



**West Suffolk Annual Governance Statement  
2019-2020**

## **1. Scope of responsibility**

1.1 West Suffolk Council was created on 1 April 2019, assuming the district-tier functions and responsibilities that were previously the responsibility of St Edmundsbury Borough Council and Forest Heath District Council.

1.2 This is the first annual governance statement of West Suffolk Council, and explains how the council has:

- conducted its activities in a lawful way, in accordance with proper governance standards
- put in place arrangements to ensure public money is safeguarded and accounted for, and being used in an economic, efficient, and effective way
- managed risks to its business
- put in place arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regards to economic, efficiency and effectiveness.

1.3 This report covers the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020 and therefore does not look in detail at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as this will be covered fully in next year's annual governance statement, however our response to the pandemic is covered in paragraph 8. Where in this document it mentions 'proposed activity for the coming year and areas for improvement' it is too early to give a full picture of governance arrangements and the impact of COVID-19.

## **2. The creation of West Suffolk Council**

2.1 Until 31 March 2019, St Edmundsbury Borough Council and Forest Heath District Council were responsible for district council functions in their area. In September 2017, both councils agreed a draft business case to create a single council, noting that it had the potential to improve value for money, financial savings and self-sufficiency; simplicity; democratic accountability; influence and resilience.

- 2.2 This business case was supported by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, leading to regulations requiring governance arrangements to be formed to establish the new council. Councillors from Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury (the predecessor authorities) came together to form a shadow council, accompanied by a shadow executive, comprised of both predecessor authorities' cabinets. They were supported by an officer implementation group, who led the day to day work to create the new authority.
- 2.3 The implementation plan, agreed by the shadow executive, was based upon 5 principles:
- ensuring West Suffolk Council was fully empowered to deliver its functions and responsibilities on 1 April 2019
  - minimising the impact of the creation of the new council on residents, communities, businesses, service users, and other local stakeholders and partners
  - harmonising policies to enable the new council to operate with a clear purpose
  - not to take avoidable decisions which could create or restrict the operation of West Suffolk Council
  - focusing on delivering the commitments in the business case
- 2.4 Particular focus was placed within the implementation plan on ensuring there were clear policies and strategies for the new council; setting the budget and precept; ensuring governance and constitutional arrangements were in place; making provisions for the transfer of staff, assets and liabilities; producing a new scheme of councillors' allowances; reviewing civic leadership and supporting the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's electoral review of West Suffolk.
- 2.5 Of particular importance to this annual governance statement was the work undertaken to ensure the transfer of strategies, policies and plans that are key to the delivery of the council's work. In practice, the vast majority of such documents were already harmonised between St Edmundsbury and Forest Heath, and as such limited work was required to create a single approach to

West Suffolk. In some cases, it was agreed to undertake an in depth review of the relevant documents once the new council was created to ensure they were robust and reflective of the new council.

- 2.6 The successful delivery of the comprehensive implementation programme ensured that throughout the first year of its operation, the council had robust governance arrangements, as is set out throughout this governance statement.

### **3. The purpose of the code of corporate governance**

- 3.1 The Local Code of Corporate Governance adopted by the predecessor councils was carried forward to West Suffolk Council. The code, which is available on the council's website, was prepared in accordance with the principles of the CIPFA SOLACE Framework, 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government'.
- 3.2 The code sets out the council's governance framework. The governance framework comprises the systems, processes, culture and values by which the council is directed and controlled and the activities through which they account to, engage with and lead 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.
- 3.3 The system of internal control is a significant part of that framework and designed to manage risk to an acceptable level. It could not eliminate all risk of failure to achieve the council's aims and objectives, but it has sought to provide reasonable rather than absolute assurance of effectiveness. The system of internal control is based on an ongoing process designed to identify, prioritise, and manage the risks to the achievement of the council's aims and objectives.
- 3.4 This annual governance statement seeks to identify how the council has complied with its code of corporate governance throughout the year 2019-20.

