

# **COLCHESTER BOROUGH COUNCIL DRAFT ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2021**

## **Scope of responsibility**

Colchester 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. The 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, the 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. The Council is also responsible for ensuring that any companies owned by the Council, and any jointly operated services, also have proper arrangements in place for the governance of their affairs.

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*. A copy of the code is on the Council website at [www.colchester.gov.uk](http://www.colchester.gov.uk) or can be obtained from Colchester Borough Council, Rowan House, 33 Sheepen Road, Colchester, CO3 3WG.

This statement explains how the Council has complied with the code and meets the requirements of regulations 6(1)(a) and (b) of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 in relation to the publication of a statement on internal control.

## **DELIVERING GOOD GOVERNANCE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT:**

### **The purpose of the governance framework**

The governance framework comprises the systems, processes, culture and values by which the Council is directed and controlled. Which in turn directs the activities through which it accounts to, engages with and leads the community. It enables the Council 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 and not 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 the 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 efficiently, effectively and economically.

The Council's governance framework has been in place during the year ended 31 March 2020 and up to the date of the approval of the annual accounts.

## Elements of the Framework

The framework consists of comprehensive processes that each ensure that the Council complies with the principals of good governance. These include:

- **The Strategic Plan** – which identifies and communicates the Council’s vision of its purpose and intended outcomes for citizens and service users. This is supported by an action plan that is updated annually.
- **The Strategic Risk Register** – which reflects the objectives of the Strategic Plan and identifies the implications for the Council’s governance arrangements.
- **The Constitution** - This is the fundamental basis of the Council’s governance arrangements and includes:
  - 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.
  - Reviewing and updating procedure rules, financial procedure rules, a scheme of delegation and supporting procedure notes / manuals, which clearly define how decisions are taken.
  - The Policy Framework which includes the documents relating to Corporate Governance including:
    - The Local Code of Corporate Governance.
    - A risk management strategy detailing processes and controls required to manage risks.
    - The Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy
  - The Ethical Framework which includes documents relating to standards of conduct and good practice which include:
    - A code of conduct which defines the standards of behaviour for all Members.
    - Planning procedures Code of Practice
    - Protocol on Member/Officer Relations
    - Media Protocol
    - Monitoring Officer Protocol
    - Chief Finance Officer Protocol
    - Resources Protocol
    - A whistle blowing policy for receiving and investigating complaints from the public and staff.
    - Gifts and Hospitality Guidance
- **The Chief Finance Officer Protocol** sets out the responsibilities to conform with the governance requirements of the CIPFA statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government (2016).
- **The operation of a Governance and Audit Committee** which undertakes the core functions of an audit committee, as identified in CIPFA’s document ‘Audit Committees – Practical Guidance for Local Authorities’. It also acts as the ‘client’ committee scrutinising the performance of the Colchester Commercial (Holdings) Limited and its subsidiary companies.
- **The operation of a Scrutiny Panel** to ensure that the actions of the Cabinet accord with the policies and budget of the Council, monitor the financial performance of the Council, link spending proposals to the Council’s policy priorities and review progress and to review decisions of the Cabinet via the call-in procedure.
- **A performance management system** for all officers that identifies key objectives and development needs.
- **A member training and development programme.**

- **A communications strategy** which establishes clear channels of communication with all sections of the community and other stakeholders, ensuring accountability and encouraging open consultation.
- **Treasury management practices and policies**

The post of the Section 151 Officer for Colchester Borough Council was held permanently by the Strategic Finance Manager until February 2019, when they ceased working for the Council. An interim Section 151 Officer has been appropriately appointed by full Council to fill the role, until a suitable permanent replacement can be made. The arrangements in place ensured that the Council's financial management arrangements conformed with the governance requirements of the CIPFA statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government (2016).

