

Executive Director's Assurance Report: Strategy and Partnerships

To: Audit and Accounts Committee

Meeting Date: 23 July 2025

From: Executive Director of Strategy and Partnerships

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Forward Plan ref: Not Applicable

Executive Summary: The purpose of this report is for the Executive Director of Strategy and Partnerships to provide assurance to the Audit and Accounts Committee that a sound system of internal control is in place and operating effectively for their areas of responsibility. This will support the delivery of the key functions of the Audit and Accounts Committee, in line with the committee's Terms of Reference.

Recommendation: This is an information-only report for noting. The Committee should consider the assurance provided over the adequacy of the Council's control environment and compliance with corporate governance controls.

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1. Creating a greener, fairer and more caring Cambridgeshire

1.1 The purpose of this report is for the Executive Director of Strategy and Partnerships to provide assurance to the Audit and Accounts Committee that a sound system of internal control is in place and operating effectively for their areas of responsibility. The report will also update the Committee on the implementation of planned actions to further strengthen arrangements for governance, risk and control, and the outcomes of whistleblowing referrals in the Directorate.

1.2 This will support the Audit and Accounts Committee to deliver the following key functions within the committee's Terms of Reference:

- Monitor the effectiveness of the system of internal control, including arrangements for internal audit, external audit, financial management, ensuring value for money, risk management, governance, assurance statements, supporting standards and ethics, and managing the authority's exposure to the risks of fraud and corruption.
- Provide independent assurance of the adequacy of the risk management framework and the associated control environment.
- Review compliance with the relevant standards, codes of practice and corporate governance policies.

1.3 As such, this will support the delivery of all seven of the Council's ambitions as set out within its Strategic Framework.

2. Background

2.1 The Council is required to include an Annual Governance Statement (AGS) as part of the Annual Statement of Accounts. The AGS is an important statutory requirement which enhances public reporting of governance matters. It should therefore be honest and open, favouring disclosure.

2.2 A key element of developing the AGS is the preparation of self-assurance statements by all directors, as a formal assurance from those managers who have responsibility for the development, implementation and maintenance of the governance environment.

2.3 These assurance statements require Executive Directors to:

- confirm that they have obtained assurance from their service directors on the key elements of risk and control systems for which they are responsible.
- confirm that all significant internal control matters brought to their attention have been or are being properly dealt with.
- confirm that the risks and internal controls for which they are responsible have been sufficiently addressed in order to provide reasonable assurance of effective financial and operational control, compliance with the Code of Corporate Governance and with other laws and regulations; and

confirm that to the best of their knowledge, these arrangements have been complied with in all material respects throughout the period.

- identify any exceptions to the above and/or any significant governance issues¹ the Executive Director is aware of, and how these are being addressed.

3. Highlights from the Annual Governance Statement

- 3.1 In the Annual Governance Statement action plan there is reference to "carrying out Strategic Commander Training for all Directors/Officers on call". Following the decoupling of our Emergency Planning service from Peterborough City Council, which was combined with strengthening the capacity within our own Emergency Planning team, we have not only fulfilled this requirement we have also introduced a new cadre of trained Tactical Officers. This group comprises a cohort of senior colleagues, mainly Heads of Service, drawn from a range of relevant services who are likely to be involved in an emergency response or recovery situation. This means we will have 24/7, 365-day emergency on-call cover from a tactical and a strategic representative as well as a representative from the Emergency Planning team. The Emergency Management Plan for the council has been updated to reflect these changes to reflect that our council-wide capability and resilience in Emergency Planning has been significantly improved.
- 3.2 Following the approval of Our Future Council Change Strategy at Strategy, Resources and Performance committee on 31 October 2024 the "system of Change Boards" required by the Annual Governance Statement has been implemented across the council. This strengthened governance is overseen by a council-wide Change Board chaired by the Chief Executive. Establishing a coherent and consistent approach to programme and project management is now underway across our portfolio of cross-cutting change programmes as well as the change programmes within Directorates. This will enable us to report on the performance of these programmes to the Strategy, Resources and Performance committee. This reporting is part of other changes agreed by the Strategy, Resources and Performance committee at its meeting in October 2024 when it approved the new Performance Management Framework - approval of this framework being another requirement of the AGS.
- 3.3 One other aspect of the Annual Governance Statement which we want to highlight is the "Local Government Association health check on the council's approach to communications and consultation". The results of this health check have informed a refresh of the work of the communications team under the leadership of its new Head of Service. In line with the recommendations from this health check the team continue to strengthen its use of visual/ video content to highlight the work of the authority using the Strategic Framework Ambitions as a means of telling the story of the council as a

