

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the CORPORATE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC SUITE (LANCASTER/STIRLING ROOMS), PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON, CAMBS, PE29 3TN on Wednesday, 24 September 2025

PRESENT: Councillor M J Burke – Chair.

Councillors J A Gray, P J Hodgson-Jones, A R Jennings and N Wells.

APOLOGY(IES): Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors I P Taylor and P Webb.

21 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 9 July 2025 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

22 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

23 CODE OF CONDUCT - ANNUAL UPDATE

The Committee received a report (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which provided a summary and update of completed or ongoing complaints received regarding alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct under the Localism Act 2011 since the start of the year.

The Elections & Democratic Services Manager set out the report, making particular reference to case number 25/67. A report published by the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGO), resulting in an apology which was issued to the complainant, some further training for statutory officers undertaken, and a slight tweak to the Monitoring Officer protocol. The tweak did not dilute down the purpose of the protocol, and ultimately it was the Council's responsibility to maintain high standards of Code of Conduct for Town/Parish Council's, but equally the onus was also on them to uphold these high standards.

In response to questions from the Committee, the Elections & Democratic Services Manager advised that in this case, the matter was referred to the Council without investigation by the respective body. Generally, if complaints were received Parish & Town Councils were encouraged to see if matters could be resolved locally, but in this instance it was referred to the Council and required further investigation.

In relation to the table at 3.1 in the report, information regarding how long investigations had been ongoing was something that could be incorporated in future.

Furthermore, information around the documented process for complaints was detailed in the Constitution which set out the procedure expected to be followed.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Committee noted the progress of any outstanding Code of Conduct complaints and the conclusion of cases resolved to date.

24 ANNUAL COMPLAINTS AND FEEDBACK REPORT 2024/25

The Committee received a report (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which provided information on complaints and compliments received by the Council between April 2024 – March 2025, and complaints referred to the LGO.

The Customer Service Complaints & Project Lead set out the report, clarifying that 21 complaints had been received by the LGO, not 22 as listed in the report in error. This figure did include the complaint referred to by the Head of Elections & Democratic Services Manager in the previous item.

The Committee was of the opinion that it would be useful to have a comparison of where the Council was in relation to neighbouring authorities in dealing Stage 1 and 2 complaints that do not go to the LGO. Such information would be included in the report next year, however there might be some gaps if some authorities did not have all information published or accessible.

In response to a question from the Committee regarding how easy it was for complaints to be made, the Customer Service Complaints & Project Lead advised that the website was quite comprehensive; complaints could be submitted via an online form, via letter, via email or by calling the customer service team.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Committee noted the data relating to formal Stage One and Stage Two complaints received (2024/25), compliments received and the LGO local authority report for Huntingdonshire District Council (2024/25).

25 ANNUAL REPORT ON HDC COMPLIANCE WITH THE INFORMATION RIGHTS ACT (FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT, ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION REGULATIONS AND UK GDPR) AND INFORMATION GOVERNANCE

The Committee received a report (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which provided an update on Information Governance activity and performance during 2024/25, highlighted any issues encountered and actions to be undertaken to improve performance.

The Information Governance Manager set out the report, noting that the report represented the final piece of a two-year review to bring the entire policy base up to date.

In response to questions from the Committee, the Information Governance Manager advised that the term “Exceeded Reasonable Limits” was specified within the legislation as a matter that required over 18 hours of work to collage the necessary information. He and his team had been trying to pick up those target areas where there were breaches by a specific service, and why these might have occurred; either because of resources, if training was not there or if any additional pressures may have contributed. Specific targeted training had been given to some services, and the Information Governance team had been increasing knowledge base with removing auto-complete off email addresses, which had caused some of the instances.

Futhermore, the Chief Executive commented that the profile had been raised around self-referral in the organisation. Manager’s had been talking about data breaches and learning opportunities, encouraging officers to self-report than be fearful.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Committee noted the contents of the report.

26 CORPORATE RISK REGISTER

The Committee received a report (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which provided an update on the Corporate Risk Register and presented a heat map relating to the current residual risk scores and a summary report. It also provided the Committee with the opportunity to comment on and offer challenge to the Corporate Leadership Team as part of the active management of risk.

The Head of Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer set out the report, making reference to the addition of noting any unchanged scores being set out clearly, as the Committee had previously requested. The Committee noted that the summary of risks were very helpful and were much clearer than they used to be.