## **DELIVERING GOOD GOVERNANCE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT:**

### **Review of effectiveness**

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 senior managers within the Council who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, the Internal Audit Annual Report, and also by comments made by the external auditors and other review agencies and inspectorates including the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, the Information Commissioner's Office, Equal Opportunities Commission, Lexcel, Investors In People, the Vehicle Inspectorate, DEFRA, East England Tourist Board and the Office of Surveillance Commissioners.

As well as the annual review, the governance and control frameworks are maintained and reviewed by a series of comprehensive processes throughout the year. These include:

- **A robust Internal Audit function** where the planned work is based on identified key systems and risk areas. The Council's Internal Audit Service arrangements conform to the governance requirements and core responsibilities of the *CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Head of Internal Audit in Public Service Organisations (2010)*. The services' compliance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards was independently assessed and verified in November 2016.
- **An embedded reporting system** for both internal and external audit issues that ensures that senior managers and members are fully briefed on key issues, which includes regular reporting to the Governance and Audit Committee.
- **A comprehensive risk management process** that ensures the key risks across the Council, both operational and strategic, are captured and reported to senior officers and Members.
- **The reports of the Chief Financial Officer** to Members and the senior management team including financial assessments of key projects and decisions.
- **Reporting of key performance issues** to the Scrutiny Panel.
- **A comprehensive budget monitoring process** that is reported monthly to senior managers.
- **A defined Monitoring Officer role** which sets out responsibility for ensuring all decisions comply with statutory requirements and are lawful.

The significant control issues found during the review are highlighted in the table at the end of the statement.

The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the Council during the financial year, and rapid changes to systems and processes were required to be able to respond to changes in legislation, development of Coronavirus support services (such as business support grants) and to continue to deliver existing services. It was acknowledged that to be able to respond so rapidly it was not always possible to verify that all control arrangements were embedded in processes, prior to their implementation.

However, the audit programme for 2020/21 was adjusted early in the year and several audits were added to assess the Council's response to the pandemic. These included an overall assessment as well as reviews of payment processes and support functions. Overall, the audits demonstrated that even with the rapid implementation of new and changed systems, there were no governance concerns, with systems of control working appropriately.

The pandemic continues to have an impact on the Council's working arrangements and appropriate audit reviews will be programmed in for the foreseeable future.

### **Effectiveness of Other Organisations**

The Council owns six companies:

- Colchester Borough Homes (CBH) which was created in 2003,
- Colchester Community Stadium Limited (CCSL) created in 2007
- Colchester Commercial (Holdings) Limited (CCHL), and its three subsidiary companies –
  - Colchester Amphora Trading Limited,
  - Colchester Amphora Energy Limited and
  - Colchester Amphora Housing Limited.

It also leads two joint (with other local authorities) services:

- Colchester & Ipswich Museums Service (CIMS)
- North Essex Parking Partnership (NEPP)

As these are limited companies there is no requirement for them to produce Governance Statements in this format. However, it is recognised by the Council, that it is essential for these companies to operate effective governance procedures to ensure appropriate and cost-effective service provision and protection of Council assets.

Whilst CBH is an 'arms-length' company it is still necessary for the Council to ensure that it operates effectively to ensure that it provides an effective and economical service to housing tenants and that the Council's asset, the housing stock, is adequately protected. CBH have produced their own annual governance review that has been shared with the Council. There were no significant control weakness identified during the year that are required to be included in this statement.

A review of the management arrangements for CCSL was carried out as part of the preparation of this statement. Whilst CCSL is an 'arms-length' company it is still necessary for the Council to ensure that it operates effectively to ensure that it can make the necessary loan repayments to the Council and that the Council's asset, the stadium, is adequately protected. There were no significant control weakness identified during the year that are required to be included in this statement.

The CCHL group was created to enable a more commercial approach to be taken to delivering revenue generating Council services and to develop innovative options for new services in the future, such as a heat exchange system for the Borough. Whilst the CCHL group are operating in a commercial environment, and therefore can take a different approach to service delivery, they are still delivering services on the Council's behalf. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that it operates effectively to deliver the best possible outcomes for the Council. The activities of CCHL are monitored through the Council's Internal Audit programme and reported to the Council's Governance and Audit Committee. There were no significant control weaknesses, specific to CCHL, during 2020/21, that need to be included in this statement.

