

ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT

2024/2025

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INTRODUCTION

One Council vision

A modern council, inspiring and enabling positive, lasting change.

Our Key priorities

Economic prosperity

Community Leadership

Environmental Stewardship

Quality housing and place making

Delivering these priorities requires good governance - for our residents, employees, businesses, service users and councillors.

Governance means: the values, culture, processes and systems by which the Council is controlled, directed and through which we deliver services for our communities. Governance means carrying out our activities in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is properly accounted for, and used well.

This Annual Governance Statement looks honestly at how effective our governance has been during 2024/25. It also looks ahead to some of our governance priorities and improvements for 2025/26.

The CIPFA/SOLACE Delivering Good Governance in Local Government (2016) requires local authorities to publish an Annual Governance Statement, and to be responsible for ensuring that:

- its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards
- public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for, and
- resources are used economically, efficiently and effectively to deliver agreed priorities and benefit local people.

The Council also has a duty to:

- make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised
- put in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, and
- implement and maintain effective processes of internal control, including appropriate arrangements to manage risk.

The Council's Accounts Audit & Risk Committee (Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee) reviews governance arrangements, audit reports and risk registers. Their role is to recommend improvements or interventions if expected performance is not being achieved, or gaps in current governance arrangements have been identified. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Overview and Scrutiny Committee) also

scrutinises performance reports as part of its work programme. Budget Planning Committee is also involved in looking at the budget process and in year performance of delivering the budget.

THE PURPOSE OF THE GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

The governance framework comprises the systems, processes, cultures and values which underpin how the Council is controlled and managed internally, and how it engages with taxpayers, service users and the wider community. The governance framework enables the Council to monitor delivery of its strategic objectives and assess whether those objectives are securing service improvements and value for money. Systems of internal control and risk management are a significant part of the governance framework and are designed to manage risk down to a reasonable level. Some risks can never be eliminated entirely, however, and these processes provide only reasonable and not absolute assurance of effectiveness.

THE KEY ELEMENTS OF THE GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK AT CHERWELL DISTRICT COUNCIL

As a local authority, the responsibility for good governance is shared by councillors and officers.

The Council has 48 councillors. These councillors are from different political parties and have different roles in the decision making process. All councillors agree to follow the member code of conduct and the rules for making decisions set out in our Constitution.

The Council operates an executive based system of governance with a Leader. The Executive takes strategic key decisions with officers responsible for day to day decisions. The Executive is made up of a Leader and 8 other councillors. The leader then appoints individual councillors (portfolio holders) to other positions in the Executive. Their remit includes obtaining assurance that Annual Delivery Plan priorities, and the Budget and Policy Framework approved by Council each year, are delivered in their relevant areas.

Since May 2024 a new Liberal Democratic Leader has been in place with no overall control.

The Council has a Constitution which sets out how the Council operates, how decisions are made and the procedures which are followed to ensure that decisions are efficient, transparent, and accountable to local people.

We have various layers of management within the organisation and the management teams each play an important role in the governance framework.

The corporate leadership team (Corporate Leadership Team), comprises the Head of Paid Service, Corporate Directors, Monitoring Officer and Section 151 Officer. Corporate Leadership Team meets on a weekly basis. The extended leadership team (Extended Leadership Team) comprises the Corporate Leadership Team and Assistant Directors. Extended Leadership Team meets on a monthly basis and are programmed as a series of sessions to focus on strategic issues, projects and programmes and health of the organisation.

The council has two wholly owned companies – Graven Hill and Crown House.

Graven Hill Village Developments was established in 2014. It is an ambitious project aimed at disrupting the market and creating innovative solutions to housing supply issues. The aim of Graven Hill is a large scale self-build community and also looking to develop around 2000 new homes. It will also provide commercial space, a nursery, a primary school and health hub, continuing to create new jobs in the locality.

The Crown House apartments project was initiated to drive economic and social regeneration. The initiative has improved community safety, and provided housing in Banbury town centre, comprising 50 apartments and one commercial unit.

The Council commissioned an independent review of the governance arrangements for Graven Hill, the recommendations arising from it were reported to the Shareholder Committee in July 2023 with the action plan agreed with the members. The action plan is regularly reviewed by the Committee and progress is tracked.