¹ N.B. Significant governance issues are defined as those which:

- Seriously prejudice or prevent achievement of a principal objective of the authority
- Have resulted in the need to seek additional funding to allow it to be resolved, or has resulted in significant diversion of resources from another aspect of the business
- Have led to a material impact on the accounts
- The Audit Committee advises should be considered significant for this purpose
- The Head of Internal Audit reports on as significant in the annual opinion on the internal control environment
- Have attracted significant public interest or have seriously damaged the reputation of the organisation
- Have resulted in formal action being undertaken by the Chief Financial Officer and / or the Monitoring Officer

whole in meeting the organisation's priorities. Alongside this, work has been carried out on improving the guidance and support available to officers carrying out consultation and engagement with residents. This guidance will be developed further during 2025. It provides a strong basis for our collaboration with local government partners on the community engagement related to Local Government Reorganisation.

4. Overall Control Environment

- 4.1 Strategy and Partnerships are instrumental in supporting and strengthening the council-wide control environment. The hierarchy of Change Boards, established in 2024/25 to ensure the effective governance of the Our Future Council Change Strategy, is supported by the programme and project management team in this Directorate. This team help to reinforce the consistency of approach throughout our change portfolios. The Head of Change works directly with the Chief Executive to ensure the council-wide Change Board is robust in tracking the progress of work across all these portfolios.
- 4.2 As part of the Our Future Council Change Strategy the Executive Director for Strategy and Partnerships leads the Target Operating Model Board. One of the principal functions of this board is to support the implementation of the Organisational Design Principles. Colleagues from the HR team work with services to ensure these principles are applied to all organisational change/re-structures. The Organisational Design Principles outline the spans of control, number of layers (or tiers) in the hierarchy and the principles for job and structure design. The benefits of having a planned and formalised approach to organisational design include:
- clearer accountabilities
 - reduction and removal of overlap in accountabilities between roles
 - improved transparency of pay and grading
 - improved career pathways as the visibility of accountabilities and responsibilities is clearer
 - closer alignment to the vision and direction of the council
 - a reduction in management layers, leading to stream-lined decision making
 - empowerment as decisions are made at the appropriate level without the need for referral up through numerous levels of management.

This board has been meeting monthly since August 2024. A lot of this work relates to achieving savings that were approved in the council's Business Plan. Applying these design principles means we take a consistent approach to workforce re-design and that any reduction in capacity is delivered in a way that ensures the council's continued effectiveness.

- 4.3 The Policy, Insight and Change service was responsible for leading the refresh of the council's Performance Management Framework, approved by the Strategy, Resources and Performance Committee in October 2024. Colleagues from this service support others across the council to prepare their performance reports for all the Policy and Service committees. In accordance with this new framework at its meeting on 24 June 2025 the Strategy, Resources and Performance Committee received the council's first Annual Performance Report. This report brought together the strategic Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) from all the council's Policy and Service committees. Strategy, Resources and Performance will continue to see these council-wide Strategic

KPIs on a quarterly basis at its future meetings. This development means this committee will be seeing council-wide finance, performance and risk, thereby strengthening its role in scrutinising the work of the authority.

- 4.4 Allied to our ability to improve our council-wide view of performance the Audit and Risk team co-ordinate and support the quarterly Corporate Leadership Team's Risk Review meetings. As a corporate service Strategy and Partnerships currently owns 6 of the 13 risks in the Corporate Risk Register. This Corporate Risk Register is brought to Strategy, Resources and Performance on a six-monthly basis with an annual report on risk going to this committee each June/July.
- 4.5 In addition, the Human Resources (HR) service facilitates the weekly and monthly reporting to the Corporate Leadership team on Health and Safety; the quarterly reporting to the leadership team on workforce data, including information about wellbeing; the quarterly reporting on the take-up of the council's Learning and Development offer; and the quarterly reporting on the progress with our Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion action plan. These reports are considered on a regular basis either at the Staffing and Appeals committee and/or the Communities, Social Mobility and Inclusion committee.
- 4.6 All this activity, led by Strategy and Partnerships, contributes to the council's control environment and we have seen improvements in a number of these areas over the last year.

