

Huntingdonshire District Council
Annual Governance Statement 2019/20

What is Governance?

Governance generally refers to the arrangements put in place to ensure that the intended outcomes are defined and achieved.

The Council approved a new local Code of Corporate Governance in July 2016. It is consistent with the seven principles set out in 'proper practice' for the public sector, namely 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework' published by CIPFA/SOLACE¹.

The Council aims to achieve good standards of governance by:

1. Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law.
2. Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.
3. Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits.
4. Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes.
5. Developing its capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it.
6. Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management.
7. Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit to deliver effective accountability.

The overall aim of the local Code of Corporate Governance is to ensure that:

- resources are directed in accordance with agreed policy and according to priorities.
- there is sound and inclusive decision making.
- there is clear accountability for the use of those resources in order to achieve desired outcomes for service users and communities.

Underpinning the Code is the Council's commitment to equality of opportunity in its approach to policymaking, service delivery and employment.

Governance impacts

Traditionally this Statement has contained issues for which the Council is wholly responsible. During 2017/18 it became clear that there were a number of overarching issues that were regularly informing and influencing the budget, performance and service delivery discussions the control and direct influence over which at both Member and Officer level lay outside of the Council. Consequently an inward looking Statement did not feel appropriate as it did not address the risks that are of greatest potential impact to the authority and the achievement of its objectives.

Five themes were identified as part of this review to reflect a more strategic outlook. These five themes have been chosen as representing our best view of the risks that challenge our financial stability and ability to deliver on our objectives. As the needs of our communities and decisions of our partners directly impact on our resource and demand profiles. However, they have been joined by a sixth issue, that of the environment and our collective responsibility to ensure that our actions and behaviours do not cause irreversible harm.

Progress made across the themes in 2019/20 is outlined in the Statement together with the actions planned for 2020/21. The impacts of Covid-19 experienced in 2020/21 have accentuated the significance of the themes in this AGS, presenting the consequences of some of the previous identified system risks, and additional activity has been undertaken to further meet these challenges and mitigate the long term impacts on our communities, Huntingdonshire as a place and its economy.

Opinion

After conducting a review of the governance arrangements across the Council and overall compliance with the Council's Code of Corporate Governance, we are satisfied that the arrangements are effective.

We are also satisfied that this statement allows the Council to meet the requirements of the Accounts & Audit (England) Regulations 2015, to prepare an annual governance statement to accompany the 2018/19 Annual Financial Report.



Signature	Councillor Ryan Fuller Executive Leader	Signature	Joanne Lancaster Managing Director
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13 November 2019
Signed on behalf of Huntingdonshire District Council

¹ The Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy (CIPFA) & Society of Local Authority Chief Executives & Senior Managers (SOLACE).

Themes

Housing Affordability

Leading to homelessness and constraining growth.

	This issue is one which impacts on the Council's ability to deliver the Corporate Plan primarily through the escalating financial consequences of homelessness. Furthermore it also has a bearing on the mobility of the local labour market, on inward investment and business growth opportunities. For the Council as an employer it also hampers our ability to recruit and retain suitably experienced and qualified staff.	
2019/20 actions		2020/21 actions
--	Adopt a housing strategy which establishes the formal basis for housing delivery across the district.	✓
✓	Complete a formal review of homelessness within the District to inform the development of an updated Homelessness Strategy.	--
✓	Continue to work with other agencies to enable earlier risk-based interventions for those individuals whose circumstances mean that they are vulnerable to homelessness.	✓
✓	Developing new delivery options to secure affordable homes within the District, using Council assets to provide alternatives to the market delivery homes where necessary.	✓
✓	To bring forward formal Scrutiny recommendations for the acceleration of supply of new affordable and accessible housing stock across the district.	--
	Working with third parties to explore partnership models to bring forward new solutions to the delivery of all types of housing to meet local needs.	✓

2019/20 achievements

The Council has developed a series of early intervention approaches, seeking to identify future housing need and address the root cause at the earliest possible opportunity. These include the delivery and continued support of the multi-agency housing trailblazer, intervening immediately on a safeguarding issue being identified to address housing needs. The new homelessness reduction act duties continue to be used proactively, and supported by broader work across the council to identify those at risk, or long term future risk of homelessness, and using appropriate pathways, such as employment support and budgeting to seek to build individual capacity and address the underlying need.