Shareholder Committee is a sub-committee of Executive. The Shareholder Committee manages the shareholding interests in the Council's trading companies. It also appoints and removes directors to the companies, and monitors the performance of the companies.

ANNUAL PLANNING PROCESS

The Council's Vision, Strategy and the new Corporate Plan sets the Council's future priorities, goals and aims over 5 years .

The annual delivery plan sets out the key projects for delivering the above priorities on an annual basis. The new delivery plan was agreed on 7th April 2025.

The Service Plans informed by the service set out how each service is working towards the annual delivery plan and the above priorities.

The framework also sets out the council's golden thread – how its annual priorities are cascaded down through the organisation to individual work plans . Progress towards these priorities is regularly reviewed and reported to the Executive and Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Performance monitoring includes key Indicators, monthly measures and targets.

DECISION MAKING

There is a Forward Plan which is updated on a regular basis for all key decisions.

All meetings are held in public and are webcast and available to watch after the event.

Decisions are recorded on the Council's website

Decisions are supported by officer reports which are open to the public unless they qualify as legally “exempt” from publication.

Decisions are also subject to call-in to Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

RISK MANAGEMENT

Risk registers identify operational and strategic risks.

Key risks are considered by Directorate Management Teams.

Strategic risks are reported to the Executive and Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee quarterly and overseen by Corporate Leadership Team

CORPORATE LEADERSHIP TEAM (CORPORATE LEADERSHIP TEAM)

Corporate Leadership Team are responsible for the overall management of the Council

The Head of Paid Service is the Chief Executive who is responsible for all Council staff and for leading Corporate Leadership Team.

The Corporate Directors lead the majority of services which are delivered to the public with the Chief Executive.

The Monitoring Officer is the Council's Assistant Director of Law, Governance and Procurement who is also responsible for ensuring legality and promoting high standards of conduct.

The Council's Assistant Director of Finance is the Council's Section 151 Officer/Chief Finance Officer and is responsible for safeguarding the Council's financial position and ensuring value for money.

There is also a statutory officer group with set objectives that meets to monitor governance issues.

FINANCE

A new Medium-Term Financial Strategy was approved by Council in February 2025 to cover the five years 2025/26 – 2029/30. The purpose of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy is to deliver a balanced and affordable 2025/26 budget and ensure that the Council's finances are robust and sustainable over the medium term or act as an early warning system of a gap in future years between forecast expenditure and resources which the Council must address, and that in the longer term, the Council's finances are not reliant on the unsustainable use of one-off reserves or funding. The Section 151 Officer issues Section 25 statements on robustness of estimate.

The Council has a robust approach to the use of reserves with any changes in uses of reserves from budgeted levels requiring approval in line with the Council's reserves policy. The Section 151 Officer carries out a risk assessment of general balances as part of the budget setting process and issues an overall opinion on the level of reserves via their Section 25 statement.

ARRANGEMENTS FOR GOVERNANCE

The Council has approved and adopted a Local Code of Corporate Governance, which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government' 2016.

The Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently and effectively. The Council also has a duty under the Local Government Act 1999 together with the Statutory Guidance on Best Value (2024) 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. The Council meets the Standards of the Framework in the following ways:

A. BEHAVING WITH INTEGRITY, DEMONSTRATING STRONG COMMITMENT TO ETHICAL VALUES, AND RESPECTING THE RULE OF LAW;

The Council's Chief Finance Officer (also referred to as Section 151 Officer) and Monitoring Officer have specific statutory responsibilities to ensure that decisions taken by the Council are lawful and in line with constitutional requirements. The Council report format and accompanying guidance helps to assist with lawful decision making and contains legal and financial implications alongside impacts assessments under the equality act, environment and sustainability, procurement and subsidy control to assist the decision maker in taking all relevant information into account when making a decision.

The Council has adopted codes of conduct for both Officers and Members which facilitates the promotion, communication and embedding of proper standards of behaviour. The Members Code of Conduct is based on the Local Government Association model code which has the benefit of it being consistent across the spectrum of County, District and Parish/Town councils and makes it easier to administer.

The Council's Constitution explains existing policy making and delegation procedures and the matters which must be dealt with by the full Council. It documents the role and responsibilities of the Executive, portfolio holders, each committee and Members and officers. The Monitoring Officer has also setup a Constitution Review Group working with members across the political spectrum to review the Constitution.