In response to a question from the Committee regarding the trade-off between the resources put in to mitigate risks, and the impact of not mitigating those risks and using those resources somewhere else, the Head of Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer would provide the Committee with a written answer around this matter. The Committee also commented that it was helpful to know which risks where actions taken to mitigate that risk had looked at the likelihood or how to reduce the likelihood; in reducing the likelihood the impact would be reduced. The Chief Executive agreed and assured the Committee that officers were of that same mindset; it was not necessarily about removing all risk as that was often not cost effective for the level of resource required, when an impact might be tolerated as business as usual.

The Chief Executive further responded to questions from the Committee, advising that earlier in the day there had been a workshop session around the Workforce Strategy; one of the pillars of that was recruitment and retention and this had been received in the context of the LGR framework. Further discussions had taken place in terms of proposals around recruitment, succession planning and personal development, to help reduce leaving, retain talent and make the Council an attractive organisation. When recruiting, the Council had a strong brand and there had been high numbers of quality candidates. Though there were some niche areas that were problematic, broadly the Council had seen positive recruitment.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Committee commented on the reports in the appendices and progress with risk management.

27 INTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE REPORT

The Committee received a report (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) presenting an update of the work of the Internal Audit Service since the last meeting.

The Audit Manager – RSM set out the report, advising that there had been minor changes to the timings of some reviews in appendix B, but no audits had been cancelled or replaced. Training and the management support of the in-house team continued. Furthermore, he noted that the previous request of the Committee to include details of high priority actions had now been incorporated. It was key to note that with the exception of one of the reports, all had implementation dates between October and December so there were rigorous and tight dates agreed to get on top of some issues.

In response to questions from the Committee, the Audit Manager – RSM commented that officers agreed the actions and dates, but RSM would provide a challenge if a high priority action had an implementation date that was particularly far in the future. It was important to note that there were a significant number of audits, a significant number of actions and therefore a head of steam being built. In terms of whether target dates were realistic, the year-end will give a of whether these had been overly ambitious, and it would be clear during the next few Committee meetings whether those targets were on track.

The Chief Executive also commented that when officers were agreeing outcomes with auditors, it was a conversation rather than a date being imposed. Furthermore, it would have been remiss not to comment that LGR might affect capacity. However, through the work with RSM and through the training of managers, accountability was much more owned now than when she had first joined the Council when there was an enormous amount of non-complete actions.

The Committee noted that it was good to see the Scrutiny Panel's insistence on getting involved in setting targets at an early stage recognised in the report. In terms of the discrepancies for two of the performance indicators in terms of data

quality, there was nothing about going back to the Scrutiny Panel that looked at them to let them know there had been data quality issues in the indicators they had been scrutinising which it was felt pertinent. The Chief Executive commented that she would take that as an action herself to make sure that was fed back to the appropriate Scrutiny Panel.

The Committee were of the opinion that there had been a big step forward in the right direction recently and thanked the Audit Manager – RSM and the Corporate Director – Finance and Resources.

The Audit Manager – RSM advised the Committee that he had briefed the Executive Councillor – Governance and Democratic Services earlier in the year on the programme of work. There was also a direct line to the Chief Executive and to statutory officers for them to feed in, and the Committee had a key role in ensuring the programme of work delivered against the plan the Committee approved, so there was a strong line of communication.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Committee commented on and noted the update on work undertaken by Internal Audit up to end of September 2025.

28 INTERNAL AUDIT ACTIONS - UPDATE REPORT

The Committee received a report (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which set out the current position with respect to implementation of actions arising from Internal Audit reports.

The Head of Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer set out the report, noting that as per the Committee's request, action titles fully captured the actions summary; there had been some training on this and officers had worked on their understanding and enhanced the appendix as such. She further commented that the Committee had previously expressed interest in Procurement, and significant detail had been provided on the work she had undertaken since joining the Council. Since the Committee last met, an experienced Procurement Manager had been appointed, to begin in December, tasked with supporting her in the delivery of audit related actions.

In response to questions from the Committee regarding Action 1625, Overtime, and whether this had come from the Retention & Recruitment audit or the Home and Hybrid Working audit the Head of Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer would provide a written response to the Committee. Furthermore, she agreed with the suggestion from the Committee that it was helpful to know how many open actions were closed in the last quarter, and would take that away as a helpful suggestion. There was confidence that the revised dates would not be pushed back again, although there was a significant amount of work ongoing to be accommodated. The Revised Code of Procurement had been moved back until the end of December, and with the new Procurement Manager incoming, this would be a key priority for them.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Committee commented on and noted the current position regarding actions arising from internal audit reports.

