

Annual Governance Statement 2014-15

Executive Summary

Governance is about how local government bodies ensure that they are doing the right things in the right way, for the right people, in a timely, inclusive, open, honest and accountable manner. It comprises the systems, processes, cultures and values by which local government bodies are directed and controlled and through which they account to, engage with and where appropriate, lead their communities.

The Annual Governance Statement is a public report by the Council on the extent to which it complies with its own local governance code, including how it has monitored the effectiveness of its governance arrangements in the year, and on any planned changes in the coming period.

This document describes our governance arrangements and assesses how closely we align with good practice. In overall terms this is a positive statement for the financial year 2014-15. This document relies on several assurance mechanisms including the internal audit annual review, internal audit reports throughout the year, the work of the Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee, the overview and scrutiny process and external audit.

External audit is now undertaken by the Ernst and Young and provides assurance on the controls the Council has in place. Where the auditor identifies weaknesses in the Council's arrangements, these are highlighted in the Annual Audit and Inspection Letter. The Council received an unqualified audit opinion on its 2013-14 accounts, the latest published.

In common with all local authorities, the Council faces an extremely challenging year in 2015/16 as it seeks to manage the implications of the local government resource review, welfare reform changes, budget reductions, increasing demand for key services and new ways of working. In order to manage this, the Council has developed a transformation programme, which through working in partnership with other local authorities, aims to deliver significant savings whilst protecting frontline services.

Other issue(s) facing the Council in 2015-16 and listed in our business plan are:

- Deliver the Local Plan to provide a framework for sustainable housing, employment and infrastructure.
- Maintain a household recycling rate of above 57%
- Deliver 150 units of affordable homes in the district and support opportunities for self-build and developing self-build schemes.
- Deliver the savings targets £500,000 within the agreed timescales.

As this statement will show the Council has a strong system of internal control and action plans are in place to address the above issues and progress against these will be monitored during the course of 2015-16.

1.1 Scope of Responsibility

Cherwell District 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. Cherwell District 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.

In discharging this overall responsibility, Cherwell District Council is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, and which includes arrangements for the management of risk.

Cherwell District Council has approved and adopted a code of corporate governance, which is consistent with the principles of CIPFA/SOLACE Framework for Delivering Good Governance in Local Government. A copy of the code is on the Council's website. This statement explains how Cherwell District Council has complied with the code and also meets the requirements of regulation 4 (2) of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2011 as amended by the Accounts Audit (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2006 in relation to the publication of a statement on internal control.

1.2 The Purpose of the Governance Framework

The governance framework comprises the systems and processes, culture and values by which the authority is directed and controlled and its activities through which it accounts to, engages with and leads the local 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.

The system of internal control is a significant part of that framework and is designed to manage risk to a reasonable level. It cannot eliminate all risk of failure to achieve policies, aims and objectives and can therefore only provide reasonable, not absolute, assurance of effectiveness. The system of internal control is based on an on-going process designed to identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of Cherwell District Council's policies, aims and objectives, to evaluate the likelihood of those risks being realised and the impact should they be realised, and to manage them economically, efficiently and effectively.

The governance framework has been in place at Cherwell District Council for the year ended 31st March 2014 and up to the date of the approval of the statement of accounts.

1.3 The Governance Framework

The following sections align to the 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework' (CIPFA/SOLACE) and provide evidence against each of sections contained within that document.

1.3.1 Identifying and communicating the Authority's vision of its purpose and intended outcomes for citizens and service users

The Council's long term strategic objectives are set out in the five year Corporate Strategy which is supported by the annually reviewed business plan. Progress is monitored via the Council's Corporate Performance Framework which integrates financial and service planning. Our annual financial planning process is driven by the Council's medium term financial strategy to ensure our future priorities and ambitions are resourced.

The Council's long term strategic objectives are set out in the five year Corporate Strategy supported by the annual business plan. The plan identifies and communicates the vision of its purpose and intended outcomes for citizens and service users through a variety of media

including its website, Cherwell Link magazine and consultation documents working with Cherwell Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). The Council chairs LSP for Cherwell with Membership of the LSP including members from the county, district, town and parish councils, Thames Valley Police, the faith, business and voluntary communities.

The Council's five year strategy sets out the organisation's vision and key strategic priorities. The business plan is refreshed on an annual basis and the updated version published. It sits alongside the budget as a key corporate document and is subject to the same public consultation process.