## 4. The governance framework

4.1 There are seven core principles of good governance identified in the CIPFA SOLACE Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework 2016 as follows:

- Principle A – behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law
- Principle B – ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement
- Principle C – defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits
- Principle D – determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes
- Principle E – developing the entity’s capacity including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it
- Principle F – managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management
- Principle G – implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit to deliver effective accountability

4.2 The Local Code of Corporate Governance set out the principles of good governance and described in full the arrangements the council has put in place to meet each of these.

4.3 During 2019-20, the council has undertaken a number of actions to improve its corporate governance arrangements. A summary of the highlights is shown below.

### **2019-20 corporate governance activity highlights**

During 2019-20, the council has:

- developed a new strategic framework for West Suffolk
- evaluated the effectiveness of areas of focus within the implementation plan, such as the new constitution and councillors’ allowances.

<b>Principle A</b>	<b>Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law</b>
<b>Key elements of the council's governance framework</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constitution</li> <li>• Employees code of conduct</li> <li>• Councillors code of conduct</li> <li>• Contract procedure rules</li> <li>• Anti-fraud and anti-corruption policy</li> <li>• Whistle blowing policy</li> <li>• Anti-money laundering policy</li> <li>• Registers of interests</li> <li>• ICT security policy</li> <li>• Monitoring Officer</li> <li>• Safeguarding policy</li> </ul>
<b>Activity within Principle A in 2019-20</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In May 2019, the council held its first elections, welcoming 64 councillors. A robust induction plan was delivered to support councillors in understanding their role.</li> <li>• A new Scheme of Allowances was adopted in May. This was subject to an interim review in the winter to ensure it was operating effectively to support the new councillors; this was supported by a review of councillors' allowances conducted by the internal audit team to ensure the scheme is clear, consistent, and properly applied.</li> <li>• In February 2019, ahead of its commencement, the shadow council had adopted a new constitution for West Suffolk. This has been subject to assessment by the Constitution Review Group during the year to evaluate whether it is operating effectively to support decision-making within the council. No significant changes were proposed.</li> <li>• In July 2019 new procedures were endorsed by the Standards Committee for assessing concerns that councillors were in breach of the code of conduct.</li> <li>• In February 2020, a new West Suffolk Strategic Framework was agreed by the council, for the period 2020-24. It set out a revised vision for the council,</li> </ul>	

<p>namely "Being ambitious in supporting and investing in our West Suffolk communities, businesses and the environment, to encourage and manage growth in prosperity and quality of life for all". It also sets out the council's ways of working, including being environmentally responsible, having a focus on individual places, and collaborating and working in an integrated way.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anti-fraud related messages were published on the West Suffolk intranet at regular intervals to increase staff awareness.</li> <li>• The council has updated its children and adult safeguarding policy and developed its approach to ensure that all staff understand their safeguarding obligations and can address accordingly. Its process and policy have been successfully audited by Suffolk County Council's Performance and Quality Assurance Advisor.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Proposed activity for the coming year and areas for improvement</b></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Local Government Association has confirmed that it will be consulting on a new model code of conduct for councillors. The council will be considering this consultation and whether it wishes to adapt its own code in future.</li> <li>• The Standards Committee are committed to a further review of the procedures used to consider standards complaints, which has been supplemented by an officer assessment of current working practices.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Principle B</b></p>	<p><b>Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement</b></p>
<p><b>Key elements of the council's governance framework</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual report</li> <li>• Reports and minutes available on council's website</li> <li>• Consultation statement</li> <li>• Equality statements</li> <li>• Uses complaints and feedback to aid learning for future service development.</li> </ul>