The Council has worked to proactively use Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) to deliver the best possible outcome and reduce the strain on the public purse, by preventing expensive and disruptive outcomes. This has included assisting those who may be at risk of homelessness. There has been some innovation in the use of DHPs. For example, someone living in social housing and in rent arrears due to having their housing benefit payments reduced due to living in a property that had a spare bedroom (and classed as being under-occupied) have been supported in clearing their rent arrears and in moving to a smaller property. This freed up a property whilst reducing the possibility of future financial problems for the tenant.

A pathway has been established with Criminal Justice partners that allows for the early notification of the release of offenders so that potential employment opportunities and other appropriate support can be identified. A key group at risk of homelessness.

The Council is increasingly working to focus services around the need of the community, rather than traditional service delivery siloes in the Huntingdon North ward, all public service agencies are working alongside the community and voluntary groups to identify those who are vulnerable and may become homeless. The group is supporting a number of community groups with the intention that residents can develop and take responsibility for these initiatives themselves. This work has informed the response to Covid, focussing on proactive prevention and support.

Proposals for housing making use of a number of surplus land sites to support the provision of affordable housing have been progressed, and will link to the forthcoming Housing Strategy.

Morbidity/Growing number of years of ill health

Impacting on people's ability to be self-reliant and generating additional cost through support needs.

Increasing pressures are being felt by many parts of the public service system, primarily through the growing demand on support costs, a rise in complex individual cases which cuts across many service providers, through such things as disabled facilities grants and personal care costs. This is not something that any single agency has total responsibility for, and it requires joint working to deliver effective solutions focussing on wellbeing and life choices as well as housing, open spaces, transport infrastructure and the design of place.

The costs of dealing with ill health and the increased risk of other complications caused by ill health, constitutes a major financial challenge to all public sector agencies. Decisions made to support these needs, often impact HDC as we see these decisions create direct and indirect financial challenges for the Council, including disabled facilities grants but also situations where those who are not able to remain economically active rely on more assistance. The increasing number of years of ill health experienced by the population, combined with Huntingdonshire's aging population make these factors areas of continued focus for HDC.

Underlying health factors such as frailty, excess weight, or other underlying health condition have been indicated as increasing the chances of poor Covid-19 outcomes.

2019/20 actions

- ✓ Use our leisure services to encourage healthier lifestyles through engaging people of all ages in activities to improve health.
- ✓ Pilot new ways of working within localities with local communities and other agencies to deliver tailored solutions to issues within defined communities.
- ✓ To bring forward formal Scrutiny recommendations on how the Council can support improved community health outcomes through its task and finish work. Maybe update with a focus on Health and Wellbeing strategy
- ✓ Pilot new ways of working within localities with local communities to deliver improved infrastructure that promotes cycling and walking
- ✓ Adoption of a 'Healthy Open Spaces Strategy' to optimise the provision and use of the Council's green open spaces, parks and play areas to encourage healthier lifestyles through engaging people of all ages in activities to improve health.
- Investing in our parks and green spaces to provide for open areas for leisure and activity, including in our 3 largest market towns

2020/21 actions

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2019/20 achievements

More People, More Active, More Often has been adopted as the key objective for our One Leisure service, as we seek to maximise the use of our award-winning leisure facilities.

The Council's new 'Healthy Open Spaces Strategy' due to be adopted in the coming year has been informed by significant public and stakeholder engagement, and lays out the principles for developing our open spaces to engage residents and boost the health benefits of our open spaces. This links closely to the work we are doing with partners on the development of the proposals as part of the Future Parks Programme. Business case developed and approved for increasing the use of Hinchbrook Country Park (HCP) with a clear vision to ensure that more people use this key health asset, whilst reducing the amount of subsidy the site needs. An outline case for the further enhancement of Paxton Pits has also been prepared. The business case seeks to secure and enhance open free space as a key route for activity for all residents as evidenced by over 500 people attending a free park run at HCP.