The Council's service and financial planning process incorporates substantial consultation with all sections of the community. At the corporate level this includes an annual customer satisfaction survey which identifies areas of customer satisfaction and priorities for improvement, and a budget consultation process that is focused on qualitative research with stakeholders. In addition we target harder to reach groups (older people, younger people, people with disabilities and people from minority ethnic communities) to ensure that all sections of the community are able to participate in the budget consultation.

At the service level, individual service areas and teams undertake public consultation. The Council has a consultation and engagement strategy, toolkit and web based portal to support this. During 2014/15 the Council, working with its partners, continued to facilitate the Disability Forum and Faith Forum to further improve opportunities for public consultation feedback to help set and test strategic direction.

The corporate agenda is communicated to staff through regular briefings for all staff from the Chief Executive, a "cascade" system and the staff magazine as well as through staff engagement in the service planning process. Additional communication activities are also undertaken in relation to key projects such as shared services.

1.3.2 Reviewing the Authority's vision and its implications for the Authority's governance arrangements

The Council reviews its vision and the implications for its governance arrangements by regularly updating its five year strategy, reviewing the annual business plan and major strategy documents. The Council has a Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) in place to ensure future ambitions are resourced. The MTFS is the Council's key financial planning document. It is driven by our five year strategy and annual business plan and the four strategic priorities which lie at the heart of it:

- Safe, Clean and Green
- District of Opportunity
- Thriving Communities
- Sound Budgets and Customer Focussed Council

This strategy sets clear targets to ensure balanced resources are set and focus resources on front line services in a time when government funding has been reduced.

The Council agreed on the 8th December 2010 to joint working arrangements with South Northamptonshire Council and these arrangements were confirmed with the appointment of the Shared Chief Executive in May 2011. This was followed up by the appointment of three directors and eight heads of service in October 2011. Further joint working arrangements have either been implemented or are being investigated by directorate, based on individual business cases, to deliver further savings whilst protecting frontline services. In September 2013, Cherwell created a fourth director role for Bicester which isn't a shared post.

Cherwell District Council and South Northamptonshire Council remain separate independent entities, retaining their sovereignty. Elected members of both councils will remain in charge of decision making in line with their visions, strategic aims, objectives and priorities. During 2014/15 the councils also extended their collaborative working with Stratford District Council, this work is in the early stages, looking at governance.

1.3.3 Measuring the quality of services for users, ensuring they are delivered in accordance with the Authority's objectives and ensuring that they represent the best use of resources

Mechanisms are in place to measure the quality of services for users, ensuring they are delivered in accordance with Cherwell District Council's objectives and that they represent the best use of resources. The Council continues to improve performance management within the organisation. Service quality and best use of resources is ensured via:

- Performance Matters (a performance management system for monitoring and recording performance indicator data and business plans) responsibility of managers to exception report
- Quarterly Review of Financial Performance Reports
- Transformation and Place Programmes

The Council recognises that to drive improvement it needs to closely monitor and review its performance. The Council routinely monitors its spend against budgets, and its performance against Performance Indicators and also against service plans and strategies. This is encapsulated in the Performance Management Framework.

Financial reports comparing budget to actual and projections to end of year are distributed to all key officers on the first working day of each month, with access/drilldown facilities appropriate to role and responsibilities. This reporting tool, known as the dashboard, includes the reasons/actions to be taken for all red flagged items. Within a further five working days, a projections module is available which includes a detailed analysis prepared by each Head of Service and Service Accountant relating to full year outturn projection.

Financial reporting is effectively delivered through the financial dashboard which is produced and distributed on a monthly basis. This provides a robust mechanism for closely monitoring budgets and effectively challenging or addressing the variances identified with the relevant Heads of Service.

The dashboard provides comprehensive and timely budget monitoring, producing a year end outturn with no unexpected variances against budget. It has also enabled funds to be reallocated within year to alternative Council priorities.

The Council is constantly seeking to ensure that its resources are used economically, effectively and efficiently. The Council encourages staff involvement in the improvement process and actively uses the findings of external agencies and inspections and the national efficiency framework, to drive improvement. Every report to members carries a paragraph that assesses what efficiency savings the proposal might generate.