### **Activity within Principle B in 2019-20**

- West Suffolk Council developed its approach to consultation and engagement during 2019-20, for example, by procuring new software to carry out qualitative analysis, and taking a more corporate approach to consultation and engagement. This latter approach involves central co-ordination of planned consultation activity and ensuring learning from consultations in different areas is shared between teams, for example in preparing the engagement approaches to the Local Plan.
- The two taskforces and two review groups established following the 2019 council elections also involved significant engagement with stakeholders. The Rural Taskforce, for example, held four stakeholder events in local villages and carried out a survey of residents and businesses to understand better the issues and challenges faced in rural areas of West Suffolk.
- West Suffolk has improved the openness of its annual environmental reporting by incorporating the Annual Environmental Statement within the council's annual report.
- Western Assembly of Youth is a young persons' led platform, arising from a collaboration of a number of high schools, whereby students work together across West Suffolk to address issues that affect young people, in partnership with West Suffolk Council. This group has the opportunity to engage on local issues and projects and consultation and represents one central location where requests can be made for young persons engagement on a variety of issues, and helps to validate the engagement as meaningful.
- The council has reviewed and reflected on the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's guidance on managing unreasonable complainant behaviour. As a result, West Suffolk Council has updated its corporate complaints policy document to include a persistent and unreasonable behaviour policy.
- All corporate complaints reviewed under step two (step one being investigation of the complaint by an assistant director, or manager in the relevant service area) are reviewed by the council's legal team. If the legal team upholds, or partially upholds, any complaint their report detailing their outcome of the review will include recommendations for the relevant service to implement.

- On 6 April 2020 powers were transferred from the police to West Suffolk Council for enforcing illegal on-street parking contraventions. These Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE) powers apply to both on street parking (roads and highways) and off-street parking (public car parks run by West Suffolk Council). CPE allows West Suffolk Council to better promote safe and sensible parking, while also tackling local parking issues concerning residents. It also allows the police to focus more heavily on tackling safety, threats and harm, and more serious crimes.
- In January 2020, the council began to webcast some committee meetings via the Vimeo broadcast platform, to encourage participation in meetings from those who could not normally attend our meetings.

#### **Proposed activity for the coming year and areas for improvement**

- Newmarket Youth Action Group has been working on a youth strategy for young people, developed by a collaboration of the statutory and voluntary sector. The aim is to bring the strands together and cement the strategy within the town council approach for young people.
- Mildenhall and Bury St Edmunds localities are in the early stages of developing youth action groups following what has been developed in Newmarket, and ultimately following the framework that Haverhill Town Council has been doing for many years with success.
- Western Assembly of Youth's ambition over the next year is to align with West Suffolk Council to create a youth council, already there are lead roles in health, leisure, media, transport, environment, key topics areas that impact on young people across West Suffolk.

<b>Principle C</b>	<b>Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits</b>
<b>Key elements of the council's governance framework</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic framework</li> <li>• Growth investment strategy</li> <li>• Business plans</li> <li>• Medium term financial strategy</li> <li>• Local plans</li> <li>• Risk management policy and toolkit</li> <li>• Investment framework</li> </ul>
<b>Activity within Principle C in 2019-20</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• West Suffolk Council's new strategic framework for 2020 to 2024 (published in February 2020), reiterates the council's commitments to its three strategic priorities of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• growth in West Suffolk's economy for the benefit of all our residents and UK plc</li> <li>• resilient families and communities that are healthy and active</li> <li>• increased and improved provision of appropriate housing in West Suffolk in both our towns and rural areas.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• The development of the Strategic Framework was undertaken in conjunction with the development of the council's budgetary framework, including three workshops open to all councillors entitled Planning for the Future. Aligned with this approach, the budget, medium term financial strategy (MTFS) and strategic framework were approved at the same meetings, to emphasise the inherent link between the council's budget allocations and its strategic priorities.</li> <li>• The MTFS approach included a round of budget challenge workshops across all service areas to review the council's key budget assumptions taking into account the 2018-19 year end performance and current 2019-20 data, service demands, planned housing growth, sensitivities, and risks.</li> <li>• Cabinet agreed to establish the Environment and Climate Change Task Force in July 2019. The task force will set out recommendations on the council's future role in protecting and enhancing the environment, both in the way in</li> </ul>	

which it carries out its operations and through specific initiatives. The task force follows an evidence led approach, to set out actions that are meaningful, measurable, and actionable. The themes established are:

- travel and transport
- renewables
- housing, green spaces, and biodiversity
- community engagement
- waste and recycling
- council consumption and accreditation

The recommendations emerging from discussions between task force councillors and officers, in the context of the workstreams, can be considered in two groups:

- short term, or quick win, actions that can be completed by 2022
- longer term recommendations that can potentially contribute to achieving a net zero carbon council ambition by 2030

The actions undertaken under each theme will link into a Carbon Neutrality 2030 Trajectory Plan, which will set out the approach the council could take to achieve net carbon zero by 2030.