B. ENSURING OPENNESS AND COMPREHENSIVE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT;

The Council consults regularly with stakeholders, taxpayers and service users. The letstalk.cherwell.gov.uk, is the consultation website and enables local people to find, participate in, and view outcomes from, any consultation activities that interest them. It also provides feedback opportunity for stakeholders, taxpayers and service users. In addition, a number of different groups and forums are in place to represent local views on a range of subjects including health and wellbeing and community safety.

C. DEFINING OUTCOMES IN TERMS OF SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS;

The Annual Delivery Plan sets out how the Council aims to work in partnership to achieve its agreed objectives. These key objectives are designed to be both financially and environmentally sustainable and have been developed in consultation with partners. The Medium-Term Financial Strategy makes a realistic assessment of financial resources available, and the Budget and Policy Framework approved by Council each year sets out revenue and capital spending limits, savings and efficiency plans as well as key improvement priorities for the forthcoming year.

The Council has implemented a robust procurement strategy for all its procurement activities in accordance with the law and the Council's Contract Procedure Rules. The Social Value outcomes are included as part of the Council's procurement process.

D. DETERMINING THE INTERVENTIONS NECESSARY TO OPTIMISE THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE INTENDED OUTCOMES;

The Executive is responsible for ensuring that actions approved as part of the Budget and Policy Framework are delivered in each service area. The Projected Outturn, leadership risk register and performance against agreed key performance indicators (KPIs) reports to the Executive summarise the forecast financial outturn position each month against budget and delivery of agreed savings targets. These are also considered by Corporate Leadership Team on regular basis. These elements of the report are reviewed quarterly by Corporate Leadership Team, the Budget Planning Committee and Accounts Audit and Risk Committee and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee respectively.

There is a Governance Dashboard produced and maintained by the Monitoring Officer which is also reviewed by the Governance and Oversight Group and Corporate Leadership Team. The frequency of the review is being determined as it is a recent initiative. Once developed it will be presented to Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee on at least on an annual basis.

E. DEVELOPING THE COUNCIL'S CAPACITY, INCLUDING THE CAPABILITY OF ITS LEADERSHIP AND THE INDIVIDUALS WITHIN IT;

The May elections resulted in a change of administration at the Council. A series of "Away days" was planned with the new administration on key strategic issues, with each day including a session on governance – related to the topics covered in the away day e.g. planning, regeneration, companies.

The legal team review the officer scheme of delegation regularly, with other departments, to ensure decision making is at the correct level of delegation. The scheme of delegation is updated as and when necessary by taking a report to Full Council

On companies owned by the council, a governance review was conducted in 2023 in respect of Graven Hill and its actions are ongoing and monitored each quarter by the Shareholder Committee. A governance review of Crown House is due to be undertaken.

Legal and governance comments are included in every report that goes to members for a decision.

The Monitoring Officer is a member of the Corporate Leadership Team, and provides governance advice on all matters before Corporate Leadership Team. The Monitoring Officer attends all meetings of the Executive and Council, and provides governance and constitutional advice

Maximising capacity by working collaboratively is a key component of the Annual Delivery Plan and a number of longstanding partnership working arrangements are in place. The Constitution sets out how the governance aspects of these arrangements should operate in practice. The Human Resources and

Development team has a specific role and remit to improve the capability and capacity of Council officers by offering a range of skills and qualification-based training opportunities.

F. MANAGING RISKS AND PERFORMANCE THROUGH ROBUST INTERNAL CONTROL AND STRONG PUBLIC FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT;

The Council's Monitoring Officer has formed the Corporate Oversight and Governance Group (COGG). The primary purpose of the COGG is to ensure good governance and decision-making processes, effective risk management, ensuring and improving value for money, effective internal controls and ensuring transparency and accountability. It also reviews the Governance Dashboard that has been developed by the Monitoring Officer periodically.

The COGG is an internal officer group consisting of the Corporate Director (Resources) as the responsible chair, Monitoring Officer, the Section 151 Officer, Head of Internal Audit (Veritau (the internal audit provider)), Deputy Section 151 Officer, Head of Legal & Democratic/ Deputy Monitoring Officer.