The external audit Annual Audit Letter gave an unqualified Value for Money conclusion in September 2014. This means that the Ernst & Young is satisfied that the Council has adequate arrangements in place for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

1.3.4 Defining and documenting the roles and responsibilities of the executive, non-executive, scrutiny and officer functions, with clear delegation arrangements and protocols for effective communication

A clear statement of the respective roles and responsibilities of the executive, the members and the senior officers are held within:

- The Constitution (available on the Council's website)
- Officer job descriptions

The budget and policy framework is determined by full Council. The Executive has delegated authority to take most decisions within that framework other than regulatory and staffing matters excluded by the Local Government Act 2000. Executive decisions are subject to scrutiny. All meetings are open to the public unless confidential or exempt items, as defined by the Local Government Act 1972 as amended, are discussed. All Executive meetings are webcast and are available in archived format for six months from the date of the meeting.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has overall responsibility for the performance of all overview and scrutiny functions (under the Local Government Act 2000 and Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007) on behalf of the Council. In particular it is responsible for scrutinising decisions and decision making, developing and reviewing policy, exercising call-in procedures and investigating matters of local concern. The Committee can establish 'Task and Finish' groups to undertake particular reviews in accordance with the annual overview and scrutiny work programme.

The Budget Planning Committee is a Committee of Council which makes recommendations to the Executive on matters relating to the finances of the authority. Its role is to provide a strategic overview of all matter affecting the current and future finances of the authority and it also plays a key role in supporting the budget setting strategy and process.

The Standards Committee has responsibility for ensuring the highest standards of councillor behaviour. This meets when needed to consider reports on investigations into complaints of breach of the Councillors' code of conduct by councillors of this authority or any Town or Parish Council in the district. There is a common code of conduct throughout all Oxfordshire councils with limited exceptions which means that any Cherwell district councillors who are also County and/or parish councillors have to abide by a single consistent set of rules. The Head of Law and Governance as statutory monitoring officer has extensive delegated authority from the Committee to process and determine complaints in consultation with two statutory independent persons. It has not been necessary for the Committee to meet in 2014/15.

The Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee has responsibility for risk management and financial probity, and signs off the Council's annual Statement of Accounts.

The Section 151 officer, his deputy and the Monitoring officer meet informally as necessary to review the governance arrangements of the Council and provide input into this Annual Governance Statement. The senior officer management team is the Joint Management Team which meets formally once a fortnight.

1.3.5 Developing, communicating and embedding codes of conduct, defining the standards of behaviour for members and staff

The key documents and techniques used to develop the code of conduct and high standards of behaviour that we achieve within Cherwell District Council comprise:

- The Constitution
- Codes of conduct and associated protocols
- HR policies and procedures
- Internal / External Communications Policy
- Whistle blowing policy

- Recruitment policy and Appraisal processes
- Registers of member interests
- Complaints policy and procedures
- Internal Audit work
- External Audit Reports
- Chief Executive briefings
- In Brief
- Staff Induction Programme
- Intranet and Website Messages

The Council has adopted codes of conduct for members and officers. The codes and protocols of the Council are in part three of the constitution. The code of conduct for councillors is a mandatory requirement and includes provision for the registration and notification of disclosable pecuniary interests backed up by criminal sanction.

1.3.6 Reviewing and updating standing orders, standing financial instructions, a scheme of delegation and supporting procedure notes/manuals, which clearly define how decisions are taken and the processes and controls required to manage risks

Under the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, the Council is able to delegate decisions to committees or officers but is required to have a scheme of delegation setting this out. The scheme of delegation is part of the Council's constitution. Since October 2012 the Council has adopted a joint scheme of officer delegations with South Northamptonshire Council so as to ensure that the shared management team members are working to substantially the same delegated powers at both Councils thereby mitigating the risk of misapplication of one Council's powers while acting for the other. This joint scheme was amended in October 2013 to reflect a re-allocation of roles amongst individual members of the shared management team. Since December 2012 the Council has also adopted joint Financial Procedure Rules and Contract Procedure Rules on a similar basis. An accurate up to date constitution reduces the risk of challenge to the Council's decisions.

One of the key aspects of the internal control environment is the management of risk. The Council has a risk management strategy which was reviewed in 2013/14. Heads of Service are responsible for maintaining the risk management system and ensuring risks are appropriately mitigated and managed. All Heads of Service review and update their strategic, corporate and partnership risks online quarterly. For each risk noted on the register, responsible officers are required to identify controls that are in place to mitigate the risk.