In January 2019 Active Lifestyles launched the ESCAPE² pain management rehabilitation programme aiming to help people with osteoarthritis and chronic joint pain, self-manage their condition

Section 106 agreements continue to be negotiated with developers towards the provision of recreational spaces and their future up-keep. This has become more challenging as the planning system required the Council show that there is a demonstrable demand for play provision in order for contributions to be secured

² ESCAPE Pain stands for Enabling Self-management and Coping with Arthritic Pain through Exercise. ESCAPE Pain is endorsed and supported by NICE, British Society of Rheumatology, Royal Society of Rheumatology, Royal Society of Public Health, Charters Society of Physiotherapy, Arthritis Research UK, Arthritis Research UK, and the Academic Health Science Network.

Wider economic environment

Impact of Commercial Investment Strategy/Business rates receipts and level of need from residents.

The Council's financial robustness is closely linked with the success of the overall local economy, driven in large part to a prosperous commercial sector. This supports the delivery of one of our key Corporate Plan strategic priorities – delivering sustainable growth across the District. The Council is making tactical investments in the property market and is determined to support the conditions for economic success to support a vibrant economy and positive community outcomes. Ultimately external economic factors do directly impact on the Council's financial plans and forecasts for new homes bonus, council tax and business rates incomes, and the level of demand for our services. We take our role on supporting the conditions for stable growth very seriously.

During Covid-19 we have, like others, administered the Government's business grants programme, using information we hold to quickly distribute funds in the most effective way, to ensure we support a quick local economic recovery.

2019/20 actions		2020/21 actions
✓	Use the Council's Commercial Investment Strategy to support the local economy.	✓
✓	Maintain and enhance the Council's existing commercial estate to provide value accommodation for local businesses.	✓
--	Use of data to target our engagement and support of local business particularly in key clusters.	✓
✓	Refocus our economic development activity to support new and emerging sectors in our economy, to create the environment within which new business can thrive.	✓
✓	Following the adoption of the Prospectuses for Growth for the four main market towns to focus on transformational interventions that make the most of opportunities unique to each town, creating new jobs, stimulating economic growth, improving productivity and raising aspirations in and around each town.	✓
✓	To work creatively with key industrial sectors to create pathways for growth and linkages to skills and training provision.	✓

2019/20 achievements

The Local Industry Strategy is supported by a Combined Authority delivery plan with which the Council is collaborating. The strategy considers how the Council can assist in developing both the local economic environment and a skilled workforce to work within it, focussing on key opportunities for growth. HDC continue to pursue an active role in OxCam Arc supporting planned economic growth across the corridor to 2050.

A 'Better Business for All' pilot is underway which has been developed via funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). The pilot is a means by which the Council can engage with the local businesses and deliver the support they need to grow. Active work is underway to implement a local business CRM to ensure that we better understand and are able to support local businesses growth objectives, and activity around supporting town reopening and campaigns to support local businesses will continue.

Property acquisitions continue to be made within the District under the Commercial Investment Strategy, supporting local employment and our local 'offer'. The refreshed Commercial Investment Strategy and other place strategies will further define our commitment to supporting local growth.

In Q3 2019 HDC was awarded £150k by MHCLG to undertake a feasibility study to investigate economy-led regeneration in St. Neots. The Final Business case to be submitted to MHCLG by 31st July 2020. If successful, will see HDC awarded in excess of £6m to deliver a new commercial and community campus in a riverside setting, a revised culture offer, improved public realm, and new homes.

Working with a number of partners the Council is involved in the St Neots Smart Town initiative. Whilst the initiative is at an early stage, the intention is that by using data and emerging technologies to address transport and connectivity challenges it will help provide information that will influence the behaviours of residents and businesses.

The Council is an active partner in the 'Connecting Cambridgeshire' (CoCam) project which is in the process of investing approx. £25m in improving the digital infrastructure (superfast broadband, full fibre, public access wi-fi and 5G mobile coverage) across Cambridgeshire and which is a key factor for economic investment decisions by businesses.

Skills level and educational attainment

As a means by which residents are able to attract profitable work and in attracting employers to the area.