For Council-owned companies there is a separate Companies Governance & Oversight Group which is led by the Chief Executive and supported by the Monitoring Officer, Corporate Director Resources, Section 151 Officer together with relevant company officers.

The Leadership Risk Register provides a high-level overview of key risks which are reported to Corporate Leadership Team and Executive on a monthly basis and Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee on a quarterly meeting. Financial Procedure Rules, Contracts Procedure Rules and Employment Procedure Rules, set out the framework of internal controls. Internal Audit have a programme of work designed to assess how this framework operates in practice and report to the Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee.

Procurement strategy for individual procurements act as a lever for cascading corporate priorities down to services and capital projects that are delivered through commercial partners. Procurement Strategy approval process has been developed to provide a system of robust internal control and ensure best value is achieved through all significant contract awards.

G. IMPLEMENTING GOOD PRACTICES IN TRANSPARENCY, REPORTING, AND AUDIT TO DELIVER EFFECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY.

All Council's meetings are held in public and minutes of meetings and webcasts are available on the Council's website. Public questions are allowed at Executive, Committees and Council's meetings.

The Council publishes an Annual Financial Report (the Statement of Accounts) annually within the statutory timescales. The Annual Financial Report incorporates the full requirements of best practice guidance in relation to corporate governance, risk management and internal control.

The Council is subject to independent audit by Bishop Fleming and receives an Annual Audit Letter reporting on findings. The Council supplements this work with its own internal audit function (outsourced to Veritau (the internal audit provider) Public Sector Limited) and ad hoc external peer reviews. The Accounts Audit and Risk Committee undertakes the core functions as identified in CIPFA's Audit Committees – Practical Guidance for Local Authorities.

REVIEW OF EFFECTIVENESS

The Council has reviewed the Council's existing governance arrangements against the revised CIPFA / SOLACE 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework - 2016 Edition' good practice guidance (See below).

The review of effectiveness is informed by three lines of defence:

- senior managers within the Council who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment;
- the Head of Internal Audit (Veritau (the internal audit provider)) and other professional leads including the Chief Executive, Chief Finance Officer, Corporate Directors, Monitoring Officer and Assistant Director of Human Resources;
- Internal Audit as provided by Veritau (the internal audit provider) and other inspections made by external auditors and independent reviews.

INTERNAL AUDIT

OVERVIEW OF WORK COMPLETED IN 2024/25

The Council uses several ways to review the effectiveness of governance arrangements. One of the key assurance statements is the annual report and opinion of the Head of Internal Audit (Veritau (the internal audit provider)). The role of the Internal Audit Service is to provide assurance to management and those charged with governance about the quality and effectiveness of the governance framework and systems of internal control. The internal audit team have completed five internal audits and two fact finding exercises, the outcomes are reported to the Accounts, Audit & Risk Committee. There are two internal audits in progress for this years programme.

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

The Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 require internal auditors working in local government to take into account public sector internal auditing standards or guidance. During 2024/25, the professional standards governing the practice of internal auditing in UK local government were the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (Public Sector Internal Audit Standards).

The 2019 CIPFA Statement on the "Role of the Head of Internal Audit in public service organisations" also applied during 2024/25. This outlines the principles that defines the core activities and behaviours that belong to the role of the 'Head of Internal Audit' and the governance requirements needed to support them. The Council's arrangements conform with the governance requirements of the CIPFA statement as follows:

- objectively assessing the adequacy and effectiveness of governance and management of risks, giving an evidence-based opinion on all aspects of governance, risk management and internal control.
- championing best practice in governance and commenting on responses to emerging risks and proposed developments.
- be a senior manager with regular and open engagement across the organisation, particularly with the leadership team and with the audit committee.
- lead and direct an internal audit service that is resourced appropriately, sufficiently and effectively.
- be professionally qualified and suitably experienced.

The Internal Audit Service operated in accordance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (Public Sector Internal Audit Standards) during 2024/25, as confirmed in the Head of Internal Audit's annual report.

With effect from 9 January 2025, the standards regime underpinning the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards were replaced by the Global Internal Audit Standards. From 2025/26, the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards will be replaced by a new standards regime known as the Global Internal Audit Standards in the UK Public Sector or 'Global Internal Audit Standards UK Public Sector'.