5. Outstanding Audit Actions

- 5.1 Electronic Records Management High Priority Recommendation 1 Design and implementation of technical controls for the retention of electronic records - there has been some progress on this recommendation with partial completion, such as the improved understanding of the need to store any records appropriately. The technical controls sit with the Customer and Digital Service who will be presenting a paper to the Corporate Leadership Team, including on the exceptions process. To close this recommendation we need to address some points including "the requirements for the transfer of email to approved storage solutions". Service area line of business systems already have storage as a requirement as part of their business as usual we need to ensure that we have addressed the use of email.
- 5.2 Electronic Records Management Medium Priority Recommendation 2 Policies, standards and procedures related to the data lifecycle - the terms of reference for the Information Management Board have been agreed and the Information Governance policies have been reviewed ready for approval and implementation.
- 5.3 Electronic Records Management Medium Priority Recommendation 3 Detailed and up to date inventory of data and data ownership - we have undertaken a review of the information asset register and we are aware that there are some gaps. We have contacted colleagues in emergency planning as they are working on gathering information on key line of business systems to support service business continuity plans. This work will be progressed to ensure that the council has the key systems noted along with the processing reasons. Whilst we have not yet rolled out wider awareness pieces to embed the importance of the asset register, the Information Management Board has received papers on the importance of records management.

- 5.4 Electronic Records Management Medium Priority Recommendation 4 Retention schedules developed, approved and implemented - we have reviewed and updated the retention schedule and are finalising the view prior to sharing with the Information Management Board, who will have oversight of this work. Further discussions are underway regarding the minimum and maximum periods for certain records.
- 5.5 Direct Payment Audit Medium Priority Recommendation - the only other outstanding action relates to the delay in the Direct Payments audit. This was due to take place in 2024/25 but was paused due to the prioritisation of other work. This audit is now underway with completion expected by the end of August 2025.

6. Whistleblowing, Complaints and Inspections

Whistleblowing

- 6.1 No whistleblowing disclosures have taken place within the Directorate.

Complaints

- 6.2 The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman launched a revised complaint handling code in February 2024. This code applies to complaints where there is no statutory process in place, such as the statutory processes in Children's and Adult's Social Care. The changes set out in this code will see the county council moving from a three stage corporate complaints process to a two stage corporate complaints process by April 2026. To ensure consistency in the application of this code, and to assist the organisation with gathering data on all types of feedback - complaints, complements, representations on council policy or procedures and suggestions relating to service improvement - we will be introducing a new feedback system, something the council does not currently have. This system will enable us to report more effectively on the feedback we receive and help us with learning lessons from this feedback. The implementation of this new code, and the associated system development and customer service training, is being overseen by the Executive Director of Strategy and Partnerships who is leading a project group to ensure this work is delivered on time and in accordance with the Ombudsman's requirements.
- 6.3 Within Strategy and Partnerships the total number of complaints received in 2024/25 and in quarter 1 of 2025/26 are listed below.

Stage 1

- Two for the Libraries Service
- One for the Household Support Fund
- One for Changing Futures
- One for the Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Service
- One for Policy Insight and Change
- One for Democratic Services

Stage 2

- One for Household Support Fund
- One for Changing Futures

- One for the Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Service

Stage 3

- One for the Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Service

Inspections

- 6.4 Strategy and Partnerships have been subject to two inspections over recent months. On 12 February 2025, the Communities Service received its annual Prevent Duty assurance visit from the Home Office. The visit measures our performance against seven set benchmarks and for 2024/25 the Council achieved an 'exceeding' rating on each of the seven benchmarks. This really is excellent news. The recommendation provided for 2025/26 is 'to build on the communications and engagement work for Cambridgeshire'.
- 6.5 From 29 April - 2 May 2025 Cambridgeshire Skills, our further education and skills service, received a full inspection from Ofsted. The inspection looked at all adult education and apprenticeships delivered by the county council. Ofsted rated the service good overall with one area judged outstanding. This outcome is really positive as the Ofsted recommendations aligned with our self-assessment prior to the Inspection. The service will be taking forward the actions arising from this inspection in the coming months.

7. Appendices

7.1 The following appendices are attached to this report:

- [Appendix 1](#) – Executive Director of Strategy and Partnerships Annual Assurance Statement 2024/25.
- [Appendix 2](#) - Executive Director of Strategy and Partnerships Actions within the Annual Governance Statement Action Plan
- [Appendix 3](#) - Audit Actions Overdue in Strategy and Partnerships as at 30 June 2025
- [Appendix 4](#) – Prevent Duty Assurance statement from the Home Office
- [Appendix 5](#) – [Ofsted Report on Adult Education](#)

8. Source Documents

8.1 None