- The council adopted the Single Issue Review and Site Allocation Local Plan covering the former Forest Heath area in September 2019. These documents together with the existing local plans complete the Development Plan for West Suffolk which set policies for delivering sustainable development – housing, employment and environmental protection and enhancement looking forward to 2031. The council is now delivering those policies, and this is monitored through the annual monitoring report.
- The West Suffolk Asset Management Strategy and Plan (AMSaP) was adopted by Council in December 2019 and sets out a clear strategic and planned approach to how the council manages, develops, and maximises the potential of its portfolio of land and property assets. Producing the AMSaP was one the undertakings given in the West Suffolk Strategic Framework 2018-20 and has also been drafted in line with the approaches set out in the West Suffolk Growth Investment Strategy, which was adopted by both former Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury councils in February 2018.

The AMSaP supports the council’s approach to behave more commercially and

<p>through future acquisitions will help to ensure that the council continues to achieve the management of an overall balanced asset portfolio based on risk and return. This means a portfolio which delivers wider social, economic and growth benefits for West Suffolk, as well as generating additional revenue income streams which support the delivery of council services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time frames for establishing performance measures were re-established this year, with revised targets set alongside the development of the budget to ensure resource allocations are aligned to delivery of priorities.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Proposed activity for the coming year and areas for improvement</b></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The council has committed to consolidate and update the suite of local plans and prepare a single West Suffolk local plan. The first consultation is due to commence in the summer of 2020 and the council will be inviting comments on issues and options for sustainable growth planning for the period to 2040. A second consultation is programmed for June 2021.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Principle D</b></p>	<p><b>Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes</b></p>
<p><b>Key elements of the council's governance framework</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultation strategy</li> <li>• Families and communities strategy</li> <li>• Health and Social Care Alliance</li> <li>• Enforcement</li> <li>• Balance scorecards</li> <li>• Procurement policy</li> <li>• Medium term financial strategy</li> <li>• Business partners model</li> <li>• Business case model</li> <li>• Commercial guidance</li> </ul>

### **Activity within Principle D in 2019-20**

- The council started work on a change programme that was anchored in three key themes: customer experience, structure and workforce development, and digital and systems intelligence. The purpose was to ensure the organisation was ready to meet the longer term financial challenges as well as responding to opportunities and challenges for example development of digital services and the environment. A number of projects had been agreed by the Leadership Team and some are already underway. Outcomes have been clearly defined and the Leadership Team acts as the programme board. (NOTE: the approach of this programme is under review in light of the impact of COVID-19 on budgets and service delivery).
- Building Control continues to work collaboratively with other Suffolk building control services, we have achieved the ISO 9001 Quality Assurance standard and continue to market our services with the help of our Suffolk Development and Marketing Officer.
- Learning and development activities on enforcement techniques and best practice have been undertaken across West Suffolk services, and enhanced procedures have been introduced for evidence storage.
- New civil sanctions have been used for the first time to respond to rogue landlords.
- We worked with a Suffolk-wide Home Improvement Agency in 2019-20 to support our residents' access to disabled facilities grants, and other important services, to meet their essential needs and maintain independence in their home. We have also worked with Suffolk partners to put in place a new fast track system for the most urgent disabled facilities grants cases, to reduce hospital admissions and increase discharge of patients.
- A number of council-wide expenditure budget reviews were held in the year to consider levels of budget provision, behaviours and ownership in support of work around the medium term financial strategy.
- In forming a new council, a new committee report template was developed to help councillors focus on key aspects of decision-making and ensure effective internal communication on future decisions.
- Changes were made in the year to waste collection rounds to make the service more efficient and robust.