Global Internal Audit Standards UK Public Sector is made up of the Global Internal Audit Standards (as well as what are known as 'Topical Requirements') and the 'Application Note: Global Internal Audit Standards in the UK Public Sector' ('the Application Note'). The purpose of the Application Note is to set out interpretations and requirements which need to be applied to the Global Internal Audit Standards requirements so that these form a suitable basis for internal audit practice in the UK public sector.

Veritau (the internal audit provider) used a conformance readiness tool, published by the Chartered Institute of Internal Auditors (UK and Ireland), to self-assess its conformance with the Global Internal Audit Standards. It also completed a self-assessment against the Application Note. The Head of Internal Audit confirmed that the service conforms with the Global Internal Audit Standards UK Public Sector.

CIPFA has recently published the 'Code of Practice for the Governance of Internal Audit in UK Local Government' ('the Code'). The purpose of the Code is to ensure that the essential conditions of governance can be met in a local government context. A difference between the Global Internal Audit Standards UK Public Sector and the Code is that the Code is intended for local authorities rather than internal audit functions. It is designed to support authorities in establishing effective internal audit arrangements and providing oversight and support for internal audit.

Internal audit functions are still expected to be aware of the Code, and to assess compliance with it (alongside Global Internal Audit Standards UK Public Sector), but the emphasis of the Code is on ensuring that local authorities have created the conditions for internal audit to be delivered effectively. The internal audit service has worked alongside senior management to ensure that the Code is understood and that the correct conditions for internal audit exist.

ANNUAL OPINION OF THE HEAD OF INTERNAL AUDIT

The Chief Internal Auditor prepared an Annual Report on the work of Internal Audit which concludes for the 12 months ended 31 March 2025. The overall opinion on the framework of governance, risk management and control operating at the council is that it provides Reasonable Assurance. However, in giving that opinion, the Head of Internal Audit, recommended that two significant control weaknesses be considered for inclusion in the Annual Governance Statement. These were as follows:

1. Health and safety management system: An audit of compliance with the Corporate Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Policy identified several significant control weaknesses which, taken together, meant that we could only provide Limited Assurance that the council's health and safety objectives will be achieved. Accident and incident reporting and investigation requirements were not adequately met, nor were requirements linked to distributing service area risk assessments amongst staff or completion of mandatory training. These issues were particularly prevalent within the council's place-based services which also carry the greatest risk to officer and public safety. Veritau (the internal audit provider) has worked with officers to support development of improvement actions. Action has already been taken in some areas, with the remaining actions expected to be completed by October 2025.
2. Management of strategic site applications (Rutten Lane): In April 2024, the Planning Inspectorate found the council to be at fault for the non-determination of the Rutten Lane application (21/03522/OUT). The Inspectorate's decision was that costs be awarded to the appellant, with these settled at £401k approx. A fact-finding review undertaken by Veritau (the internal audit provider) identified several significant control weaknesses which significantly contributed to the delays and non-determination of the application. The council has already been financially exposed as a result of these weaknesses and, if left unaddressed, there is a risk that the situation reoccurs with other strategic site applications it handles. In response, the Development Management service has implemented an improvement action plan which is expected to be mostly completed by the end of 2025.

Both of these weaknesses have been included in the 2024/25 Annual Governance Statement action plan.

The Reasonable Assurance opinion given by the Head of Internal Audit means that, overall, there is satisfactory management of risk within the council but with a number of weaknesses identified. An acceptable control environment is in operation but there are a number of improvements that could be made.

Where weaknesses have been identified through internal audit review, they have worked with management to agree appropriate corrective action and timescale for improvement. Management action plans are in place and are routinely monitored by the Internal Audit team and reported to Corporate Leadership Team and the Accounts, Audit & Risk Committee. In 2024/25, the Council and its internal audit service developed a follow-up and escalation procedure to strengthen this process further. Managers are required to provide positive assurance that actions have been implemented; performance on implementation is high, demonstrating that control weaknesses identified by Internal Audit are being addressed on a timely basis.