A risk management workshop for members is held on an annual basis, the most recent being in March 2015 these are held on an annual basis in the final quarter of the year. Management and officer training will be arranged in the second quarter. The purpose of these workshops is to review and revise the strategic risk register and provide an update on the Council's risk management strategy. Risks are categorised as either strategic, corporate, partnership or operational. All strategic, corporate and partnership risks are reviewed on a quarterly basis. The Audit, Accounts and Risk Committee receive quarterly risk reports. The risk management handbook has also been updated and training has been provided for the Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee. Operational risks are managed at the departmental level, reviewed by DMT on a quarterly basis.

The on-going working arrangements due to the recent joint working arrangements with South Northamptonshire Council require a shared approach around a Joint Risk strategy and Opportunities Management Strategy both Councils in achieving their objectives through proactive risk management.

The risk register is considered by the Joint Management Team, and ensures that identification and consideration of risk corporately and across services is emphasised and highlighted. The South Northamptonshire Council's Audit Committee and the Cherwell District Council's Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee receive regular risk management updates and review the strategic risk register. This oversight of risk ensures there is senior officer level and political commitment to effective risk management.

The inclusion of risk registers within service plans and risk logs in key programmes and projects seeks to reinforce the importance of assessing and being aware of the risks associated with each service and major projects.

Joint working arrangements are in place, the following list summarises the key activities that were undertaken to ensure risk management is embedded across both councils.

1. A quarterly process of risk review covering both the strategic and operational risk registers.
2. Quarterly monitoring reports will be presented to relevant council committees to ensure Councillors have good access to risk information.
3. Risk management awareness training sessions will be facilitated for Councillors and employees. Members of the committees with specific responsibility for the management of risk will be offered dedicated training events. The potential of risk management awareness to be included on induction programmes will be explored.
4. An internal audit of risk management will take place annually.
5. The Joint Management Team takes responsibility for ensuring that management actions highlighted in the risk registers are implemented.
6. Support is available to risk owners when assessing new risks. The 'bow tie' risk analysis model is available to use as part of the process.
7. A process of annual review is undertaken by the Joint Management Team to ensure the risk register remains up to date and that obsolete risks are removed.
8. Officer working groups as required to embed, review or develop risk practices.
9. The councils will seek to learn from other organisations where appropriate, and to keep up to date with best practice in risk management.

Budget monitoring takes place monthly with all Heads of Service. Any variations to profile are reported on to JMT on a monthly basis with any required corrective action identified and agreed upon. Proposals to increase or reduce expenditure will have a risk assessment as to the consequences. There are specific earmarked reserves to deal with identified non-insurable risks.

The Council has staff with specific responsibility for health and safety, and operate Integrated Management Standards, ISO 14001:2004 Environmental Standard and OHSAS 18001 covering all aspects of the Councils work. Both these standards are audited twice a year by external auditors, in addition quarterly monitoring reports are produced for the Councils Health and Safety Committee and an annual report is submitted to the Integrated Management Board.

The Investigation team aim to prevent, detect, investigate and sanction cases of fraud under the Council's Prosecution Policy. Internally, the Investigations Manager provides corporate and benefit fraud awareness training to all new staff via induction training, and briefings to

members. More in-depth and frequent training is provided to front line staff and other staff where it is needed, such as Customer Services, Benefits, Human Resources and Elections. External training has also been delivered in 2014-15 to two of the Council's major partners, Sanctuary Housing Association and Capita Business Solutions. In addition training has been presented to Housing Internal Audit Forum which is a group of Housing providers who cover the majority of the South East and Central England. The event was hosted by Bromford Housing Association, another partner of the Council.

During 2014/15, 165 investigations were completed of which 65 offenders were sanctioned, with 10 prosecutions via the criminal courts. £215,739 of fraudulently obtained benefits was identified for recovery. £14,598 of this total relates specifically to single person discount fraud claimed falsely, as the team looks to actively counter the threat of this type of fraud. Using Local Government Finance Act legislation, the team fined thirty four of the offenders for their actions and prosecuted one further offender. The strategy of publishing our prosecutions in the local papers acts as a deterrent against this type of abuse and gives assurance to Cherwell residents that the Council is discharging its responsibility to protect public funds. In addition, these press releases advise how the public can access the Investigation team's service by way of the hotline number. 53 residents used the hotline, 19 sent anonymous letters and 7 used the website. From this, the Investigations team had 20 successful investigations leading to 10 sanctions during 2014/15.