- We inform decision-making around policies and interventions with research and evidence of good practice from other councils and think tanks. Through the weekly policy alerts prepared by the corporate policy team and disseminated to staff and councillors, evidence gathered from evaluation and horizon scanning is shared with decision makers.
- Revised key performance indicators within balance scorecards aligned behind the strategic priorities have been reported and reviewed monthly by Leadership Team and quarterly at Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee.
- The Suffolk Office of Data and Analytics, which was established in June 2018 and is a collaborative effort between all Suffolk local authorities, Suffolk Constabulary and the two clinical commissioning groups in Suffolk, continues to deliver data and analytics to its partners and the wider Suffolk system. This output has provided West Suffolk Council with a wider range of data and evidence to be used in the development of policy and strategy.
- We now provide regular update newsletters to councillors, parishes and planning agents on the work of the development control service and have established an agents' forum to continue building relationships and improving the quality of planning application submissions.
- We have expanded the LifeLink social prescribing project, a multi-agency approach led by West Suffolk Council that supports residents to overcome social barriers and issues in their lives. This is done through health coaching techniques and measured using an internationally recognised tool, Patient Activation Measures.

#### **Proposed activity for the coming year and areas for improvement**

- We will contribute to the forming of a West Suffolk wide LifeLink steering group made up from key stakeholders and funders which will ensure the governance and shaping of the project is at its optimum. A new system of debt recovery, supported by government funding, will be introduced in respect of civil sanctions for rogue landlords.
- We are currently working with partners on a new fit for purpose system to deliver disabled facilities grants related works from a 'grab' rail all the way through to an extension for disabled people in their homes.

<b>Principle E</b>	<b>Developing the entity’s capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it</b>
<b>Key elements of the council’s governance framework</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workforce plan</li> <li>• Learning and development policy</li> <li>• Constitution</li> <li>• Employees performance review framework</li> <li>• Disciplinary procedure</li> <li>• Job descriptions</li> </ul>
<b>Activity within Principle E in 2019-20</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will continue to maximise the opportunities of the apprenticeship levy both through apprenticeship contracts and upskilling our current work force to complete apprenticeship qualifications.</li> <li>• The West Suffolk Council Workforce Strategy sets out our people management aims, goals and objectives to assist the council in achieving its strategic aims. A workforce strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis has been conducted which will help to inform the development of the HR strategy and plans in the future.</li> <li>• On reviewing this strategy, the council will continue to build on our well-embedded approaches to ensure we have the right people, in the right place, with the right values and skills to deliver.</li> <li>• The ambitions in the workforce strategy are challenging and measurable in order that we can operate successfully in the increasingly complex public sector environment, whilst creating a rewarding and engaging place for people to work. The key areas which form the pillars of the strategy are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ skills and behaviours</li> <li>➤ pay, reward and recognition</li> <li>➤ recruitment and retention</li> <li>➤ workforce planning and data</li> <li>➤ health and wellbeing</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Future training approaches will focus on maximising opportunities for remote</li> </ul>	

<p>learning. Ongoing training within service areas, will include, for example, in respect of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, mental health first aiders, county lines, and investigatory training for enforcement officers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workforce planning is monitored on a monthly basis to make best use of our resources and in so doing match resources with finance in both the short and long term.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Proposed activity for the coming year and areas for improvement</b></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are evaluating the methods through which councillor development is delivered to encourage engagement with the programme and support the development of networks across peer councils.</li> <li>• Updating the West Suffolk Council Workforce Strategy, which will build on our well-embedded workforce approaches which help to ensure we have the right people, in the right place, with the right values and skills to deliver.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Principle F</b></p>	<p><b>Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management</b></p>
<p><b>Key elements of the council's governance framework</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial procedure rules</li> <li>• Contract procedure rules</li> <li>• Treasury management strategy and growth investment strategy</li> <li>• Budget monitoring</li> <li>• Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee</li> <li>• Strategic risk register</li> <li>• Investment framework</li> <li>• Risk management toolkit</li> <li>• Balance scorecards</li> <li>• Internal audit</li> <li>• Business continuity plan</li> <li>• Complaints</li> </ul>

