources, and secures continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised. The External Auditor passed an unqualified audit opinion on value for money providing assurance to the public over its financial resilience and that proper arrangements have been made to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources.
- Financial management in Hastings Borough Council and the reporting of financial standing is undertaken through a general ledger and management information system, Agresso, which integrates the general ledger function with those of budgetary control and payments. These are supported by the Finance Operating Procedures (FOPs) manual held on the Council's intranet which contains information on financial and business procedures and processes to be followed in all areas of the Council.
- A scheme of delegation which sets out the powers of Directors, the Financial rules and Contract Standing Orders form part of the Constitution. A rigorous system of monthly risk based financial monitoring ensures that any significant budget variances are identified in a timely way, and corrective action is initiated if necessary.
- Performance management in Hastings Borough Council and the reporting of performance management continues to show good results. In response to the de-regulation of Performance Management the Council has focussed its quarterly reporting of data on 30 Key Indicators that can be used to assess the 'health' of the organisation.

This, together with the reporting on each of the Service's Part II commitments, enables a rounded view of how the Council is performing against key issues of concern to local people. Performance indicators are recorded and monitored using an in-house developed spreadsheet system.

- A Senior Information Officer is responsible for information security.
- Hastings Borough Council is the Trustee for all purposes to the Foreshore Trust. Its business is conducted through the Charity Committee which meets every quarter. The charity has a Protector to protect the charity from conflicts of interest, financial and otherwise, arising from the Council's position as charitable trustee and local authority with its own priorities. At Annual Council, the Leader of the Council allocates responsibilities of the Cabinet to include Chair of the Charity Committee.

Changes to the Council's Structure and Governance arrangements

- There have been significant changes at Director level and tier 2 & 3 senior management. The number of directors has reduced from 3 to 2; a Director of Operational Services and a Director of Corporate Services and Governance. Seven Heads of Service have been reduced to four Assistant Director posts. These changes to the Head of Service positions will result in savings of around £100,000 during 2015/2016 and just over £200,000 per annum from 2016/2017 ongoing. The purpose of the new organisational structure is to encourage a greater commitment to one council working, whilst making necessary revenue savings.
- Documentation and systems are currently being aligned to the new organisational structure.
- In accordance with announcement made in the December 2013 Autumn Statement, the Housing Benefit Investigations team and responsibility for investigating housing benefit fraud, transferred to the Department for Work and Pensions Single Fraud Investigation Service. In order to sustain our counter-fraud capability, we applied for and were successful in 3 bids for working collaboratively with other organisations at combating fraud.

Ensuring the authority's financial management arrangements conform with the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on 'The Role of the Chief Finance Officer in Local Government (2010)'

9. The Assistant Director – Financial Services and Revenues, is the Section 151 Officer who leads and directs the Finance function that continues to be sufficiently resourced and fit for purpose and is also professionally qualified and suitably experienced.

Ensuring the authority's financial management arrangements conform with the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on 'The Role of the Head of Internal Audit in Local Government (2010)'

10. The role of the Chief Auditor at Hastings Borough Council complies with the CIPFA statement. This is fully met except that the Chief Auditor had some responsibility for oversight of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Investigations until its transfer from 1 November 2014 to the Department for Work and Pensions Single Fraud Investigation Service. The independence had been enhanced through the Chief Auditor's job description and also by overview from the Section 151 Officer.

Review of effectiveness

11. Hastings Borough Council has responsibility for conducting, at least annually, a review of the effectiveness of its governance framework including the system of internal control and effectiveness of Internal Audit. The review of effectiveness is informed by the work of the Directors within the authority who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, the Audit Committee's annual report to Council and also by comments made by the external auditors and other review agencies and inspectorates.
12. The Council contributes to the delivery of the town's Sustainable Community Strategy through its membership of the Local Strategic Partnership and via targets included in the Corporate Plan. The Council monitors and reports publicly on progress so residents can see how issues that matter to them are being tackled. The plan is monitored on a quarterly basis by Overview and Scrutiny Committees.
13. The Council's constitution sets out the responsibilities of both Members and their senior managers. In particular, the Council has identified the three statutory posts as follows:

Head of Paid Service	-	Director of Corporate Services & Governance
Monitoring Officer	-	Chief Legal Officer
Section 151 officer	-	Assistant Director – Financial Services and Revenues

14. The Council continues to assess how its overall corporate governance responsibilities are discharged. In particular the Council has adopted the CIPFA/SOLACE guidance and has developed a local code of corporate governance. This was updated and approved by Cabinet on 6 October 2014.
15. The arrangements for the provision of internal audit are contained within the Council's Financial Rules, which are included within the Constitution. The Assistant Director – Financial Services and Revenues is responsible for ensuring that there is an adequate and effective system of internal audit of the Council's accounting and other systems of internal control as required by the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2011. The Internal Audit service is managed, independently, by the Assistant Director and operates in accordance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards. The Hastings audit plan is prioritised by a combination of the key internal controls, assessment and review on the basis of risk and the Council's corporate governance arrangements, including risk management. The work is further supplemented by reviews around the main financial systems, scheduled visits to Council establishments and fraud investigations. The resulting work plan is discussed and agreed with the Directors and the Audit Committee and shared with the Council's external auditor. Regular meetings between the internal and external auditor ensure that duplication of effort is avoided. All Hastings Internal Audit reports include an assessment of the adequacy of internal control and prioritised action plans to address any areas needing improvement.
16. The Council's review of the effectiveness of the system of internal control is informed by:
 - Directorate assurance based on management and performance information
 - Scrutiny reports covering a planned scrutiny review programme but also any item can be subject to a scrutiny review
 - Work undertaken by Hastings BC Internal Audit during the year and summarised in the Annual Internal Audit Report
 - Work undertaken by the external auditor reported in their Annual Audit Letter and particularly their audit opinion on the Financial Statements and on Value for Money
 - Other work undertaken by independent inspection bodies.
 - Corporate Management Group and Audit Committee review of the Strategic and Operational Risk Registers
17. From the work undertaken by Hastings Audit in 2014/15 the Chief Auditor was able to give the following assurance "I am able to provide a reasonable assurance on the key areas of risk management, corporate governance and financial control". In this context "reasonable assurance"

means that the systems can be relied upon to prevent error, fraud or misappropriation occurring without detection, and that nothing was found that would materially affect the Council's standing or Annual Accounts.

Significant governance issues

18. The Council follows the CIPFA/SOLACE guidance entitled 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government (Guidance Note for English Authorities)'. In accordance with its categorisation of significant issues, there are no new issues to report, however, provided is an update to the 2 risks reported last year.
19. Essential repairs needed to Aquila House which is the Council's main operational building commenced during March 2015. Staff have been set-up with portable personal computers and soft phones to enable homeworking therefore greatly reducing the impact on the risk of disruption that could affect service performance.
20. In the last Annual Governance Statement, it was reported that there was a significant emerging risk relating to the reduction in Government grant funding. A balanced budget for 2015/16 was achieved whilst retaining an appropriate level of reserves but indications are that funding will continue to be under extreme pressure as the Government seeks to reduce public spending into the future.
21. This year has again, been a period of change and development. There have been continuing financial pressures. Despite this challenging environment there have been significant achievements and continuing improvement in the Council's overall governance arrangements. Where we have identified areas for further improvement we will take the necessary action to implement changes that will further develop our governance framework.

Signed:.....

Leader of the Council

Signed:.....

Director of Corporate Services
& Governance