In July 2013, the Investigations Team implemented and undertook the operation of the Government's new Civil Penalty initiative. This is where an overpayment of Housing Benefit has occurred which is not decided to be caused through fraudulent actions, but where there has been a failure on the part of the claimant to adhere to their claim responsibilities. Between 1/07/13 and 31/03/14 534 overpayments were reviewed to see which complied with the Civil Penalty criteria. Of these 174 claimants received and agreed to a Civil Penalty of £50, bringing in an additional £8,700 income to the Council. It is hoped that the continuation of Civil Penalties through to Universal Credit being introduced will see more claimants changing their claim behaviours and complying with their claim responsibilities.

The Council participates in the National Fraud Initiative, an exercise that matches electronic data within and between public and private sector bodies to prevent and detect fraud. The Council also participates in data matching exercises through the Housing Benefit Matching Service. This matches data held by the Council with that of other agencies such as DWP, to identify cases where fraud may have been committed.

1.3.7 The Authority's financial management arrangements do conform to the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government (2010).

In June 2009, CIPFA launched its 'Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) in Public Service Organisations'.

The Statement supports CIPFA's work to strengthen governance and financial management across the public services. CIPFA's Statement sets out five principles that define the core activities and behaviours that belong to the role of the CFO and the governance requirements needed to support them.

The statement advocates that the CFO in a public services organisation:

- Is a key member of the leadership team, helping it to develop and implement strategy and to resource and deliver the organisation's strategic objectives sustainably and in the public interest

- Must be actively involved in, and able to bring influence to bear on, all material business decisions to ensure immediate and longer term implications, opportunities and risk are fully considered, and alignment with the organisation's financial strategy
- Must lead the promotion and delivery by the whole organisation of good financial management so that public money is safeguarded at all times and used appropriately, economically, efficiently and effectively.

To deliver these responsibilities the CFO:

- Must lead and direct a finance function that is resourced to be fit for purpose
- Must be professionally qualified and suitably experienced.

For each principle, the Statement sets out the governance arrangements required within an organisation to ensure that CFOs are able to operate effectively and perform their core duties. The Statement also sets out the core responsibilities of the CFO role within the organisation. Many day to day responsibilities may in practice be delegated or even outsourced, but the CFO should maintain oversight and control.

CIPFA has issued its 'Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government (2010)'. The statement draws heavily on the 'Statement of the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Public Service Organisations' and applies the principles and roles set out in that document to local government.

With the implementation of joint working arrangements the Director of Resources is the Council's nominated CFO (section 151 Officer) and the Head of Finance and Procurement is deputy S151 officer to the CFO.

1.3.8 Undertaking the core functions of an audit committee, as identified in CIPFA's Audit Committees – Practical Guidance for Local Authorities

The Council's Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee undertake the core functions of an audit committee, as identified in CIPFA's Audit Committees – Practical Guidance for Local Authorities. In particular it has an on-going role in ensuring a responsive and effective internal audit function and the effective management of the Council's risks and provides 'robust challenge' to the internal control and other governance arrangements of the Council.

During 2014-15, the committee received the annual risk strategy and quarterly updates on the Risk Register. The committee received annual training on Treasury Management as part of the treasury strategy which was delivered by the Council's advisors Capita Asset Services.

1.3.9 Ensuring compliance with relevant laws and regulations, internal policies and procedures, and that expenditure is lawful

Chief Officers and Heads of Service take responsibility for ensuring compliance with relevant laws and regulations, internal policies and procedures, and that expenditure is lawful.

Cherwell District Council observes all specific legislative requirements and adhere to the general principles of good administrative law – rationality, legality and natural justice.

The Head of Law and Governance is designated as the Council's Monitoring Officer and it is his responsibility to ensure that the Council's business is conducted in a legal and proper fashion and in accordance with council policies. All reports that go before Council and Cabinet are reviewed by the Monitoring Officer to ensure the legality of the Council's actions. Additional external legal advice is sought where appropriate.

The Chief Finance Officer is responsible for the administration of the Council's finances under section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 and ensures financial management of the Council is conducted in accordance with the Financial Procedure Rules (article 9 of the Constitution). Financial management facilitates service delivery through the five-year Medium Term Financial Strategy and the annual budget process, underpinned by the Treasury Management Strategy.

Cherwell District Council actively recognises the limits of lawful activity implicit in the ultra vires doctrine, and strives to employ our powers to the full benefit of our communities.