### **Activity within Principle F in 2019-20**

- Workshops for cross council expenditure reviews as well as a review of all major income streams. The income reviews took into account ongoing trends, impact of pricing, benchmarking information, market conditions and intelligence and an assessment of potential new and existing growth areas.
- Increased focus on ensuring that staff have undertaken appropriate cyber security e-learning.
- Revised strategic approach to ICT, covering 2019 to 2022, encompassing strategic principles for the renewal and selection of new technologies within the council to reinforce a sound basis for achieving business benefits, value for money, standardisation and integration of business systems corporately.
- Revised treasury management strategy and code of practice.
- Update of Capital Strategy 2018-19.
- Budget monitoring reporting has been enhanced and improved with focus on income and expenditure.
- The strategic risk register is reviewed and updated quarterly to reflect our risk profile at that time.
- The business continuity plan has been subject to review and updated to ensure it is fit for purpose.

### **Proposed activity for the coming year and areas for improvement**

- The council's compliance with CIPFA's Financial Management Code will be reviewed against CIPFA's recently issued guidance notes to evidence that good financial management practices are in place

<b>Principle G</b>	<b>Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting and audit to deliver effective accountability</b>
<b>Key elements of the council's governance framework</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Council's website</li> <li>• Statement of accounts</li> <li>• Annual governance statement</li> <li>• Annual report</li> <li>• Medium term financial strategy</li> <li>• Anti-fraud and anti-corruption policy</li> <li>• Whistle blowing policy</li> <li>• Data protection policy</li> <li>• Officer Information Governance Group</li> <li>• Balance scorecards</li> <li>• Annual internal audit report and opinion</li> </ul>
<b>Activity within Principle G in 2019-20</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A piece of work was undertaken during the year to review the council's compliance with the Local Government Transparency Code 2015 and consider ways in which this could be improved still further.</li> <li>• A risk-based plan of audit work was delivered during the year by the internal audit team, designed to support the internal audit service manager's annual audit opinion and add maximum value to the council. All work was undertaken with due regard to the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards.</li> </ul>	
<b>Proposed activity for the coming year and areas for improvement</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further increased emphasis will be given to the need for agile and flexible use of internal audit resources as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, while still ensuring that a robust audit opinion can be delivered at the end of the year.</li> <li>• Further work on the Local Government Transparency Code will be undertaken to check that any suggested improvements have been implemented where appropriate.</li> <li>• We will be beginning a programme of health checks within services to</li> </ul>	

evaluate compliance with the Data Protection Act, two years after its introduction, and support improvements where required.

- Also, we will be working with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, including its new Chair, to evaluate its work programme and effectiveness to support a robust scrutiny programme within the council.

## **5. Review of effectiveness**

- 5.1 The annual review of the governance framework and system of internal control involves:
- a self-assessment exercise
  - consideration of the relative significance of audit issues raised and audit opinions issued during the period
  - the external auditor's comments, and other review agencies and inspectorates' reports
  - where appropriate, production of an action plan where progress is assessed and recorded.
- 5.2 The Leadership Team reviews the draft annual governance statement prior to submission to the Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee, which approves this statement.
- 5.3 The internal audit team is responsible for giving assurance to councillors, the Head of Paid Service, s151 Officer, Leadership Team and the Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee on the design and operating effectiveness of the council's risk and internal control arrangements.
- 5.4 Based upon the audit work undertaken during the financial year 2019-20, as well as assurances made available to the council by other assurance providers, the Service Manager (Internal Audit) has confirmed that reasonable assurance can be provided that the systems of internal control within these areas of the council, as well as the risk management systems, are operating adequately and effectively. Similar to previous years, internal audit work has however identified

a number of areas where existing arrangements could usefully be improved, and agreed actions will be followed up by the internal audit team in the usual way.