It is important that all young people can fulfil their potential and become active citizens with meaningful and valuable work. Furthermore, the workforce within the area needs to be supported to continue to gain meaningful employment and meet the demands for new skills in the labour market. This is particularly true to ensure we are able to support our residents to respond to the impacts of Covid, and to ensure the growth we see in Huntingdonshire being in high value adding sectors. In turn this will also contribute to the area's reputation for attracting inward investment and so grow and thrive. Finally, skilled and flexible workforces who possess digital skills will allow the Council to transform its current delivery models and offer new methods of service delivery. Post Covid activity will also be undertaken to ensure our working age population are able to respond to changes in local employment, and benefit from co-ordination of activity around gaining the skills needed within the local economy.

2019/20 actions

- Endorse a digital strategy for the area, to ensure that the needs of Huntingdonshire are properly understood and laid down to support the skills and economic growth agenda.
- Work with local businesses to understand and support their growth and recovery plans, and skills needs.
- ✓ Support apprenticeships, directly as an employer, but also through our supply chain and through promotion with local businesses.
- ✓ Continue to engage with schools through local careers fairs and EDGE, but also through fostering direct links between employers and educational institutions.
- ✓ Work to create pathways from local communities and schools to colleges and institutions such as iMet which support the development of skills required by the future economy.
- ✓ Develop and enhance our commitment to social value, and seek to encourage other local employers to do the same.

2020/21 actions

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2019/20 achievements

Work has also taken place with key local schools and colleges, including the iMet in Alconbury to support pathways for young people into fulfilling long term careers.

Safeguarding training for taxi drivers has been provided, ensuring good service, and supporting a vibrant wider economy.

Over sixty-one Leisure employees have obtained or are being trained to become qualified lifeguards. Lifeguarding posts are an entry level position for many staff and obtaining the qualification is the first steps towards a career in the leisure industry.

The Council was represented at the third annual school careers fair at Wood Green in December 2019 and also supported its organisation, supporting the development of long-term careers for the areas young people.

Limited benefits have been obtained to date from suppliers delivering a social value benefit (i.e. creating opportunities for the long-term unemployed or other disadvantaged groups, apprenticeships or other environmental or community benefits) to the District when being awarded contracts of a significant value.

The Council addressed this by introducing in February 2019 a requirement that social value considerations be including in all contracts over £100k.

Partner agency operational pressures

Financial challenges of partners impacting on demand for our services or reducing existing support.

There is evidence to suggest that as parts of the public sector reduce their input into communities, that the demand transfers to other agencies. In Huntingdonshire whilst partners work well together there continues to be the challenge of controlling additional demand and the corresponding budget pressures that it brings. Elsewhere financial pressures in one sector, have had significant financial and capacity impacts on the authority.

The impact of Covid has further emphasised these challenges, as the demand and income pressures generated by Covid-19 have begun to impact. Collective work on recovery to properly understand the links between cause, and financial impact will be central and driven through shared recovery activity across all public sector partners.

2019/209 actions

- ✓ Share budget planning activity with other public agencies to guard against unintended consequences of financial decisions.
- ✓ Continue to engage with near neighbours, particularly the County Council and health services to understand how best we can complement each other's activity
- ✓ Work closely with partners to understand the triggers and impacts of decisions on partners, and seek to proactively prevent costly crises, and deliver better outcomes.
- ✓ Use evidence to undertake targeted outbound contact with those residents that need it, and develop new ways of working which ensure that public services become more agile in responding to changing circumstances.
- ✓ Recognising that residents needs to not map neatly to organisational boundaries, establish multi-disciplinary teams (or digital services) with partners, where the evidence shows that these will better help us achieve our objectives.

2020/21 actions

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2019/20 achievements

There was engagement with Cambridgeshire County Council about their proposed 2019/20 budget and the likely impact service cuts would have upon the District. The County Council understand that the Council is willing to work collaboratively both with themselves and other agencies to consider alternative ways of working.

Strategies such as the parks and open spaces strategy, the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park business case, and the work in health absolutely links local activity with the wider benefits of improved physical and mental health, reducing partner demand, but also helping people to remain independent for longer, reducing future HDC costs.