1.3.10 Whistle blowing and receiving and investigating complaints from the Public

The Council has well-developed processes for whistle blowing and for receiving and investigating complaints both internally and from the public. The whistle blowing policy is available on the intranet and the corporate complaints procedure is available on the internet. All new members of staff receive a copy of the whistle blowing policy and a leaflet entitled 'Don't Turn a Blind Eye' in their induction packs.

The Council has a dedicated whistle blowing hotline which is publicised on the Council's website and intranet. There were no incidents of whistleblowing reported in 2014/2015.

Complaints can be made by telephone, in writing or by visiting the Council. The Council aims to resolve all complaints at the point of contact wherever possible. Where this is not achievable, the Council's corporate complaints procedure (available on the website) outlines a formal two stage process for rectifying issues. The definition of a complaint is:

- a service being delivered at a lower standard than is set out in council policy or SLAs
- the attitude of staff
- neglect or delay in responding to customers
- failure to follow agreed procedures/policies
- evidence of bias or unfair discrimination.

Electronic training has been rolled out in 2014/15 to all employees. The council reports its performance on a quarterly basis and complaints including Ombudsman investigations are included within this report. An annual summary is provided in the Council's Annual Report which is published in June/July each year.

1.3.11 Identifying the development needs of members and senior officers in relation to their strategic roles, supported by appropriate training

The Member Development and Support Strategy was agreed by Executive in September 2009. The Strategy sets out the Council's commitment to member development and support. It explains the responsibilities of the Council in delivering effective support to members. All members are given a copy of the strategy upon election to the Council and it is available on the Council's website. The strategy has raised the profile of member development within the organisation. Executive responsibility for member development sits with the Leader of Council whose areas of responsibility include Democratic Services.

Members and officers are also invited to suggest topics for development sessions at any point during the year. The development programme for elected members offers a range of formal and informal learning events including conferences, briefings, seminars, workshops and forums.

In 2014/15 there were 14 formal training sessions arranged by Cherwell District Council. The total attendance at all events was 147 Cherwell District councillors and 30 external attendees (other district councillors, town/parish councillors, town/parish clerks, officers and partners). The training sessions are categorised to help members choose the appropriate training to suit their individual requirements. There are six training categories:

- essential, which cover the broad skills for being a councillor, providing information on some of the basic principles of local government such as finance, and statutory issues around planning and licensing;
- internal knowledge, which provides information specific to Cherwell District Council;
- Committee skills, which are targeted at specific committees and roles;
- Portfolio Holder, which focus on the knowledge and skills required in these roles;
- engagement, which relate to members' responsibilities as community leaders;
- information, which refer to briefings on specific subjects as required.

In 2014/15 all of the categories were included in the Member Development programme. Sessions included planning training, social media training, service specific briefings including Environmental Services. There were also special briefings for Members on the major projects underway in the district and briefings by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England as part of the on-going Cherwell boundary review.

Training needs for all staff are discussed as part of the annual appraisal process, and all requests for training go through the Council's human resources team to monitor both cost and link to the Council's strategic priorities. In 2012-13 the Council retained its accreditation of the Investors in People programme and training is one of the key components of this assessment. As reviews only take place every three years the next review will take place in 2016.

1.3.12 Establishing clear channels of communication with all sections of the community and other stakeholders, ensuring accountability and encouraging open consultation

There is a Corporate Consultation Framework with a toolkit for staff providing support, guidance and a statement of our standards. The Council has an online consultation portal which provides access to consultations that are underway and information about what consultations are planned. The Council undertakes a statistically representative annual satisfaction survey and has an annual budget consultation programme that underpins the service and financial planning process.

When procuring the corporate consultation programme, an evaluation criterion was set to ensure that the research contractors took steps to ensure harder to reach groups are not excluded. Steps taken include recruiting a balanced citizen's panel to ensure all sections of the community can participate in key pieces of corporate consultation.

In addition to the corporate consultation programme, the Council also holds a number of consultative forums including and in partnership with other local public sector agencies, forums including the Faith and Disability Forums.

We also hold formal annual parish liaison events which provide clear channels of communication and engagement with the parish councils.