The Council agrees an Annual Plan for the Counter-Fraud Service each year. This is usually presented to the March meeting of the Accounts, Audit and Risk Committee, supporting the Council's Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy with updates taken throughout the year. The 2024/25 Counter Fraud Plan was considered in July 2024 as Veritau (the internal audit provider) had recently taken over the provision of this function from the previous provider. The Counter-Fraud team's purpose is to adhere and to promote the zero-tolerance approach to fraud detailed in the Council's Fraud Strategy, by thoroughly investigating any instances of fraud; applying the appropriate sanctions; undertaking proactive and preventive work to prevent and detect fraud through training, awareness raising, data matching and proactive reviews.

The key areas of work for the Counter-Fraud Strategy for 2024/25 were:

- Counter Fraud Framework – monitoring changes to regulations and guidance and maintaining the counter fraud framework
- Proactive work – raising awareness, targeted pro active counter fraud work and advice on measures to help prevent and detect fraud
- Reactive investigations – investigation of suspected frauds against the council and associated recommendations.
- National Fraud Initiative – Coordination of the submission of data to the programme and investigating subsequent data matches
- Fraud liaison – Act as a single point of contact to the DWP to provide data to support Housing Benefit investigations.

For the period April 2024 – March 2025, 47 referrals of potential fraud were made to the team. Twelve investigations were completed, addressing fraud related to Empty homes Council Tax Premiums, Single person discounts and claims for Council Tax Reduction. One person was issued with a formal warning, three people were invoiced for money owed to the council, one person was referred to the Police, positive outcomes were achieved in four cases, and no fraud was found in three cases.

The 2024/25 bi-annual National Fraud exercise began in Autumn 2024; data privacy notices held by relevant departments were reviewed, to ensure they are compliant with government guidance. Datasets were then collated and securely provided to the PSFA. Following this, the PSFA conducted the data-match, comparing data held by Cherwell District Council to other Local Authorities and Government Departments. In December 2024, over 1,000 data matches were sent to the counter fraud team for triaging. The matches cover Council areas including Council Tax Reduction, Housing Benefits, Housing Allocations, Payroll and Creditors. Work is ongoing to review the matches and identify those where further fraud investigation is required.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT CODE

A key goal of the Financial Management Code of Practice (launched by CIPFA in November 2019) (FM Code) is to improve the financial resilience of organisations by embedding enhanced standards of financial management. Since April 2021 authorities have been expected to work towards full compliance of the FM Code. There are clear links between the FM Code and the Governance Framework, particularly with its focus on achieving sustainable outcomes. The Council's latest self- assessment of compliance with the FM Code paints a positive picture with the RAG (Red-Amber-Green) rating of compliance showing as Green for all of the 19 standards.

2023/24 ACTIONS

Significant actions have now been completed.

Actions	Update
Review focus on transformation and identify work programmes with savings.	The four phases of the Transformation programme work were completed in January 2025. Initial effectiveness changes are being built into the budget for 2025/26. Further work is underway to bring forward a Case for Change for Executive approval to develop the long term transformation programme covering the next 3-5 years.
Ensure reports commissioned for transformation projects have take into account financial implications and have clear actions plans.	Some savings identified in 2025/26 and the rest has been incorporated into the scope for next phase of the transformation programme.
Develop Workforce Strategy to address key staff vacancies in key services with staff development objectives.	This is being transferred to next year's actions with high level People elements covered in the Corporate Strategy.
Update on the implementation of the Planning Improvement Plan following three different service review reports.	A new plan is being developed and this is part of the next year's actions.
Devise a work programme arising from the Digital Futures Strategy 2022 – 2025.	This is now incorporated into Cherwell Futures programme (as part of case for change) which will deliver this work programme.
Ensure understanding of the Council's governance at all levels including members and officers. This is to include roles and responsibilities and scheme of delegation.	Series of seminars and away days.
Ensure Implementation of Procurement Act 2023 effective from October 2024.	Procurement & Contracts Teams Site Updates Monthly Newsletters Procurement Act FAQs Engagement with our e-tendering portal provider Cabinet Office Procurement Act accreditation Briefing/Webinars to staff & members Existing toolkits to support: Specification/KPI development Contract management & variation. Update to Forms/Templates Information for Suppliers

Commercial Playbook v2 (2025)	
Ensure further improvements on Information Governance by setting up as a corporate project.	This has been setup and work is underway.
Ensure Health and Safety requirements are properly understood for those working in the office and remotely.	This has now been implemented.
Implementation of the new waste regime and extended producer responsibility.	This now incorporates the Simpler Recycling (as required regulations) which has been incorporated into the next year's action plan.