- 5.5 The council is subject to an annual programme of independent external audits and inspections. The external auditor summarises the findings from his audit of the financial statements and the council's systems which support them and his assessment of arrangements to achieve value for money.
- 5.6 The review of the effectiveness of the governance framework for 2019-20 concluded that the arrangements continue to be regarded as fit for purpose in accordance with the governance framework.
- 5.7 The council recognises that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on its activities after the balance sheet date (between 1 April 2020 and the preparation of this annual governance statement as at 30 June 2020). However, this is still an emerging situation and it is not possible to fully determine the impacts across the range of local authority activities, finance and governance at this stage. As such, determining the effectiveness of the governance framework during this period would be premature. More information in relation to the council's response is set out in section 8.

## **6. Significant governance issues**

- 6.1 In determining the significant issues to disclose, the council has considered whether issues have:
- seriously prejudiced or prevented achievement of the council's objectives
  - resulted in a need to seek additional funding to allow it to be resolved or had resulted in a significant diversion of resources from another aspect of the council's services
  - led to material impact on the accounts
  - received adverse commentary in external inspection reports
  - been treated by the Service Manager (Internal Audit) as being significant in internal audit reports issued during the year

- attracted significant public interest or seriously damaged the council's reputation
- resulted in formal action being taken by the s151 Officer or the Monitoring Officer
- councillors had advised that it should be considered significant for this purpose.

6.2 There are no significant governance issues to disclose for 2019-20.

## **7. Assessment of Brexit**

7.1 In anticipation of the UK's exit from the EU on 31 January 2020 the council has kept a watching brief regarding developments around the withdrawal agreement and the future relationship with Europe. This has included engagement with Local Government Association activities and briefings and participation in a cross Suffolk officer group working on the implications of the UK's withdrawal for the local area. The council's risk assessment has considered risks and opportunities which may or may not arise from Brexit.

## **8. COVID-19 pandemic**

Towards the end of 2019-20, a global pandemic was declared in connection with the COVID-19 virus. Emergency responses were triggered, and lockdown measures were introduced from the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 in the UK. Not only is COVID-19 already having a significant adverse effect on the economy, it has impacted upon some of the services that the council delivers. Despite the challenges, West Suffolk Council has been able to react to ensure statutory services continue to be delivered and that residents and businesses continue to receive the support they need at this difficult time. Some examples as to how COVID-19 has impacted on governance since March 2020 include:

## **The council's response to the pandemic and the impact on service delivery**

- Prior to the full lockdown, the council's business continuity plans were implemented, ensuring that decisions could be made as required to understand the emerging risks and impact of the virus and government lockdown measures, re-evaluate service delivery, focus on statutory service provision and release resources to support COVID-19 efforts.
- The council has worked with key national, regional and local partners, such as the Suffolk Resilience Forum, to embed clear principles and adapt new ways of working to encourage services across sectors to act together to understand each other's challenges and risks and ultimately support the community.
- New ways of working had to be rapidly deployed to support a homeworking environment. Initial focus was upon IT and equipment deployment, and development of new working practices to ensure staff were able to work from home. The council has also been required to consider the support networks available to staff and evaluate the mental and physical wellbeing impacts of the change in working practices.
- The crisis has required the council to evaluate its data sharing practices, working with the Suffolk Office of Data and Analytics and partner authorities to enable the quick and consistent sharing of data to identify vulnerable residents.
- It has been critical to ensure that the council communicates quickly and clearly with key stakeholders, including residents and local businesses. Throughout, the council has had to be mindful of the need to ensure effective communication with those who may not have access to the internet or other electronic communications whilst also balancing the need to maintain safe working practices for staff.
- The council's constitution has established practices to enable decision-making in emergency situations that were utilised where required. In April, the Government issued regulations allowing for a range of changes in council working practices, such as remote decision-making committees and the cancellation of elections in May 2020 to ensure councils could function effectively and focus on COVID-19 efforts. The council has now successfully deployed virtual decision-making for all meetings, ensuring councillors are still

effectively engaged in the decision-making process and reducing reliance on emergency practices.