In the main accountability and consultation is achieved using the following methods:

- Website
- Committee Management Information System (Modern Gov) (where the public reports are available for inspection).
- Corporate Improvement Programmes

- Medium Term Financial Strategy
- Annual Report and Summary of Accounts
- Statement of Accounts
- Budget Book
- Customer Satisfaction Surveys
- Press releases
- Cherwell Link
- Intranet
- Corporate Briefings
- Corporate Communications Strategy
- Performance Management Reports

1.3.13 Incorporating good governance arrangements in respect of partnerships and other group working as identified by the Audit Commission's report on the governance of partnerships and reflecting these in the Authority's overall governance arrangements

The Council's aim is to fully exploit the opportunities for partnership working and strengthen the governance and performance management arrangements. The Council's key strategic partnerships are included as part of the performance management framework and performance is reported quarterly. There is also a partnerships protocol.

The LSP is a key partnership for the Council, the role of Chairman is held by the Leader of the Council and there are clear terms of reference in place to cover membership, roles and responsibilities and the objectives of the partnership. The LSP Board provides the leadership and decision making body for the partnership that plans the work programme of the board and coordinates performance management and action planning. The Management Group is chaired by the LSP Board member with the role of performance champion.

To ensure the partnership listens to the wider views of the local community, it holds an annual conference which is open to all stakeholders and provides an annual report of its activity. Where appropriate the LSP sets up sub-committees to co-ordinate work programmes, examples include the Climate Change Partnership and the Brighter Future in Banbury Steering Group. Sub-partnerships have their own terms of reference, agreed by the LSP Board, and report back to the Board with performance and progress updates on a regular basis.

There are clear arrangements for Member roles on partnerships and outside bodies and this has been supported by relevant training and a process of annual review.

1.4 Review of Effectiveness of Governance

The Council has responsibility for conducting, at least annually, a review of the effectiveness of its governance framework including the system of internal control. The review of effectiveness is informed by the work of the Joint Management Team which has responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, Internal Audit's annual report, and also by comments made by the external auditors and other review agencies and inspectorates. The Council uses the Corporate Governance Group to monitor the effectiveness of the Council's governance framework.

1.5 The Authority's Assurance Framework

The review of the effectiveness of the system of internal control is underpinned by an Assurance Framework for internal control. The Framework is managed by the Corporate Governance Group, consisting of senior officers from a range of relevant disciplines, and

seeks to provide assurance by adopting a dual approach, assessing information from a service perspective provided by service managers and a more corporate overview from each of the Group members.

Officers responsible for corporate governance are in regular contact with each other to ensure all the relevant governance processes are in place and are robustly followed.

Within the framework, individual service managers are required to complete a management assurance statement each year, in which they confirm the arrangements that they are operating to maintain internal control, and how effective they believe them to be. These assessments are then analysed centrally by the group to provide a picture of any local weaknesses and to help identify any corporate themes that may not be remarkable in one service, but may assume greater significance when exhibited across a range of services.

There is a process, whereby significant issues raised within the framework can be escalated to Joint Management Team and/or the Executive. There have been no issues escalated during 2014-15.

1.6 The Constitutional Framework

1.6.1 The Executive

The Local Government Act 2000 sets out the functions which the Executive may perform. The Executive is not permitted to carry out any regulatory or staffing function. The Leader of the Council selects the Executive which is a maximum number of ten. 'Portfolios' are given by the Leader to the individual Members of the Executive.

1.6.2 Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee

To monitor the audit and risk management processes of the Council and ensure they comply with best practice and provide value for money. To approve the Council's statement of accounts and respond to any issues raised by internal audit or the external auditor.

1.6.3 Overview and Scrutiny

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has overall responsibility for the performance of all overview and scrutiny functions (under the Local Government Act 2000 and Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007) on behalf of the Council. In particular it is responsible for scrutinising decisions and decision making, developing and reviewing policy, exercising call-in procedures and investigating matters of local concern. This work is delivered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee which can establish 'Task and Finish' groups to undertake particular reviews in accordance with the annual overview and scrutiny work programme.

The role of scrutiny in following up recommendations: At every meeting of each scrutiny committee, there is a standard agenda item: 'Overview and Scrutiny Annual Work Programme'. This includes a follow up schedule for all previous scrutiny reviews. The committees normally review progress on the implementation of their recommendations at six month intervals, unless the nature of the review suggests a shorter or longer timescale is appropriate. The Lead Member and relevant Director and/or Service Head are asked to provide a written progress report and to attend the meeting to brief the committee. There were no call-ins during 2014/15.

Also part of the overall overview and scrutiny process is the newly formed Budget Planning Committee, further details of which are contained in section 1.3.4 above.