We have worked with local GP practices and developed a health portal which is implemented in GP practices. It enables customers to access services around the common needs of GP patients, recognising the role of wider determinants of health. The advantage to the Council is earlier visibility of issues around housing, benefits and greater likelihood of addressing complicating factors such as isolation and mental health challenges. Reducing high cost demand, and poor outcomes. A similar portal which makes it easy for residents to navigate all services they need, irrespective of agency, is also live in the Oxmoor community.

We have worked proactively to demonstrate that proactive interventions deliver more substantial savings in the long term than merely making short term cuts to services.

In conjunction with other agencies, the Council is involved in looking to reduce the costs of responding to incidents of crime in the Huntingdon North ward which is estimated to cost the agencies £8m/annum to deal with.

Environmental pressures and sustainability challenges

Challenges to the long-term sustainability and attraction of our area.

There is growing recognition of the significant consequences of a failure to properly account for human actions, and wider climactic events which are becoming increasingly common. The national risk register includes flooding and severe weather events as risks that as a country we should prepare for. We also recognise the health impacts of pollution and poor human behaviour in terms of pollution and improper handling of waste as key challenges to the beauty and sustainability of our area.

2019/20 actions		2020/21actions
✓	To maximise the recycling rate within our district, seeking to reduce contamination, and deliver the highest possible rate of recycling and reuse of our recycled materials.	✓
✓	Develop proposals around improving the movement around the district, by way of modal shift and improved public transport. To promote sustainable transport options, including the provision of charging points for electric cars, and through encouraging walking and cycling as safe and practical alternate travel options.	✓
✓	To ensure the Digital agenda remains at the core of new infrastructure projects, allowing for flexible working where possible, minimising the need for am/pm peak travel.	✓
✓	Maximising the use of renewable energy technology in all suitable locations across the Councils assets and achievable land opportunities, and pursue technologies that allow us to minimise use of utilities.	✓
✓	Ensuring new residential developments are environmentally sustainable and make best consideration of key environmental factors during both the design and build stage and ongoing liveability.	✓
✓	Maximising the impact of our green space, by investing in and expanding green spaces across the district and seeking to achieve net-gain biodiversity where possible..	✓
--	Implementing a strategy to limit single use plastics across our estate. Removing such items from our cafes.	✓
✓	Working with parish and town councils to ensure that Neighbourhood Plans reflect the growing environmental and sustainability agenda.	✓
--	Working to understand our communities' ambitions on the sustainability agenda and supporting this through the way we undertake our business.	✓
--	Work with the CPCA to frame and deliver the ambition of the Climate Change Commission and the Electric Vehicle strategy.	✓

2019/209 achievements

Initial scoping work has taken place to establish how the District Council can contribute to this agenda and developing opportunities to take this forward as outlined above.

Sustainability considerations form part of the District's Parking Strategy and form a new part of the newly adopted Local Plan to 2036.

Internal Assurance Activity

HDC assures its financial controls through an internal audit team and a programme of internal audit activity. Extended periods of absence within the team has limited the delivery of the audit programme, the table below provides a summary of audit activity undertaken last year. A full review of the internal audit function is underway and additional resource has been agreed for this year to give confidence to the audit plan for 2020/21, notwithstanding any further impacts of COVID, including the expected second wave. The effect of the pandemic this year has meant that IA resource has been redeployed to more urgent financial business and as such, BAU IA activity has been suspended temporarily. Future plans for Internal Audit are being developed, using appropriately directed resource, a holistic and end-to-end engagement and a more risk and outcomes-based approach will deliver a greater impact and VfM output from internal assurance.

Internal Audit Reports Issued

Audit reports issued are listed in the table below - grouped by assurance opinion (see Annex B for further explanation) and showing action type and number of actions.

Audit area		Action type & No.	
		Red	Amber
Substantial			
	Disabled Facilities Grants	0	0
	Protocol Policy Mgt System	0	2
Adequate			
	Staff Recruitment *	0	12
	Housing Benefit 18.19	0	6
	S/w and H/w Asset Management	0	8
	Network Access Control	1	4
	Network System Resilience & Availability	0	3
Limited			
	Purchase Order Compliance *	0	9
	Lone Working *	1	5
	Delivery of Capital Schemes	0	0
No opinion given			
	GDPR (update only)	---	---
	Land Charges 18.19	0	4
* Draft reports (status as at 31/03/2020).			