29 APPROVAL FOR THE PUBLICATION OF THE ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2024 25 AND ANNUAL FINANCIAL REPORT 2024 25

The Committee received a report (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which set out the processes for finalising and publishing the Council's Annual Governance Statement (AGS) and Annual Financial Report (AFR) for 2024/25.

Clare Mellons – Partner EY – External Auditors set out the report, advising the Committee that they did expect to receive substantial assurance over every element of the balance sheet, other than property, plant and equipment and reserves. There was a potential timeline based on the national audit office guidance, and 2027/28 was where they would like to get to in terms of being able to issue a completely clean opinion. Furthermore, over the next couple of years the Committee should see a change in the format of the opinion. An awful lot of work had been undertaken by the Head of Finance, and the Council was on a good track to getting back to a clean financial statement's opinion again.

In response to questions from the Committee, Clare Mellons – Partner EY – External Auditors, advised that they were trying to prioritise and look at who was going to be the most impacted by LGR. That would be refined over the coming months to be specific about which authorities going into a new body, who would be the main body, noting that it was difficult for a new authority if they had a host of disclaimed opinions. The team were conscious this was coming down the line.

The Committee commented that with LGR, just because an entity had clean accounts before-hand, that did not mean they would remain so in the new body if it does not adapt to or be compatible with the introduction of new systems/culture. Clare Mellons – Partner EY – External Auditors responded that experiences in the past had seen that, however it was the sort of thing the auditors would be picking up in terms of value for money thinking as LGR approached. It was challenging for management to realign systems, but they would have an eye on this over the next few years. The Chief Executive further commented that as the implementation plan came in to being between the present time and vesting day, as part of that it would be expected that there would be a five-year transformation plan for the new unitary, and that is where those key component pieces of work would come into play. There was a sub-committee of the governance democracy risk workstream around procurement because one of the risks of the new unitary was not having sufficiently mapped out existing contracts, not having looked to take economies of scale prior to vesting day, and letting longer contracts than would be good practice before vesting day that would bind the new unitary. That was one aspect of the value for money consideration officers were already thinking of. It was going to be complex but she gave the Committee assurance that officers were already in that space and seeking to undertake due diligence of what could be done now.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Committee

- (1) received and discussed the Completion Report for Those Charged with Governance 2024/25 (Appendix 1);
- (2) approved the Annual Governance Statement (Appendix 2) and authorised the Executive Leader and Chief Executive Officer to sign the Statement on behalf of the Council;
- (3) approved the Letter of Representation (Appendix 3) and authorised the Corporate Director (Finance and Resources), as Section 151 Officer to sign it on behalf of the Council;
- (4) gave delegated powers to the Chairman of the Committee and the Corporate Director (Finance and Resources), as Section 151 Officer to authorise and sign the Annual Financial Report for 2024/25 (Appendix 4) on behalf of the Council; and
- (5) gave delegated powers to the Corporate Director of Finance and Resources, in conjunction with the Chairman of the Committee, to ensure that any minor amendments to the statement of accounts are completed before final publication.

30 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CORPORATE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

Consideration was given to the Committee's draft Annual Report to Council summarising the work it had undertaken during 2024/25 and any issues that arose in the year. The report had been prepared by the Chair of the Committee during the period covered by the report and was scheduled to be presented at the next full Council meeting. A copy of the report is appended in the Minute Book.

The Committee requested that the report should include headings around Audit Committee Membership and Impact as had been in previous reports. It also felt that the report glossed over the disclaimed audit and what was breakdown in the third line of defence. Further detail was also requested on internal audit, which needed to be more explicit, and to include a reference to the Constitutional Working Group and the work it had undertaken.

The view of the Committee was that it had become more effective, with more focus and more prodding, and a large part of that was down to the effectiveness of the Chair.

Accordingly, it was

RESOLVED

that the Committee

- (1) reviewed the draft annual report and decided what changes to make; and
- (2) authorised the Chair of the Committee to approve any amendments to the draft report.

31 CORPORATE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE PROGRESS REPORT

The Committee received and noted a report (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) on progress of actions in response to any decisions taken at previous meetings. The Committee noted that the Constitutional Working Group had met on 4 September and there was now a timeline on bringing something through to the Committee in November.

32 NOTE OF THANKS TO THE HEAD OF FINANCE

The Committee wished to pass on its sincere thanks to the outgoing Head of Finance, Sharon Russell-Surtees, in her final Corporate Governance Committee meeting. The Chief Executive similarly praised the Head of Finance's work and approach and for being a real asset to the Council.

Chair