1.6.4 Standards Committee

The Localism Act 2011 required the Council to adopt new arrangements for ensuring the maintenance of high standards of councillor conduct, including a code of conduct which is consistent with the Nolan principles of good conduct in public life with effect from 1 July 2012. A new code was duly adopted and the Standards Committee was re-constituted so that its membership met the requirements of the 2011 Act. Two statutory independent persons were also appointed as part of the new arrangements. During 2014/15 there have been no complaints heard by the Committee.

The code adopted at Cherwell is consistent with that adopted by Oxfordshire County Council and all other principal authorities in the County. This has been done under the auspices of the Oxfordshire Monitoring Officers Group which meets six times a year and includes as a standing item on its agenda matters relating to standards issues. The vast majority of parish councils in the Cherwell district have also agreed to adopt the same version of the code. This means that, with limited exceptions, councillors throughout the Council's district are covered by the same code of conduct thereby ensuring consistency of approach.

As Monitoring Officer, the Head of Law and Governance continues to review the relevance and effectiveness of the constitution. This is particularly in the light of the shared Joint Management Team with South Northamptonshire Council. As mentioned in section 1.3.6 above three key sections of the constitution have been redrafted and joined with South Northamptonshire Council to reflect the shared joint management team namely the scheme of officer delegations, the Financial Procedure Rules and the Contract Procedure Rules. Having common schemes and procedures such as these significantly mitigates the risk of any Joint Management Team members applying an incorrect rule with resultant unlawful action on the Council's behalf.

1.6.5 Chief Financial Officer

During the 2014-15 financial year, the Chief Financial Officer was designated as the person responsible for the administration of the Council's finances under section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 and ensured the financial management of the Council was conducted in accordance with the Financial Regulations and Corporate Financial Procedures.

With the implementation of joint working arrangements the Director of Resources is the Council's nominated CFO (section 151 Officer) and the Head of Finance and Procurement is deputy S151 officer to the CFO.

1.6.6 Internal Audit

The Council's Internal Audit Service Annual Plan is developed using a risk based approach, aligned to the Corporate Risk Register where possible to ensure current and emerging risks were adequately covered. Internal Audit Service reports provide an overall risk assessment on the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's internal control environment, with areas of weakness identified and agreed actions for improvements.

Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) and CIPFA's Audit Code of Practice requires that the Head of Internal Audit provides a written report to the Accounts Audit and Risk Committee, timed to inform the organisation's Annual Governance Statement. The purpose of this report is to present Internal Audit's view on the adequacy and effectiveness of Cherwell District Council's system of governance, risk management and control.

The draft Annual Internal Audit Report is presented to the Accounts Audit and Risk Committee in June 2014, which details the reviews completed and the number of critical, high, medium and low risk items identified within each individual review. The full report is available on the Council's website through the June Accounts Audit and Risk Committee published committee papers.

No serious control weaknesses (critical or high risk items that are pervasive to the council as a whole) were identified that internal audit considers warrants specific mention in the 2014/15 Annual Governance Statement. This is a positive message for the Council in terms of its control environment.

There were two internal audit reviews conducted in 2014/15 at the request of the Council. One related to Anti-Money laundering policies and procedures following an investigation. The second related to contractor compliance on a specific project on South Northants. Following these reviews the Council has;

- updated the Council's anti money laundering policies and procedures;
- delivered additional anti money laundering awareness training sessions (facilitated by PwC as internal auditors); and
- reviewing how the Council captures its contracts through its contracts register and the roles and responsibilities of both procurement and service contract owners once contract awarded.

1.6.7 Performance and Value for Money

Progress in meeting targets for Performance Indicators is reviewed quarterly by the Joint Management Team, and quarterly by the Executive as part of the Performance Management Framework. This ensures that senior managers know which targets are being met and that action is being taken where performance is not meeting targets. Financial performance is measured across a range of indicators that are reported quarterly to Overview and Scrutiny Committee and to the Executive. Budget monitoring is reported quarterly to Budget Planning Committee and to the Executive. In 2014/15 the Council delivered its corporate pledge of identifying efficiency savings of £500,000 for the 2015/16 budget.

This document has described our governance arrangements and assessed how closely we align with good practice. In overall terms this is a positive statement for the financial year 2014-15. The Council has a good system of internal control and action plans in place to address the issues highlighted in the internal audit report and seek to ensure continuous improvement of the systems is in place.

Sue Smith
Chief Executive
25 June 2014

Cllr Barry Wood BSc ACMA
Leader of the Council
25 June 2014