The Council is the lead partner in the Colchester & Ipswich Museum Service. Due to the nature of the arrangement, the joint museum service conducts its own annual governance review which includes an assessment of internal control. Therefore, it is not intended to include any details relating to this service within this statement.

The North Essex Parking Partnership was created on 1 April 2011, with the Council as the lead partner. The partnership conducts its own annual governance review which includes an assessment of internal control. Therefore, it is not intended to include any details relating to the service within this statement.

### **Internal Audit Opinion**

From the work undertaken in 2020/21, Internal Audit has provided reasonable assurance that the system of internal control that has been in place at the Council for the year ended 31 March 2021 accords with proper practice. This is excepting any details of significant internal control issues as documented hereafter. It is also the opinion of Internal Audit that the Council's corporate governance framework complies with the best practice guidance on corporate governance issued by CIPFA/SOLACE.

### **Review of Actions from 2019/20 Statement**

There were three actions included in the Annual Governance Statement for 2019/20:

- Procurement / Purchasing
- IT – Social Media
- Payment Controls

An independent review of the Council's strategic approach to procurement was commissioned and a procurement board was set up to steer the implementation of the recommendations. Social value and environmental impacts have been included in the procurement process and record keeping has been moved to an accessible site.

A follow up of the Social Media audit showed that the recommended control improvements had been implemented, including strengthening of password controls, completion of a business needs assessment for new social media platforms, use of external monitoring tools, inclusion of social media in the Information Security Policy and regular training of officers responsible for the social media accounts.

The payment controls audit identified concerns relating to the possibility of payment files being amended after authorisation, officers having more than one level of authorisation, weak password controls and the ability for payment runs to be authorised by only one officer. The recommended changes have now been implemented to resolve these concerns.

## Conclusion & Significant Governance Issues

Overall, the control arrangements in place during the 2020/21 financial year have been effective and were appropriate. However, the review has identified some areas where actions are required to ensure that the Council continues to provide appropriate and cost-effective services. The issues and action plans are shown in the table below. These will be monitored and reviewed via the Internal Audit review process during 2021/22

No.	Issue	Action
1.	The Council, like many other organisations, was subjected to deliberate attempts to disrupt its IT processes and potentially access information during the year. The attempts were successfully defeated, however they did highlight some weaknesses in the controls around IT usage. It is also acknowledged that cyber attacks will continue to evolve and the system controls will need to be constantly refined to be able to provide adequate defence against them.	A review of system controls is already completed after any attempted cyber-attack, and any necessary changes are immediately implemented to resolve any weaknesses. However, resources need to be dedicated to ensuring that controls are continuously reviewed and developed to guard against new methods of attack.
2.	The response to the pandemic highlighted the importance of effective partnership arrangements. This has included joint planning to alleviate acute health and social care service pressures, partnerships providing business support to help with local economic recovery, and the delivery of community support across multiple agencies, including NHS partners and the community and voluntary sector (CVS). The Annual Governance Statement and Strategic Risk Register acknowledge the essential role of partnerships, but these have not been reviewed considering the Covid pandemic and the Council's strategic priorities and risks.	A review of the Council's partnership arrangements, including partnerships considered strategically important to the delivery of the Council's strategic priorities, is undertaken.

We have been advised on the implications of the result of the review of the effectiveness of the governance framework, by the Governance and Audit Committee, and we propose over the coming year to take steps to address the above matters to further enhance our governance arrangements. We are satisfied that these steps will address the need for improvements that were identified in our review of effectiveness and will monitor their implementation and operation as part of our next annual review.

**Signed:**



Leader of the Council



Chief Executive

on behalf of Colchester Borough Council