A number of internal audit reviews from the 2019/20 plan are still underway (but work was paused due to the COVID situation). Reports are anticipated on the following audit reviews:

- Enforcement Policy
- Dashboard/Sickness
- achievement of KPIs
- Maintenance Schedule Planning

The assurance opinions given on the remaining key financial systems are set out in the table below.

Audit area	Level of assurance				Action type & No.	
	Substantial	Adequate	Limited	Little	Red	Amber
*Council Tax		✓			-	-
*Non-Domestic Rates		✓			-	-
*Housing Benefits – payments		✓			-	-
– recovery		✓			-	-
*Main accounting system		✓			-	-
*Accounts payable (Creditors)		✓			-	-
*Accounts receivable (Debtors)			✓		-	-

* These audit reviews were undertaken for quarters 1-3 but quarter 4 was not undertaken due to COVID/redeployment of resources. Consequently no end of year opinion and audit actions were provided for each of the areas and the above level of assurance is taken from Q1-3 work only.

Audit Opinion on the Council's internal control environment and systems of internal control in providing adequate assurance over key business processes and financial systems:

Due to the decreased resources available in 2019/20, a limited number of audits were conducted and full audit coverage across the Council was not achieved; therefore an adequate assurance opinion can only be given in respect of the assurance gained from those audits alone and does not represent the wider Council.

Confidence in the assurance can be taken from the fact that coverage included all the Council's key financial systems and IT Service; however it did not include a full wider coverage of general services.

Deborah Moss
Acting Internal Audit Manager

July 2020

How do we know our arrangements are working?

This statement builds upon those of previous years. Many of the key governance mechanisms remain in place and are referred to in previous statements which are available on the Council's website. The local Code of Corporate Governance (as at May 2018) is also available on the website and describes in more detail the governance processes in place.

The review of effectiveness was informed by the work of the Senior Management Team, who are responsible for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, the Internal Audit & Risk Manager's annual report and comments made by the external auditors.

Governance Framework

Assurance required upon	Sources of Assurance	Assurances received
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery of Corporate Plan priorities • Services are delivered economically, efficiently & effectively • Management of risk • Financial planning and performance • Effectiveness of internal controls • Community engagement & public accountability • Shared service governance • Project management & project delivery • Procurement processes • Roles & responsibilities of Members & Officers • Standards of conduct & behaviour • Training and development of Members & Officers • Compliance with laws & regulations, internal policies & procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constitution (incl. statutory officers, scheme of delegation, financial management and procurement rules) • Council, Cabinet, Committees and Panels • Corporate and service plans • Shared service joint committee • Policy framework • Risk management framework • Project management methodology • Financial Performance Monitoring Suite • Medium Term Financial Strategy • Customer Service Strategy • Consultation and Engagement Strategy • Complaints system • Head of Paid Service, Monitoring Officer and S151 Officer • HR policies & procedures • Whistleblowing & other countering fraud arrangements • Staff and Member training • Codes of conduct • Corporate/Senior Management Team • Independent external sources • Regular monitoring of outcome measures • Monitoring of economic indicators & associated financial receipts • Effective joint working arrangements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular performance and financial reporting • Annual financial report • External audit reports • Internal audit reports • Officer management groups • On-going review of governance • External reviews and inspectorate reports • Customer feedback • Peer reviews • Council's democratic arrangements incl. scrutiny reviews and the 'audit' committee • Corporate Governance Committee annual report • Staff surveys • Community consultations

Two key pieces of assurance are provided by Internal and External Audit.

The Internal Audit & Risk Manager stated in their 2019/20 annual opinion that the Council's internal control environment and systems of internal control provided adequate assurance over key business process and financial systems. However the opinion excluded any view on the effectiveness of the key controls associated with the financial management system due to work in that area not being completed at the time of preparing the annual opinion statement.

The external auditors, Ernst & Young LLP, issued an unqualified opinion on both the 2019/20 statutory financial statements and the Council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness (value for money) and in the use of its resources.

End