GOVERNANCE SELF ASSESSMENT

Annual Assurance Statements from the Chief Executive, Corporate Directors and Assistant Directors in respect of governance and internal controls for their respective areas, confirm that expected governance arrangements have been in place throughout the year. They have also confirmed that Codes of Conduct, Financial regulations and other corporate processes have operated as expected by undertaking self-assessments of governance arrangements. The themes arising from the self assessment are also reflected in the conclusion below.

CONCLUSION

The Council is satisfied that appropriate governance arrangements are in place however it remains committed to maintaining and where possible improving these arrangements. The following items are noted for improvement in 2024/2025:

Actions	Lead Officer
An audit of compliance with Health and safety management system identified several significant control weaknesses in this particularly within the Place directorate. Demonstrably meet the Council's accident and incident reporting and investigation requirements. Implement the action plan.	AD HR as corporate health and safety. AD Environment for implementation
Implement improvements in report clearance processes, with DLTs taking responsibility for early engagement with legal and finance to improve quality and timeliness of reports and improved forward planning.	DLTs
Management of strategic site applications to minimise the risk of legal proceedings and costs exposure.	AD PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

<p>Implement all review findings and action plan</p> <p>Address issues identified in the Internal Audit fact finding review relating to negative framing of officer recommendations, strategic partnerships and stakeholder management, Resource and document management, Performance management, management of planning performance agreements and management of service improvement.</p>	
<p>Work with Executive and CLT to deliver the 2025/26 budget and financial challenges, giving particular attention to the delivery of the agreed savings. Delivery of agreed savings</p> <p>Where overspends are identified operating within the mitigation plan outlined in the S25 statement.</p>	AD FINANCE
<p>In collaboration with the new administration, better engagement and consultation with Portfolio Holders (PH) and CLT including focus on strategic planning and transformation change.</p> <p>Officers and members should work together. PH briefing, reports produced and presented to ensure that it meets members needs and provided sufficiently in advance to allow PH and Exec members to review and have political discussion. Planned away days.</p>	CLT DLTS
<p>Build on the existing work on transformation and develop a plan to address the budgetary shortfall identified in the Medium Term Financial Strategy beginning in 2026/27.</p> <p>Transformation</p> <p>Case for Change</p> <p>Strategic Planning Process</p>	CD Resources AD FINANCE & CLT
<p>Further embed the new Procurement Act 2023 and Procurement Regulations 2024 including Member and officer training.</p>	AD LAW & GOVERNANCE
<p>Produce and Implement Risk Management Strategy and framework to ensure compliance with HM Government Orange Book and implement training programme to embed risk management.</p>	CD RESOURCES
<p>Specific training on Information Governance as identified in the improvement plan especially in relation to data breaches.</p>	AD LAW & GOVERNANCE
<p>Building on the Corporate Strategy which covered at a high level “People” to produce Strategic workforce plan focussed on skills and knowledge gaps, performance management, including appraisal processes and learning development plans.</p>	AD HR
<p>Review of agency processes to ensure that pre employment checks are conducted and the reasons for waiver of any requirement is properly authorised and reasoned.</p>	AD HR

To produce and implement detailed Simpler Recycling action plan	AD Environment
To define governance parameters around Local Government Reorganisation leading to implementation phase.	CLT

Other governance outcomes are shown below:

- Nil reports issued by the Section 151 Officer or the Monitoring Officer.
- The Monitoring Officer received 12 complaints about member conduct in 2024/ 2025. 9 were dismissed at initial stage with 1 offered an informal resolution. 2 were withdrawn by the complainant.
- The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman upheld 1 complaint out of total 10 received.

STATEMENT OF OPINION

It is our opinion that the Council's governance arrangements in 2024/25 were sound and provide a robust platform for achieving the Council's priorities and challenges in 2024/25. It is our opinion that our ability to maintain sound governance during the past year, has been effective.

Gordon Stewart

Chief Executive

Cllr David Hingley

Leader of the Council