- The crisis has had a significant impact upon the council. Increased engagement with key councillors was necessary to aid understanding of the work being undertaken by the council, and the impact on the council itself, most notably on its financial position.
- The council continues to plan for the phased return for staff to the workplace, as part of the recovery process. This included health and safety planning as well as building in organisational resilience, evaluating the impacts that the virus will have on service demand in the short to long term, and buy-in to recovery while still working remotely.

#### **New areas of activity as part of the national response to coronavirus and any governance issues arising**

- The council has provided support measures for local businesses to help them through these challenging times. Business grants have been paid to West Suffolk businesses with work undertaken to reduce the risk of fraudulent claims and that businesses meet relevant criteria, whilst balancing the need to pay support in line with government timescales.
- The council developed arrangements to administer the Government's initial grant schemes for small businesses and retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, and established a specific scheme for allocating grants under the discretionary scheme. Staff were redeployed to a business support team who called around 3000 businesses to encourage them to apply. The discretionary scheme included delegated arrangements for officers to approve grant applications.
- Work has taken place alongside partners such as the Business Improvement District, individual businesses, and Suffolk County Council on town centre recovery to establish a safe trading environment for our residents and businesses.
- The 'Home But Not Alone' service, which has received national recognition has been established, with the aim to provide a response to the calls from residents in the area. This required significant considerations in relation to sharing of data and working practices between partner and voluntary agencies, and welfare support for staff involved in operating the scheme.

- The council has had to adapt quickly to demands for support for rough sleepers and homeless residents, including the requirement to ensure all residents have housing. This has required a multi-agency approach to find new providers and consideration of innovative housing solutions.

### **The funding and logistical consequences of delivering the local government response**

- COVID-19 triggered two different governance models for the council during the immediate response phase. Internally, the council's business continuity plan was activated. Externally, the emergency planning processes of the Suffolk Resilience Forum (SRF) was activated. Both have well defined governance processes, including political input. The SRF process also provides the framework for collaborative work on recovery.
- During the pandemic, a lot of the work carried out under these two structures was entirely collaborative with public and voluntary sector partners, mostly managed through tactical groups and operational 'cells' of the SRF. Some of this work built on existing partnership arrangements (for instance in relation to economic development). In the case of the community and health aspects of the response, however, new coordination arrangements were created at very short notice (for instance the Collaborative Communities Board, and its various sub-groups e.g. housing). The same applies to new aspects of the response such as the 'Safer Spaces' work to reopen town centres or the work to create a Test and Trace structure.
- Some of these groups will continue for some time into the future, and others may need to be reactivated if there are further waves of infection. Whenever they end, the council will be looking to retain and transfer any newly strengthened partnership arrangements into its normal operations, particularly those with new community groups that have been established in response to the pandemic.
- West Suffolk is continuing to lobby Government for the funding needed to continue to provide the vital services and roles that the council performs.

## **Assessment of the longer-term disruption and consequences arising from the coronavirus pandemic**

- The council is contributing to Suffolk-wide work to support communities and businesses to recover from the COVID-19 crisis.
- The current stage of the pandemic means that as yet, the longer-term direct impacts of COVID-19 on the council cannot be fully understood. This would include the potential costs associated with social distancing measures on the council itself and projects it is delivering; or the impact on council finances, for example changes in car parking income.
- Further, it is not possible to understand the wider economical and societal impacts; for example, changes in demand for housing and homelessness services.
- The strategic and tactical officer groups required by the business continuity plan as well as the council's normal Leadership Team meet regularly to understand the immediate and emerging risks to the council, and the changing situation within communities. This includes evaluation of the council's current and long-term financial situation, and the impact on corporate projects and programmes. Fortnightly formal briefings take place with Cabinet members to communicate the emerging picture. The council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee will also be evaluating ways that they can contribute to supporting recovery efforts.

## **9. Assurance by Chief Executive and Leader of the Council**

We approve this statement and confirm that it forms the basis of the council's governance arrangements and that these arrangements will be monitored and strengthened in the forthcoming year as described above.

Signed:

**John Griffiths**  
**Leader of the Council**

Date:

Signed:

**Ian Gallin**  
**Chief Executive**

Date: