ANNUAL
GOVERNANCE
STATEMENT
2023-24

Suffolk
County Council

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

The County Council's governance arrangements have stood up well in a year where, globally, the context and future remains uncertain. Internationally, nationally, and locally, there are significant economic, environmental, political, and technological challenges and changes.

Across the country, councils' finances remain under strain from the rising costs imposed by inflation, and the increasing levels of demand for services - in particular children's social care, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and home to school transport. Government funding has not kept pace with these cost pressures, resulting in Suffolk County Council developing a substantial savings programme for 2024-25 and using a significant drawdown from the Council's reserves to enable setting a balanced budget for 2024/25. Consequently, robust and good governance is pivotal to the Council's sustainable delivery of services for its residents. It is a clear priority for the Council's leadership, supported by the continued good management by our staff.

Looking ahead, we know that there will be a General Election in 2024 and County Council elections in May 2025. The Council is also in the process of considering the proposed in-principle devolution deal, following the ten-week public consultation process which ended in May 2024. Effective governance will continue to support the financial management and transformation of the council, maximising efficiency and productivity where we can by, for example, the use of technology and redesign of services.

There have been some significant changes to the Council's governance set-up over the past year. In July 2023, Stephen Meah-Sims started as the new Executive Director of Corporate Services and Deputy Chief Executive, and Sarah-Jane Smedmor was appointed Executive Director for Children and Young People in March 2024.

In January 2024, a report by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) found significant concerns with the way SEND services are delivered by the NHS and Suffolk County Council. A key priority for the new Executive Director for Children and Young People will be to oversee the continued improvement of these services, working with children and families, health, and education partners. This includes the delivery of a Priority Action Plan submitted to Ofsted and CQC in March 2024, and

the implementation of a new SEND Strategy 2024-29. The Council has prioritised investment in strong officer and political leadership, more frontline staff, and a new governance model for SEND services across the partnership, to deliver the improvements and outcomes needed, including the appointment (in April 2024) of an Independent Chairman of the new SEND Improvement Board.

There have been important external assurances for Adult Social Care and Suffolk Archives. From April 2023, the CQC acquired new powers to assess the provision of adult social care by local authorities in England. Suffolk County Council volunteered to be one of five local authorities to pilot the assessment approach. The CQC's final report, published in November 2023, rated the overall quality of Suffolk County Council's Adult Social Care services as "Good". Also, in July 2023, following an inspection from the UK Archive Service Accreditation Committee, Suffolk Archives were moved from provisional to full accreditation status.

Many of the actions from the 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement have been implemented. These are covered in this document in the assurance statements from officers relating to their areas of responsibility.

The Council's Annual Plan 2024/25, which sits alongside this Annual Governance Statement as a key delivery document of the Council, also includes a renewed focus on providing value for money for the Suffolk taxpayer. Progress on the delivery of key commitments in the Annual Plan will be tracked through our performance management arrangements.

Risk management, throughout the organisation, remains a priority. The strategic risk register is reviewed regularly at a senior political and officer level to ensure it is dynamic and relevant for a currently volatile external environment.

This year's Annual Governance Statement conveys the ongoing efforts of staff and Councillors to uphold the core principles of good governance for the Council. The assurance statements and resulting actions continue to underline the importance of good governance and prudent investment in, and delivery of, services for the people of Suffolk.

NICOLA BEACH Chief Executive

APPROVAL OF THE ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT

We have been advised of the result of the review of the effectiveness of the governance framework by the Audit Committee, and that the arrangements continue to be regarded as fit for purpose in accordance with the governance framework.

To the best of our knowledge, the governance arrangements as defined within the Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance have continued to operate effectively.

The Annual Governance Statement shows that our high standards have been maintained and no significant issues are reported.

Specific opportunities for improvement in governance and internal controls are detailed within the action plan. We propose, over the coming year, to take steps to address these opportunities to further enhance our governance arrangements.

We are satisfied that these actions will deliver, over appropriate timescales, the improvements necessary and these will continue to be monitored, evaluated, and reported on as part of our next annual review.

COUNCILLOR MATTHEW HICKS

Leader of the Council

NICOLA BEACH

Chief Executive

SCOPE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Suffolk County Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised. It is also responsible for ensuring that public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently, and effectively.

In discharging this overall responsibility, the Council is responsible for putting in place proportionate and appropriate arrangements for the governance of its affairs and facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, which includes arrangements for the management of risk.

The Council has approved and adopted a code of corporate governance, which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy)/SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers) framework 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework (2016 Edition)'.

The Annual Governance Statement explains how the Council has complied with the code and meets the requirements of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 in relation to the publication of a statement on internal control.

The governance arrangements for the Council's wholly owned companies (Concertus, Vertas, and Opus People Solutions - operating under the trading name 'Vertas Group') and partially owned company (housing joint venture Edmundham Developments) are incorporated within this Annual Governance Statement.

WHAT IS GOVERNANCE?

Good governance is about achieving the intended outcomes while acting in the public interest at all times.

Governance is about how the Council ensures that it is doing the right things, in the right way, for the right people in a timely, inclusive, open, honest, and accountable manner.

Corporate governance generally refers to the processes by which an organisation is directed, controlled, led, and held to account.

The Council's governance framework aims to ensure that, in conducting its business, it:

- Operates in a lawful, open, inclusive, and honest manner.
- Makes sure public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for, and spent wisely.
- Has effective arrangements in place to manage risk.
- Meets the needs of Suffolk communities.
- Secures continuous improvements in the way it operates.

The Council concurs with the view that:

"Good governance leads to good management, good performance, good stewardship of public money, good public engagement and, ultimately, good outcomes for citizens and service users. Good governance enables an authority to pursue its vision effectively as well as underpinning that vision with mechanisms for control and management of risk ... and governance arrangements should not only be sound but also be seen to be sound."

THE PURPOSE OF THE GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

The governance framework includes a set of legislative requirements, governance principles, and management processes which the Council follows:

Principles of corporate governance

Principle A: Integrity and Values

- Staying true to our strong ethical standards of conduct
- Respecting the rule of law
- Creating a culture where statutory officers and other key post holders are able to fulfil their responsibilities
- Ensuring fraud, corruption and abuse of position are dealt with effectively
- Ensuring a safe environment to raise concerns and learning from our mistakes

Principle B: Openness and Engagement

- Keeping relevant information open to the public and continuing their involvement
- Using consultation feedback from the public to support services and budget decisions
- Providing clear rationale for decision making – being explicit about risk, impact and benefits
- Having effective scrutiny to constructively challenge what we do and decisions made

Principle C: Working Together

- Staying true to our strong ethical standards of conduct
- Respecting the law
- Creating a culture where statutory officers and others key post holders are able to fulfil their responsibilities
- Ensuring fraud, corruption and abuse of positions are dealt with effectively
- Ensuring a safe environment to raise concerns and learn from our mistakes

Principle D: Making a Difference

- Having a clear vision and strategy setting out our intended outcomes for citizens and service users

Principle E: Capability

- Having clear roles and responsibilities for Council leadership
- Maintaining a development programme that allows Councillors and officers to gain the skills and knowledge they need to perform well in their roles
- Evaluating Councillor and officers' performance, compliments and complaints to enable results (outcomes) to be measured and enable learning

Principle F: Managing Risk and Performance

- Ensuring that effective risk management and performance systems are in place, and that these are integrated in our business systems/service units
- Having well developed assurance arrangements in place – including any commercial activities
- Having an effective Audit Committee
- Having effective counter fraud arrangements in place

Principle G: Transparency and Accountability

- Having rigorous and transparent decision making processes in place
- Maintaining an effective scrutiny process
- Publishing up-to-date and good quality information on our activities and decisions
- Maintaining an effective internal and external audit function

This framework is used to examine the services being provided and whether they are satisfying the objectives set. The governance framework has been in place at the Council for the year ended 31 March 2024 and up to the date of approval of the annual report and statement of accounts.

HOW THE COUNCIL WORKS

1. Elected Councillors set the Council's strategic direction by developing and keeping under review the corporate objectives of the Council. The objectives give a clear direction for what is important politically and drive the work of Council services every day.
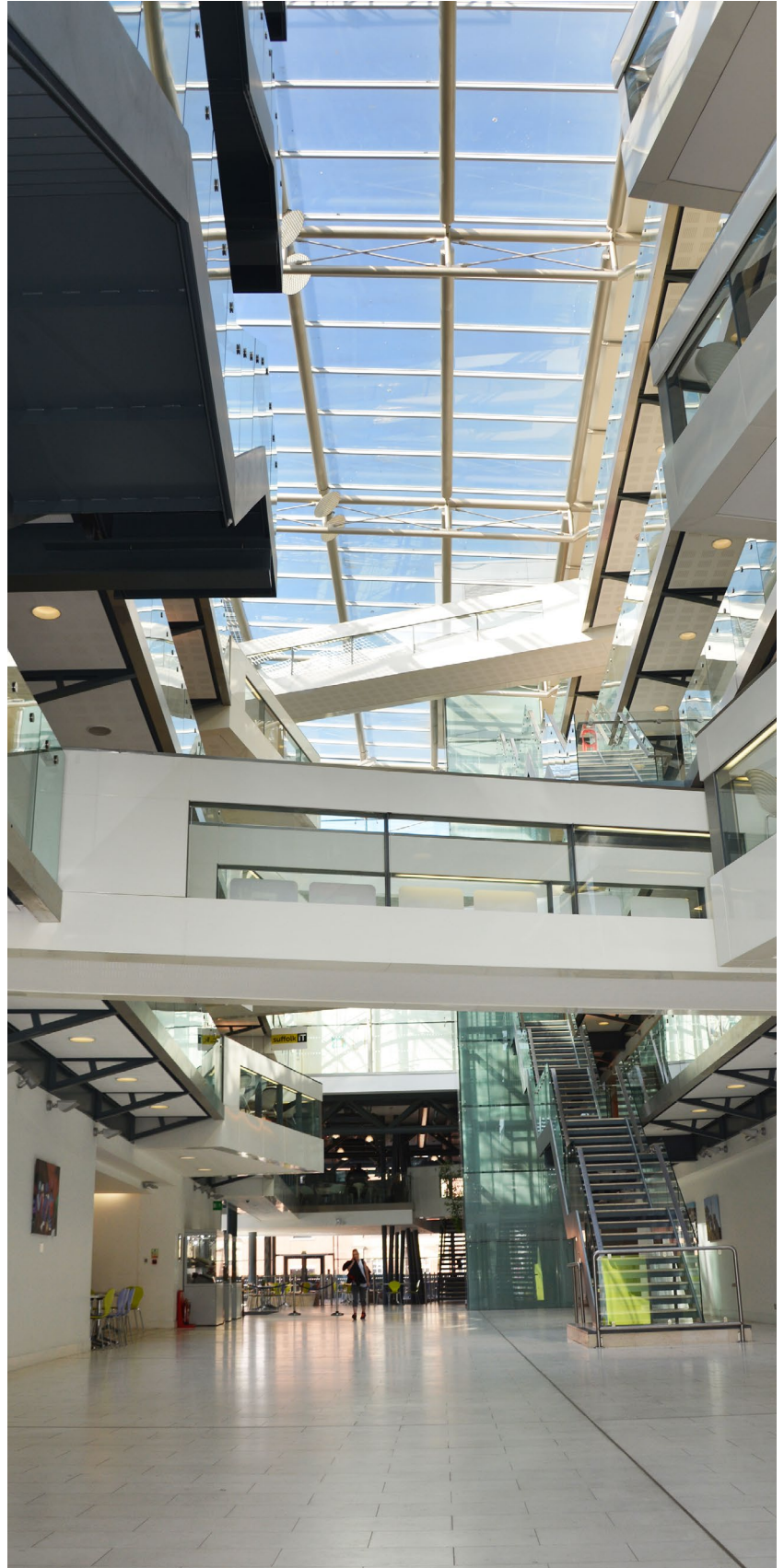
The objectives for 2023-24 were:

I. **Looking after our health and wellbeing** – maximising our ability to innovate, adapt and work in partnership with individuals, communities, and partners.

II. **Strengthening our local economy** – maximising economic opportunities that benefit everyone, so that no one is left behind.

III. **Protecting and enhancing our environment** – working to protect and enhance Suffolk's environment and biodiversity, while also reducing harmful carbon emissions.

IV. **Providing value for money for the Suffolk taxpayer** – being bold and challenging in ensuring value for money and accountability to local people in everything that we do.

2. There is an established, integrated planning process which ensures Council services are delivered in accordance with the Council's objectives and represent the best use of resources. The 2023/24 Annual Plan was approved at the meeting of the County Council, alongside the budget, in February 2023.

3. Performance is measured against corporate objectives.

4. There is a written Constitution in place which specifies the roles and responsibilities of the executive, non-executive, scrutiny, and officer functions, setting clear delegation arrangements and protocols for effective communication.

5. Codes of Conduct have been developed, which define the standards of behaviour for Councillors and employees.

6. The Constitution, Schemes of Delegation to members and officers, Financial Procedure Rules and other supporting procedures clearly define how decisions are taken and highlight the processes and controls required to manage risks, with appropriate review procedures.

7. The Audit Committee promotes and maintains high standards in relation to the operation of the Council's Code of Corporate Governance, ensuring that the Council operates within the law, in accordance with the Council's internal procedures, and follows the framework and guidance issued by CIPFA/SOLACE. The Committee is also responsible for monitoring the risk management framework and control environment to ensure the Council's financial and non-financial performance is properly monitored.

HOW THE COUNCIL WORKS

8. Statutory officers support and monitor the Council's governance arrangements, ensuring expenditure is lawful and the Council continues to comply with relevant laws and regulations, internal policies, and procedures.

9. There are arrangements for whistleblowing and for receiving and investigating complaints from the public, supporting the measurement of the quality of services for users.

10. The Council seeks to keep communities informed, giving local people the opportunity to get involved in the decision-making process, promoting local democracy, and supporting and shaping places and local communities.

KEY ROLES

The key roles of those responsible for developing and maintaining the Governance Framework are:

The Council	■ Approves the Annual Plan. ■ Approves the Constitution including the Financial Regulations. ■ Approves key policies and budgetary framework.
Cabinet	■ The main decision-making body of the Council. ■ Made up of the Leader of the Council and a number of Cabinet members with responsibility for different portfolios.
Audit Committee	■ Provides independent assurance to the Council on the adequacy and effectiveness of the governance arrangements, risk management framework and internal control environment. ■ Promotes high standards of Member conduct and approves the Annual Statement of Accounts and Annual Governance Statement.
Scrutiny Committees	■ Support and challenge the Council in carrying out its responsibilities.
Corporate Leadership Team	■ The Chief Executive has overall accountability for the governance framework. ■ Implements the policy and budgetary framework set by the Council and provides advice to Cabinet and the Council on the development of future policy and budgetary issues and oversees the implementation of Council policy. ■ Accountable for developing and maintaining the Council's governance and risk framework.
Chief Finance Officer (s151)	■ Leads and directs the financial strategy of the Council and ensures the Council controls and manages its money well. Is suitably qualified and experienced, and ensures the Finance Team is fit for purpose. ■ Accountable for developing and maintaining the Council's internal control and counter fraud framework. ■ Contributes to the effective corporate management and governance of the Council.
Monitoring Officer	■ Advises the Council on ethical issues, standards, and powers to ensure the Council operates within the law and statutory Codes of Practice. ■ Overall responsibility for the maintenance and operation of the Whistleblowing Policy and contributes to the effective corporate management and governance of the Council.

KEY ROLES

The key roles of those responsible for developing and maintaining the Governance Framework are:

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Internal Audit	■ Provides independent assurance and opinion on the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's governance, risk management and control framework. ■ Delivers an annual programme of risk-based audit activity, including counter-fraud and investigation activity. ■ Makes recommendations for improvements in the management of risk.
External Audit	■ Audits/reviews and reports on the Council's financial statements (including the Annual Governance Statement), providing an opinion on the accounts and use of resources, concluding on the arrangements in place for securing economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the use of resources (the value for money conclusion).
Directors & Managers	■ Responsible for developing, maintaining, and implementing the Council's governance, risk, and control framework. ■ Contribute to the effective corporate management and governance of the Council.

REVIEW OF EFFECTIVENESS

In preparing the Annual Governance Statement the Council has:

- Reviewed the Council's existing governance arrangements against the revised CIPFA/SOLACE 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government framework - 2016 Edition' good practice guidance.

- Reviewed the Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance to ensure it reflects this guidance, including the seven principles of good governance and associated required actions and behaviours taken by the Council that demonstrate good governance.

- Assessed the effectiveness of the Council's governance arrangements against the Local Code of Corporate Governance.

- Obtained assurance statements from officers relating to their areas of responsibility, including actions from the 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement.

The review of effectiveness is informed by the three lines of defence (i.e., the relationship between managers responsible for the operational delivery; accountable managers who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment; the Head of Internal Audit's independent risk assurance role) and inspections made by external auditors and other review agencies and inspectorates.

This is demonstrated here:
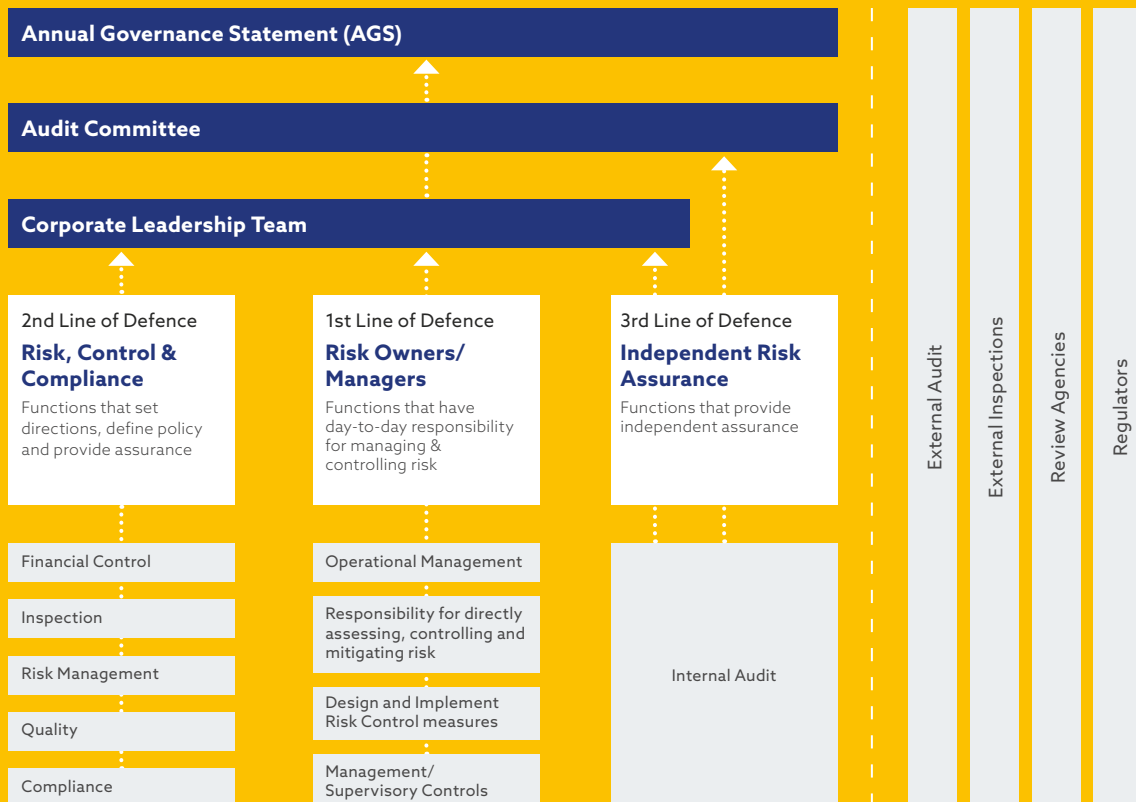
The roles and responsibilities are applied in a pragmatic, real-world manner. In reality, a significant amount of policy, associated guidance, training, and tools are provided at second line with a proportionate, risk-based application of assurance and compliance activity. Internal Audit use a risk-based methodology to determine their annual programme to support the application of the governance model within the organisation. This allows the second and third lines of defence to place emphasis in the right place and work effectively and efficiently to help management achieve organisational objectives through delivery, support, and challenge.

GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK – ASSURANCE

The key sources of assurance that inform this review and where it is obtained from are outlined below

WHERE DO WE NEED ASSURANCE?	WHERE CAN/DO WE GET ASSURANCE FROM?
Compliance	Constitution
Democratic Engagement & Public Accountability	Audit Committee, Council Executive & Scrutiny
Management of Risk	Internal & External Audit
Financial Management	Independent & External Sources
Members & Officers Roles & Responsibilities	Financial Strategy
Standards of Conduct & Behaviour	Complaints System, Counter Fraud & Whistleblowing
Action Plan Approved & Reported on	HR Policies & Codes of Conduct
Effectiveness of Internal Controls	Risk Management Strategy & Framework
Services Delivered	Performance Management System

GOVERNANCE

NIGEL INNISS
(Head of Governance & Monitoring Officer)

The Council has a Constitution made under Section 37 of the Local Government Act 2000. Its purpose is to enable the Council to set a strategic vision for the provision of local public services, and to function as a champion for Suffolk. The Constitution supports development of the Council's capacity, and the capability of the individuals within it, and ensures that decisions are taken while respecting the rule of law.

Through openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement, local people have every opportunity to know how decisions are made, and how to influence those decisions. The Council consults on major decisions, agendas and papers for meetings are published, Council and Cabinet meetings are webcast, and the public can participate in such meetings by asking questions or raising petitions.

ELECTIONS

By-elections were held in May 2023 for Felixstowe Coastal and Priory Heath, respectively, and for Woodbridge in October 2023.

Preparations for the May 2025 County Council elections soon will begin in earnest. We will provide a comprehensive induction programme for all Councillors, whether returning or new to the authority. The induction programme, overseen by the Councillor Development Programme, continues to provide positive, conducive, and coordinated training that enables sound decision making and reflects the Council's values. It covers aspects such as the Code of Conduct, equality and inclusion, safeguarding, and health and safety.

COUNCIL SCRUTINY AND MONITORING

The Council, Cabinet, and other committee meetings continue to be held face-to-face, in line with legislative requirements.

The Council has undertaken prerequisite training with chairmen and committee members to ensure they have a full understanding of their roles and responsibilities, and how these contribute to the governance of the Council.

The Council faces numerous challenges in 2024/25, including ensuring its financial resilience, and improving the delivery of SEND services following the recent OFSTED/CQC inspection.

Various committees ensure that the Council is subject to rigorous scrutiny and held to account in its work by robustly challenging the Council's plans and overarching decision making for the people of Suffolk.

The main Scrutiny Committee consists of twelve Councillors from different political groups, who are not members of the Council's Cabinet. The Scrutiny Committee is part of the arrangements for making sure the Council carries out its responsibilities properly.

During 2023/24 the Scrutiny Committee has considered various topics, including the Fire Service Inspection Action Plan, cybersecurity, and the new highways contract. It also plays a key governance role in the Council's annual budget setting and provides its recommendations to Cabinet.

GOVERNANCE cont...

The Audit Committee consists of seven Councillors. During 2023, Council agreed to increase the number of independent co-opted members sitting on the Audit Committee from one to two, with the second member commencing their role in October 2023. The Audit Committee is responsible for reviewing the Council's corporate governance arrangements and critically analysing opportunities for improvement in governance, risk management and internal controls. In 2023/24, the Committee has considered the Council's corporate performance and risk management processes; customer compliments, comments, and complaints; and information governance management, including data handling.

The Audit Committee continues to take an interest in the Council's commercial activities and the governance and assurance of the Edmundham Developments LLP joint venture project was an agenda item at the September 2023 meeting.

The wholly owned companies (Vertas Group) were subject to review again in November 2023, and the Committee remains satisfied that the Council's roles and responsibilities as shareholder are satisfactorily managed by the structures in place.

In September 2023, the Audit Committee considered the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's (LGSCO) Annual Review Letter for the year ending 31 March 2023. Of the 143 enquiries relating to the County Council received by the LGSCO during the reporting period, 75 (52%) were referred for investigation and 62 (83%) of these were upheld, compared to 61% last year. The remaining thirteen complaints were not upheld.

The Annual Standards Report for 2023/24 will be considered by the Audit Committee at their meeting in June 2024. During 2023/24, the Monitoring Officer received seven complaints about instances when a Councillor had allegedly breached the Code of Conduct. Of the seven instances, a breach was found to have occurred in one of these. Counting the multiple complaints regarding a former Councillor in 2020/21 as one complaint, this gives a total of seventy-seven complaints since the current arrangements prescribed by the Localism Act 2011 were introduced in July 2012.

In conclusion, the Council continues to demonstrate sound decision making following the election of the new Council in May 2021, and as we move toward the County Council election in May 2025. It is the opinion of the Monitoring Officer that the Council has complied with its Constitution, and its corporate governance arrangements continue to be sound and are subject to critical review, in accordance with good governance.

FINANCIAL GOVERNANCE – VALUE FOR MONEY

LOUISE AYNSLEY
(Chief Financial (s151) Officer)

The statutory role of the Chief Financial (s151) Officer (CFO) in relation to financial administration and stewardship of the Council and their role in the organisation are key to ensuring that financial discipline and strong public financial management is maintained.

The Council has robust arrangements for effective financial control through accounting procedures, key financial systems, and the financial regulations and procedural responsibilities, which are compliant with accounting and auditing standards and guidance. To ensure financial sustainability, the Council plans and manages its resources so it can deliver its services. The responsibility for the effective management of the Council's budgets is delegated to designated managers within its directorates.

The Council's financial statements and arrangements to secure value for money (VFM) in the use of resources are reviewed each year by its external auditor, Ernst & Young. The financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2023 were signed by the S151 Officer on the statutory deadline of 31 May 2023. However, Suffolk County Council did not meet the 30 September 2023 statutory deadline for publishing an audited set of financial statements.

As with many other local authorities, delays remain in the external auditor completing their work on the 2022/23 financial statements. This delay is primarily due to the capacity shortfalls in the external audit sector. To clear the backlog of audits and 'reset' the system, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) proposes putting a date in law (the 'back stop date') – namely 30 September 2024 - by which point local bodies would publish audited accounts for all outstanding years up to and including 2023. While the proposals support the return to a timely delivery of local audits, there will be implications to not completing a full audit for 2022/23, which will most likely be subject to a qualification or disclaimer of opinion. The consultation on the proposals closed on 7 March 2024, with the outcomes and final arrangements still awaited.

Regular updates on the progress of the external audit of the 2022/23 accounts have been reported to the Audit Committee with the latest update taken in March 2024, alongside the draft audit plans for the 2023/24 audit of financial statements.

Despite the challenges with the 2022/23 financial statements, ministerial proposals made it clear that value for money (VFM) and pension funds audits are a high priority. Ernst & Young provided their provisional opinion on this work to the Audit Committee on 31 January 2024. The provisional audit results report for the Suffolk Pension Fund shows Ernst & Young expect to issue an unqualified opinion. The interim value for money (VFM) report did not identify any significant weaknesses in the Council's VFM arrangements, nor did they identify any significant risks during their VFM work. The final VFM arrangements and Suffolk Pension Fund opinion will be summarised as part of the Auditor's Annual Report when this is issued for Suffolk County Council for 2022/23.

The Council's 2023/24 budget, approved in February 2023, was set during highly uncertain economic conditions following various global shocks in the preceding years, particularly COVID-19 and the Ukraine War. This led to inflation and interest rates being higher than had been experienced in a generation, and the legacy of the pandemic continuing to have a significant impact on services. This meant the risks associated with the 2023/24 budget have been higher than in an average year, with services more susceptible to budget variances than they would be in more stable times.

FINANCIAL GOVERNANCE – VALUE FOR MONEY cont...

Comprehensive financial reports were provided to Cabinet for each quarter of 2023/24. A significant overspend for 2023/24 was forecast early in the financial year with pressures arising in the Children & Young People's Services directorate, within children in care, home-to-school transport and inclusion services relating to SEND. At its meeting on 12 September 2023, Cabinet agreed actions must be developed and required directors to work with their Cabinet Member and services to take necessary measures to mitigate expenditure wherever possible and continue to monitor services closely to ensure any further budgetary issues are swiftly identified, understood, and mitigated.

The Council has sufficient reserves to support an overspend in 2023/24. However, it is understood that it is not sustainable to use reserves to routinely cover overspends, and that the focus should be on delivering a budget which can be fully funded from the resources available.

The affordability of the Council's capital programme remains under regular review, with cost management more important than ever, given acute inflationary pressures and the increased cost of borrowing. The Capital Strategy Group has met regularly to ensure accountability and visibility of all projects in the capital programme.

Capital resources are scarce, especially given recent rises in interest rates and inflation, so not all requests for investment by directorates can be accepted by the Capital Strategy Group for inclusion in the capital programme. Where there is a sound case for progressing with a scheme, except for the lack of resources to finance it, that scheme is incorporated into the Council's capital pipeline. This pipeline contains schemes planned for up to ten years into the future and is reviewed periodically to assess whether there is scope for transferring such schemes into the capital programme. During the year, four business cases for additional investment were presented to Cabinet and approved, totalling £42.5 million.

The Council has continued to progress with work on Oracle Fusion - the integrated system for human resources and payroll, finance and purchasing. The forecasting tools have been rolled out to all directorates and this has enabled budget managers to undertake monthly forecasting across the Council's budget. Internal Audit undertook a budget survey in October 2023. The responses to this showed that most understood their financial responsibilities, but many were not confident about the best way to deliver these. It is envisaged that a new e-learning module for all budget managers, and those undertaking financial activities to support them, will help improve confidence. Elements of this module that are relevant to all staff will be part of mandatory training in 2024-25. Alongside this, all guidance materials are being brought together under the Oracle Helpdesk to make it easier for them to access the support they need.

Planning for 2024/25 commenced in June 2023 and continued up to the Full Council meeting in February 2024, where the 2024/25 budget was approved. The setting of the 2024/25 budget was one of the most challenging years for the Council, with increases in demand for services, the rise in the cost of living, and the need to close significant budget gaps over the coming years. The Council's budget strategy recognises that, for the Council to continue delivering the best possible services within available resources in 2024/25, it is essential to take a medium-term view of the Council's budget, focus on meeting the Council's corporate objectives and associated directorate annual plans, and rise to the challenge presented by the economic environment. Savings plans developed for the next two years are substantial, so a significant financial challenge exists. Continued effective financial management will be essential. Monthly monitoring of savings will be undertaken to ensure these remain on track. Any adverse trends in any deviation from budgets will require management action.

FINANCIAL GOVERNANCE – –VALUE FOR MONEY cont...

A further key element of the budget strategy is having adequate reserves available to manage any unexpected changes to spending and funding plans. This involves the Council assessing and, where possible, quantifying the financial risks it is facing. A core principle is that reserves should not be used to cover ongoing gaps between expenditure and funding and should be replenished as soon as practicable when used. At the end of 2023, a review of all reserves was undertaken to ensure that the Council's reserves are optimally earmarked and applied. This led to a number of reserves being repurposed and the creation of a Corporate Priorities Reserve to support the Council moving forward. For the setting of 2024/25 budget, the Council is needing to deviate from its reserve strategy, with the expectation that this will remain the case until such time as sufficient additional funding is identified to replenish the Council's risk reserve. However, the Council's unallocated reserves are sufficient to cover the Councils assessed financial risks in 2024/25. The Council recognises that unallocated reserves should not be depleted further to provide sustainability in 2025/26 budget planning.

The CIPFA Financial Management Code (FM code) provides guidance for good and sustainable financial management in local authorities and provides assurance that authorities are managing their resources effectively. The code sets out the principles local authorities should be guided by in managing their finances and the specific standards that they should seek to achieve. A review of the Code was carried out in February 2024. The review identified changes and improvements from the previous self-assessment undertaken in 2022/23, along with an action plan to promote further improvement in 2024/25. A report is planned for the Audit Committee meeting in July 2024.

The opinion of the Chief Financial Officer is that the Council continues to operate robust internal controls and good public financial management. Further action is required to manage financial pressures and develop strategies to meet the long-term financial challenges that face the Council. There has been no need for the Chief Financial Officer to exercise her statutory powers and the Council complies with its financial regulations and procedures together with relevant codes of practice and guidance. The Finance Function continues to provide an effective and efficient service while enabling the Council to meet its objectives within a robust financial framework.

INTERNAL AUDIT

PETER FROST
(Head of Internal Audit)

Internal Audit is an independent and objective function with all audit work carried out in this capacity and in accordance with the Audit Charter, Code of Ethics and Public Sector Internal Audit Standards.

The Head of Internal Audit has a responsibility under the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards to provide an independent annual internal audit opinion on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's governance, risk, and control framework (i.e., the control environment) and, therefore, the extent to which the Council can rely on it and inform its Annual Governance Statement.

No system of control can provide absolute assurance against material misstatement/loss or eliminate risk; nor can Internal Audit give that assurance. The work of Internal Audit is intended only to provide reasonable assurance on controls.

The Council's governance, risk management and control framework has, overall, stood up well in 2023/24.

An internal audit review of the Council's compliance with the seven core principles of good governance, underpinned by detailed risk, assurance, and governance audits, has provided substantial assurance that there are sound arrangements in place.

89% of internal audit work completed during 2023/24 has yielded an acceptable level of assurance (substantial or reasonable) of the design and operation of the services, systems and processes audited.

Audit reviews that have presented significant concern relate to specific parts of the Council, rather than an across-the-board breakdown in controls. These audits are in the minority, and generally controls are sufficient to prevent or detect serious breakdowns in systems and procedures.

As a result of audit work, actions have been agreed to improve controls. These are closely monitored until such time they are completed. Any outstanding weaknesses in the governance, risk and control framework will continue to be followed up by Internal Audit.

There are areas of potentially higher risk that are being closely monitored by Internal Audit, via audit work and through the work of other assurance providers. These relate to **SEND**, the management and oversight of **direct payments**, and the number of **data breaches** occurring within the Council.

Common issues arising from audit work throughout 2023/24, which also underpin these potentially greater risks, are **'management self-service'**, and, in some instances, the limited amount of **oversight/ checking at the second-line level.**

I am satisfied that sufficient internal audit work has been undertaken to allow me to draw a reasonable conclusion as to the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's governance, control, and risk processes.

I have performed my duties in accordance with CIPFA's guidance on the role of the Head of Internal Audit.

Based on the findings of the managed audit and governance reviews carried out throughout 2023/24 and evidence from other assurance providers, and considering the current climate in which the Council is operating, it is the opinion of the Head of Internal Audit that the Authority's governance, risk, and control environment provides reasonable assurance that the significant risks facing the Authority are addressed. Generally, risks are well managed, but some areas require the introduction or improvement of internal controls to ensure the achievement of objectives. The Head of Internal Audit does not consider there to be any areas of significant corporate concern.

COUNTER FRAUD

CHRISTOS CONSTANTINOU
(Counter Fraud Manager)

The Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) has committed to tackling fraud and corruption affecting the Council, aiming to adopt a culture in which all employees maintain a proactive attitude towards preventing fraud. The Council's Constitution states that the Chief Finance Officer is responsible for the development and maintenance of an anti-fraud and corruption policy, and that directors are responsible for ensuring that this policy is implemented within their directorates. A number of policies that make up the Council's anti-fraud governance arrangements are in place and regularly reviewed.

As part of the Council's arrangements to tackle fraud, the Counter Fraud Service, working within the Internal Audit Team, works solely on fraud related matters, providing the capacity and capability to deal with such matters.

The Council has in place a Counter Fraud and Corruption Strategy 2023/25 which was approved by CLT and the Audit Committee. This is in line with best practice and based on the national 'Fighting Fraud and Corruption Locally 2020' strategy. The Strategy directs the work of the Counter Fraud Service under four workstreams:

1. Governance and strategy

2. Fraud awareness and prevention

3. Proactive exercises

4. Investigations and redress

The Counter Fraud Service has annual action plans, which are approved by the Audit Committee, and carries out an annual review against the Fighting Fraud and Corruption Locally checklist, and the Local Government Counter Fraud Standards to ensure best practice is followed. Furthermore, a progress report and an annual report are presented to the Audit Committee.

The 2023/24 action plan was delivered. This included reviewing and updating fraud awareness resources available to staff on the intranet, creating and launching an e-learning module which will become mandatory for all staff during 2024/25, and providing training to teams in Adult and Community Services. Proactive counter fraud exercises were carried out, including reviewing reports provided by the Cabinet Office through the National Fraud Initiative and internal data matching exercises with the aim of spotting fraud and error.

Investigations were carried out in line with the Council's Fraud Response Plan, with the trend in the number of referrals received to be investigated continuing to rise, compared to previous years. Furthermore, the Council's Blue Badge Enforcement initiative was extended to other parts of Suffolk.

During the year, Counter Fraud Services, working with Legal Services, successfully prosecuted two cases in relation to social care fraud, including a case which is believed to have been one of the largest direct payment frauds nationally. A further case in relation to an ex-employee was prosecuted as a 'working whilst sick' fraud. Investigations can lead to outcomes other than prosecutions, and these are reported to the Audit Committee. Taking strong action shows that fraud against the public purse will not be tolerated and perpetrators will be held to account.

The Counter Fraud Service continued to build strong working relationships with other local authorities nationally and in particular through the Suffolk Fraud Group and the South-East Fraud Hub, sharing best practice and acting as a support network.

RISK MANAGEMENT

CAROLINE DAVISON
(Head of Policy & Performance)

The Council follows an 'Active Risk Management' approach, a framework that aligns with the Chartered Institute of Internal Auditors 'Three Lines Model.' The model promotes the delegation of risk management to those with the appropriate responsibility and oversight. The model encourages managers to take ownership of their risks, to assess the likelihood and potential impact on service delivery and outcomes, and to establish appropriate controls. All risk owners are required to periodically review their risks and assess whether suitable mitigation actions are in place to reduce the likelihood and impact. The corporate risk management software (JCAD) prompts risk managers when a review of their risk is due. However, managers can access and adjust risk controls at any point, as relevant. Risk management is embedded in regular governance, along with strategic planning, financial management, and performance management.

The organisation manages all its high-level risks using a corporate risk register supported by industry standard software (JCAD Risk Management) and reinforced by corporate guidance themed around good practice published by HM Government: **The Orange Book.** The JCAD system is a live, real-time platform that records, monitors, and reports risks in a structured and consistent way. It is a system that is used by similar local authorities and is constantly evolving and adapting to service need.

Corporate Leadership Team and Cabinet Members have regular oversight of the corporate risk register on a quarterly reporting cycle. In addition to the quarterly reporting process, all corporate risks are reviewed annually and the Council's approach to risk management is scrutinised by Audit Committee and compliance reviewed by internal audit. The annual review is an opportunity to look at all corporate risks and moderate across themes, scores, and processes. Each high-level risk is reviewed, and its relevance and suitability assessed. Where appropriate, recommendations are made to the relevant director and risk owner for further review.

CORPORATE PERFORMANCE

CAROLINE DAVISON
(Head of Policy & Performance)

The Council regularly monitors how its services are performing against agreed priorities and targets to assess the impact of decisions on resources, identify areas for improvement, and provide assurance that services are managed effectively. The corporate performance dashboard is the tool used to report and manage performance information. The dashboard is discussed every quarter at Corporate Leadership Team and with Cabinet Members. The corporate performance reporting framework is integral to good governance and the process is annually reviewed by Audit Committee and compliance (including the quality of data) checked by internal audit services.

Directorate leadership teams report and review performance issues within their respective areas of responsibility. The directorate process aligns to the corporate model but enables reporting frameworks to reflect business need and adjust as relevant. Performance information is also used to support benchmarking activity. Scrutiny Committee uses the corporate performance dashboard to inform its forward work programme and the Audit Committee receives an annual report detailing the Council's corporate performance management arrangements.

In accordance with the Local Government Transparency Code 2015, the Council publishes the corporate performance dashboard on its website. The Council also provides statutory data returns to Government that comply with Single Data List requirements. This process provides accountability, transparency, and evidence to support the regulatory and external inspection processes. Since 2023, these statutory returns have fed into the newly established Office for Local Government's (Oflog) data explorer. This is a national database, accessible to the public, with the intention of enhancing accountability and transparency.

For the first time, all English councils will be required by Government to develop a 'Productivity Plan' in 2024. This will draw on existing Medium Term Financial Plans, transformation and service redesign work and highlight existing activity to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity. These plans will be submitted to Government by 19 July and published on councils' websites.

HUMAN RESOURCES

JEANETTE BRAY
(Head of Human Resources, Performance & Change)

The SCC Corporate Workforce Strategy 2023-27, which outlines how the County Council will develop as a place to work over the next four years, was adopted from April 2023. It describes our workforce ambitions, and the six strategic goals we will focus on to help us achieve those ambitions. Delivery of the strategy has been supported through the annual action plan established within HR, and progress is reported through a set of data measures within the Corporate Performance Report.

In response to budgetary pressures, a more rigorous establishment control mechanism has been introduced across all directorates with monitoring oversight by CLT. This requires documented consideration of wider resourcing options and solutions, with proposals being considered at directorate management team level before recruitment or contractual changes are undertaken.

A revised staff survey was delivered in the summer, which achieved the highest completion rate to date and, overall, indicated improved levels of engagement across SCC. Following results being shared across all teams, work has been ongoing to establish responsive action plans at team, service, directorate, and corporate level.

To maintain good people management and compliance with legislation and best practice, the Council has a comprehensive and accessible suite of employment policies, guidance, toolkits, and procedures. An ongoing programme of work ensures that these are regularly reviewed, updated, refreshed, and promoted so that they remain relevant and are utilised effectively by managers and staff.

We have refreshed the format of our regular corporate webinars for managers. These continue to be well attended, with often over 200 attending live and others listening to the recording after the event. The webinars include a regular corporate update from both the Chief Executive and the Head of HR on any relevant staffing matters, ensuring that managers are well informed and supported in a timely way. We are supplementing the webinars with focused manager training in the coming year covering key HR policies.

A second suite of statutory and mandatory e-learning modules was launched for all staff, with some additional modules for managers. This year, e-learning was staged with statutory modules (including data protection, information governance, and health and safety) released at the start of the year for completion, and further mandatory modules released for completion by 31 March 2024. This year we introduced a clear link between completion of training and performance ratings that determine incremental progression, with regular reminders to staff and information provided to managers, via their dashboard, on completion rates. This has resulted in an overall completion rate of 96%, compared to 71% the previous year. The programme for the coming year has been agreed by CLT and launched.

Oracle's Post Implementation Value Identification (PIVI) was completed and received by the internal Oracle Governance Board, with associated outcomes, including the implementation of the HR Helpdesk and Manager's Dashboard which will go live in Summer 2024. An automated, "real-time" directorate management team dashboard will replace manual processes and calculations, and integration between Oracle Fusion and Microsoft BI will be established to produce DMT and Corporate Performance reports. The implementation of the Helpdesk module will be extended across Finance and Procurement, as well as providing an opportunity to review and update all the existing information available in askHR, the HR knowledge base.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

KRISHNA YERGOL
(Chief Technology Officer)

The Council's Technology Service continues to enable the Council to deliver modern, sustainable, and scalable frontline services underpinned by technology and digital capabilities. Our operating model, which is now fully embedded, is enabling the IT service to work closely with directorates and services and helps support the Council's ambitions both proactively and reactively, while the Technology Strategy continues to evolve to accommodate and respond to the changing needs of the organisation.

The IT Service continues to support hybrid working models across the Council. This has entailed a redesign of our corporate network, including our WiFi infrastructure, optimising our wide area network, and building additional resiliency into our in-house cyber security skills by recruiting apprentices into our teams.

We continued to strengthen our support to our frontline services. This includes support to Public Health and Communities' ambitions for Live Well Suffolk to enable online self-referral to healthy living services. We have implemented a new system for electronic care management recording, care visit roster and scheduling for Home First, and supported the implementation of a Marketplace Directory of Care Quality Commission registered adult social care providers.

In addition, the IT service supported the work on the new highways and street lighting contracts, the continuing integration of Local Enterprise Partnership services into the Council, and the connectivity requirements for the new Fire Control Centre.

In Children and Young People's Services, we are supporting the work to join datasets from child health and youth justice to allow greater oversight and better resource allocation. We have supported schools with ranking their school admissions applications for phase transfers and have implemented a pupil Department of Health assessments booking solution. We also introduced a new solution to enable the transfer of documents safely and securely to third parties and implemented collaboration mechanisms for the Suffolk Safeguarding Partnership and Early Help Coastal North and South.

In Adult and Community Services, the IT Service is supporting the People at the Heart of Care programme with the scoping, definition, and delivery of new IT solutions for online services and managing customer contacts. We are also providing a data gateway to bring together insights from care providers in the Eastern region to support ongoing service improvement.

Priorities for the next year include supporting the ongoing transformation of our services and service improvement activities across all our frontline services.

INFORMATION GOVERNANCE

PETER KNIGHT
(Head of Information Governance)

The Corporate Information Governance Board, is the lead body at the County Council for ensuring the Council has effective information governance arrangements in place. The Corporate Board is supported by service-specific information governance boards or information governance leads. The Council also has a network of Strategic Information Agents (SIAs) across the organisation, who promote and encourage information governance best practice within their service areas.

The Council has a number of key individuals with specific roles and responsibilities regarding information governance, including Senior Information Risk Owner (the Deputy Chief Executive); Head of Information Governance; Data Protection Officer and Compliance Manager; IT Security Manager; and Caldicott Guardians in Adult and Community Services and Children and Young People's Services.

The Council is subject to a number of external information and IT assurance regimes. This includes various mandatory inspections to facilitate access to various networks and systems, such as the Public Service Network (PSN) Compliance and the Data Security & Protection Toolkit. All external assurance validations have been successfully achieved in 2023/24.

The Council continues to receive a high number of Subject Access Requests (SARs), with 323 received in 2023/24, compared to 233 in 2022/23 (an increase of 28%). Complying with statutory requirements for responding to SARs has proved a challenge in recent years, given the level of requests received. However, the compliance rate has improved significantly in 2023/24 to 77%.

The Council also continues to receive a high number of Freedom of Information (FOI) and Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) requests, with 1,384 information requests in 2023/24, compared to 1,258 in 2022/23 (a 10% increase). Despite this increase, the compliance rate for meeting statutory FOI/EIR deadlines remains high at 97%, an improvement on last year's 93.1%. There were two complaints made to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) regarding the Council's response to specific requests.

The Council has seen an increase in the overall number of information security incidents this year compared to the previous year (670 in 2023/24 compared to 588 in 2022/23). Of these, 324 resulted in a personal data breach in 2023/24 compared to 333 in 2022/23. Five personal data breaches were serious enough to require notification to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), compared to seven in the previous year. The majority of security incidents are the result of human error, such as information being sent to the wrong person via email or in the post.

Responding to the increased demand in requests to the Council for personal or organisational information, combined with the management of a greater number of information security incidents, has undoubtedly placed considerable strain on the resources of the Information Governance Team and the wider organisation.

Some of the specific information governance activities undertaken in 2023-24 include:

- Reviewed and updated the Council's suite of information governance policies.
- Produced updated mandatory e-learning training on information management and data security for all Council staff.
- Implemented measures to improve the Council's compliance rate for responding to Subject Access Requests (SARs).
- Operated the Data Ethics Advisory Panel to assist with upholding the principles of the Council's Ethical Data Stewardship Charter.
- Completed the review of the Council's legacy documents held at the Records Management Centre.

PROCUREMENT

MATT WEST
(Head of Assets and Investment)

The Assets and Investment Procurement Team deliver a professional service to help the Council procure goods and services commercially, legally and at minimal risk, while supporting the Council's policies, and in accordance with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015.

The Council's internal Procurement Rules, processes and advice to staff have been maintained in line with the national Procurement Policy Notices and guidance issued by the Cabinet Office.

A comprehensive range of training delivered by the Procurement Team is available to staff within the corporate training offer on Oracle Fusion. Training includes the use of the e-procurement system, undertaking tenders and contract management.

A new team structure has been implemented in 2023/24, ensuring clearer leadership roles and the retention of valuable professional skills for the service. The team have also successfully recruited into vacant professional roles within the team, rebuilding capacity following the departure of experienced staff.

The Procurement Team provides advice and guidance relating to how best to process payments and orders on the Council's electronic system, ensuring users deal with their purchase orders and invoices are paid in good time. Quarterly updates to procedures reflect regular updates to the system.

All user guides and additional supporting documents are kept up to date and available for all staff. Regular drop-in sessions are held to support staff who have specific questions.

During 2023/24, the Procurement Team reviewed the results of the LGA Procurement Diagnostic Tool and led a workshop with directorates to consider the results. This process helped highlight areas for the team to consider for future development. It was a helpful process, and the findings will be taken into account when implementing the new Procurement Act in 2024.

Maintaining Suffolk County Council's Social Value 'Ask' is a responsibility of the Procurement Team. The Ask provides a comprehensive list of ideas on how suppliers can deliver social value when we contract and do business with them. This enables the Council to get maximum value out of the money it spends. The Social Value Ask has been reviewed and updated this year and is published on the Council's website. The Council's Contract Management Minimum Standards and supporting checklist have also had their annual review.

The use of Credit Safe (an online credit and business information service) has been actively promoted to service contract managers to help them carry out risk assessments of our suppliers' financial security. The number of users is increasing year on year.

Contract Management Network webinars are held on a quarterly basis to provide additional advice and support for staff with contract management roles. There are over 180 staff in the Contract Management Network and approximately 50 staff attend each webinar. The webinars this year have included updates for contract managers on health and safety, EDI, and fraud. There is also a Contract Management Network group for sharing information and peer advice.

COMMUNICATIONS

ANDREW ST. LEDGER
(Head of Communications, Consultation & Media)

During 2023/24, Suffolk County Council saw both the continuation and start of significant new projects, all of which require engagement and communication with Suffolk residents and county council staff to achieve better results. The Communications Team has once again been at the heart of supporting these projects and campaigns and will continue to be in 2024/25.

Activity in 2023/24 included (but not exclusively), our staff survey; 'Local Matters' roadshows, with 12 events taking place; Lowestoft's Gull Wing bridge; SEND improvements; flood response; highways resurfacing programme; the libraries re-procurement consultation, which received almost 6,000 responses; and Suffolk's proposed devolution deal consultation.

The Communications Team designed and ran a very successful Suffolk Show in 2023 under the 'Suffolk to the Future' theme, and in the last quarter of 2023/24 commenced planning for the 2024 show.

Suffolk County Council's 2023/24 budget consultation saw the highest ever response to this work and, once again, provided a clear steer to senior leaders about public opinion relating to required savings and council tax changes. Communications leads also worked closely with their portfolio holders to help people understand the challenges facing the County Council and respond to comments raised.

Other notable work in 2023/24 included the annual Travel to Work Survey, Active Travel Woodbridge, and other active travel projects across Suffolk.

We also supported directorates during this year, including Adult Social Care (ACS) with its Care Quality Commission Local Authority Pilot Inspection, an important phase in the national rollout of local authority inspections. We also supported ACS with provider business continuity issues, recruitment of crucial social care staff via the I-Care Campaign and helped to launch the "People at the Heart of Care" transformation programme.

Despite the challenges of our new highways contract being in its infancy, several large-scale storm events and record-breaking rainfall, Suffolk Highways increased defect repairs by 45% and respond to 89% more emergencies compared to the previous year. The Communications Team supported this increase in activity by driving an increased level of public engagement; through increased and improved social media activity, news releases, public engagement events and new systems to improve information available to Councillors. The Team also led activity to better engage with town and parish councils, promoting new ways of working such as the dragon patcher, road mender, and electric gritters and forging better relations with local media by organising briefings.

The additional communications activity associated with highways has resulted in significantly more engagement via social media with several thousand new followers across all platforms and an increase in the amount of positive coverage the service is receiving.

Throughout February and early March 2024, Suffolk County Council spoke to more than 1,500 people to tell them about Suffolk's proposed County devolution deal and that the consultation would launch on 18 March 2024. This included sharing information and holding online and face-to-face meetings with representatives from a wide range of organisations and sectors.

Feedback from the discussions further informed the design of the consultation. Suffolk County Council also published information about the proposed Deal on its website and made available a three-minute video explaining the proposed Deal and the consultation. At the time of going to consultation, more than 43,000 people had viewed the video for 15 seconds or more and more than 800 people had accessed the webpage **www.suffolk.gov.uk/devolution**

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

RICHARD CRACKNELL
(Assistant Director of Public Health and Communities)

Processes are in place to enable the Council to meet its legal duties under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), and the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) Regulations 2011. The Council recognises its statutory duties and recognises the rule of law, including that the PSED is non-delegable, so it always remains the responsibility of the Council.

This year's focus has been on further embedding the three corporate equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) objectives (agreed in January 2022 for the four-year period to 2026) related to the delivery of the Race Equality Action Plan; meeting our Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED); and increasing inclusion within the Council itself and with our service users.

The Strategic Equalities and Inclusion Board (SEIB) comprises of Councillors representing each political group on the Council, directorate EDI Leads, trade union representatives, staff network leads, and key EDI leads from across the organisation. The Board is chaired by the Cabinet lead for equalities and inclusion, who has oversight of the Council's activities for this area of work. The Board meets quarterly.

The focus of this year's EDI work has been on increasing inclusion for service users with protected characteristics in Council services delivered 'in-house', and by contractors and through our commissioned services. Recent examples of where we have included EDI in our procurement and commissioning include in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) delivery for refugees and asylum seekers, and in our Oral Health Assessment and Treatment Service procurement, Healthy Behaviours procurement, and Education Psychology Support Service procurement.

As part of maximising the effectiveness of our PSED work, we have incorporated a pre-screening assessment phase to ensure that we only carry out an EIA screening when there are going to be differential impacts on people with protected characteristics. We have also added a monitoring component to our EIA Screening Template. We have carried out 53 EIA screenings (published on the SCC web site), one full EIA relating to the re-procurement of the Library Service, plus an additional 12 EIA screenings relating to the 2024/25 Budget proposals. 16 pre-EIA screening assessments have also been submitted to the EDI Team. All directorates have increased their communications around encouraging EIAs to be completed for all policy and service changes, as well as for procurement and commissioning activities.

The Race Equality Oversight Group, chaired by the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) EDI lead (Deputy Chief-Executive), and supported by the Race Equality Lead and the Black and Asian Staff Network, has progressed delivery on the Council's Race Equality Action Plan objectives. Notable successes include the roll-out of the reverse mentoring programme with senior managers and a very successful programme of Let's Talk About Race, Safe Spaces, and Equality Team talks to encourage conversations about race across the organisation and with our partners.

The EDI Team works closely with directorate EDI leads (who hold this role in addition to their substantive roles), and through a network of 214 race equality and EDI champions and others, to develop and implement the directorate EDI action plans. These plans provide a focus for EDI work in terms of implementation and progress is reported to the SEIB.

Our 12 staff networks represent over 1,200 members of staff and cover all protected characteristics. Networks provide the organisation with invaluable lived experience, which influence County Council policies, ensuring more inclusive services that meet the needs of all residents.

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION cont...

Each network has a direct link into the Corporate Leadership Team. The networks report regularly to the SEIB on their activities and on the issues that are affecting them.

Every staff member is expected to have an EDI objective in their annual personal development review and there is a comprehensive set of EDI related e-learning, webinars, and policies to support this work area. The staff survey included questions around EDI and the Council's Workforce Strategy incorporates many aspects of EDI. The new leadership and management training for all senior managers, currently being developed, will embed EDI throughout. As part of mandatory training, all staff had to complete three EDI related e-learning modules in 2023/24.

UNDERTAKING OUR EDI DUTIES AS AN EMPLOYER

JEANETTE BRAY
(Head of Human Resources, Performance & Change)

We continue to use positive action to address underrepresentation of equality groups in the organisation. This includes statements in our adverts to encourage applications from people within underrepresented groups, the use of diverse imagery in our recruitment marketing, and attendance at local events.

Work continues in relation to maintaining our Level 3 Disability Confident status, including improvements to our job application process, recruitment guidance, and processes around reasonable adjustments. In addition, we are working with the Neurodiversity Staff Network to review and improve the inclusiveness of our recruitment processes for people who are neurodivergent.

The Council's gender pay gap continues to reduce. A new initiative in our action plan was a pilot programme to support people who have been out of work for more than two years because of parental responsibilities. This was successful and will be repeated.

The SEIB considered the full analysis of staff survey results that specifically focused on the employment experience of those with different protected characteristics, and appropriate actions are being considered.

To build on this information, our exit interview survey for staff leaving the organisation is being extended to determine whether there are any trends/factors contributing to people leaving that we need to address moving forward.

SAFETY, HEALTH & WELLBEING

MIKE LEAKE
(Mike Leake, Head of Health & Safety)

The Council continues to benchmark its Safety, Health, and Wellbeing (SHAW) Strategy and performance monitoring arrangements through both internal assurance activities and externally through routine benchmarking with the Local Government Association and other local authorities, including alignment to the East of England Healthy Workplace Awards scheme.

The Safety, Health and Wellbeing service provides competent advice to the Council, as required by Regulation 7 of the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

In accordance with Section 2(7) of the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974, the Council has robust levels of corporate health and safety arrangements through the SHAW Board, which has representation from the Corporate Leadership Team, senior managers, and unions. The SHAW Board sets the strategic direction of the organisation in relation to safety, health, and wellbeing. It meets quarterly and ensures appropriate Health and Safety communication channels to all Staff and Councillors.

The SHAW Strategy for 2022-25 is driving measurable, continuous improvements in our arrangements through appropriate trend analysis, specifically relating to the four key priorities: procurement and contract management; schools; supporting a wellbeing culture in SCC (the Council's corporate staff health and wellbeing agenda); and internal/external assurance.

WHOLLY OWNED COMPANIES

Suffolk Group Holdings Limited, trading as Vertas Group Ltd, is a group of companies wholly owned by Suffolk County Council. The companies are Vertas (facilities management), Concertus (property design and consultancy services) and Opus (recruitment). In November 2023, Suffolk Group Holdings were ranked seventh out of 100 in 'Suffolk Limited', an independent performance ranking of Suffolk's largest businesses.

The Suffolk Group Holdings Limited Board met in June and December 2023, and in February 2024. In the run-up to the Board meetings, a series of meetings take place. These discuss areas for development, upcoming requirements, and performance issues across each of the wholly owned companies and are attended by key Suffolk County Council clients from across the Council.

This approach provides transparency and accountability on the quality of services provided by the Vertas Group to Suffolk County Council. Cllr Robert Everitt, as the Council's representative on the Suffolk Group Holdings Board, is briefed by the Head of Assets and Investment, based on the feedback received from the meetings described above. The briefing is also produced as a written document. The Deputy Chief Executive, the Chief Financial (s151) Officer and the Monitoring Officer also attend these meetings. Following the Board meeting, the senior managers from Vertas, Concertus and Opus meet with the Suffolk County Council Shareholder Group.

As part of the continuous improvement process, consideration was given as to whether there was a better, more efficient way to gather shareholder feedback. The review concluded that the current process of obtaining feedback directly from officer clients of the Vertas Group companies, via quarterly governance meetings, should continue.

Alongside obtaining shareholder feedback, the Head of Assets and Investment continues to meet with senior managers in Vertas, Concertus and OPUS on a regular basis to raise concerns and ensure issues are resolved in a timely way, and as part of ongoing partnership dialogue.

The Shareholder Group met in June and December 2023, and February 2024. This group is chaired by Cllr Lance Stanbury and made up of five Conservative Councillors and one Councillor from the Green, Liberal Democrat, and Independent opposition group. The purpose of this group is to ensure a consistent strategic view is taken across all the wholly owned companies, and to review and monitor the performance of the companies.

The Audit and Risk Committee for Suffolk Group Holdings was chaired by the outgoing Non-Executive Director, Robert Coyle, for the majority of 2023/24 and will be chaired by new Non-Executive Director, Geoff Dobson, moving forward. Mr Dobson's appointment was approved by the Deputy Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council.

The Audit and Risk Committee consists of three members who were recruited based on their skills and experience. The committee meets on a quarterly basis, with additional meetings held as and when required. The dividend return to the County Council for 2023/24 is £1.5m.

MATT WEST
(Head of Assets and Investment)

HOUSING JOINT VENTURE – EDMUNDHAM DEVELOPMENTS

The Housing Joint Venture (Edmundham Developments) is a 50-50 limited liability partnership with Lovell Partnerships.

The structure and legal provisions of the joint venture have been established to provide protection for the Council (e.g., to protect its land interests) and commercial certainty for the joint venture.

During 2023/24, Edmundham Developments has continued preparation work ahead of construction work starting. While housing starts were expected during 2023/24, there have been unexpected delays in securing the necessary planning consents. This has meant additional time has been required to work with the district planning authorities and their statutory consultees to further refine the site designs. It is now expected that the first starts on site will occur towards the end of 2024.

There are six representatives on the Joint Venture Member Board, namely three from each of the two partners. The chair of the Joint Venture is rotated annually, and the Member Board meets every two months. The Council has both Councillor and Officer representation on the Board.

The Joint Venture Member Board has signed off early expenditure (funded via Lovell) at a number of the sites, to prepare detailed design and contractor packages.

In September 2023, a report was prepared for the Council's Audit Committee regarding the governance of Edmundham Developments. The Audit Committee recommended that the report be refreshed on an annual basis, with the next report due in Autumn 2024.

2024/25 will see the first homes being built by Edmundham Developments. Prior to homes being built, a series of conditions must be fulfilled, including the agreement of a Settled Business Plan (which sets out the level of development at the site, the funding arrangements, the returns and land values generated, and the key risks), and the formal transfer of land from the Council to Edmundham Developments. Processes around the land transfer were legally set out at the time the Joint Venture was established; these processes will be used for the first time in 2024/25.

ROB HANCOCK
Head of Housing, Growth & Planning

EXTERNAL ASSURANCE

All local authorities are subject to external scrutiny from regulatory bodies. The most notable external inspection processes are those undertaken by OFSTED and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) across education services and social care. However, other service areas of the Council are regularly inspected or regulated to some degree.

The following outlines the main external inspections that the Council was subject to in 2023/24.

In January 2024, OFSTED and CQC published the outcome of the Area SEND inspection of Suffolk Local Area Partnership. The inspection focused on how the Council and NHS partners support young people with SEND, and their families. The purpose of the inspection is to provide an independent assessment of the effectiveness of Suffolk's partnership arrangements for children and young people with SEND.

As well as acknowledging progress, the inspection highlighted widespread and/or systemic failings and significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND, which the local area partnership must address urgently. A priority action plan to address the areas for improvement is now in place, having been agreed by Cabinet in February 2024.

During 2023, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) carried out pilot inspections of local authority adult social care services. Suffolk County Council volunteered to be one of the five pilot sites. In November 2023, CQC published their final report, which rated the overall quality of Suffolk County Council's adult social care services as 'Good'. The report highlighted areas of strength, including the quality of its leadership, the culture of learning and support for staff, the range of digital care options available, the good relationships between social care and health colleagues, locality team knowledge, and understanding of community needs.

The pilots have helped CQC to formulate its new model of inspection, aligned to the requirements of the Care Act 2014. The inspections, which are now underway, are designed to help inspectors assess and understand how each local authority is delivering adult social care services. Each area submits performance information and evidence, which is supported by meetings with staff, partners, providers, carers, and people with lived experience. Main focus is to assess the quality of services, behaviours, attitudes, and effective leadership. All new schools, including academies, are inspected within three years and inspections can be carried out without notice.

In July 2023, Suffolk Archives achieved Full Accreditation from the UK Archive Service Accreditation Committee. Suffolk Archives had previously achieved Provisional Accreditation in March 2019. Accreditation is the UK quality standard that recognises good performance in all areas of archive service delivery. The Committee commended Suffolk Archives for the way the service develops and delivers community engagement across the county.

The outcomes from all external inspections are published and shared with the relevant Director or Chief Executive. Each will usually have associated recommendations and an action plan that will be monitored by senior leadership to ensure areas identified for improvement are implemented within agreed timescales.

ACTION PLAN FOR 2024/25

Actions planned for 2024-25 to further strengthen the Council's governance, alongside the standing arrangements already in place are:

Area	Governance matters identified	Lead Officer
Corporate Ambitions	Deliver actions set out in the 2024/25 Annual Plan in relation to the Council's four objectives: looking after our health and wellbeing; strengthening our local economy; protecting and enhancing our environment; providing value for money for our residents.	Nicola Beach
Corporate Governance	Code of Conduct for Employees to be reviewed and updated, as necessary.	Nigel Inniss
Corporate Governance	Corporate Governance Preparation for local elections in 2025, including development of Councillor induction and training programmes.	Nigel Inniss
Finance	Work with Cabinet and CLT to review the 2024-25 budget and financial challenges, giving particular attention to the delivery of the £43 million of savings. Develop the 2025-26 budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy addressing these challenges, continued demand pressures on Council services, and the impact of government reforms/policies.	Louise Aynsley
Finance	Work with other Councils to lobby Central Government on the need for sustainable funding linked to need.	Louise Aynsley
Finance	Work with External Audit to deliver a timely audit for 2023-24 Financial Statements.	Louise Aynsley
Finance	Continue to review the support to budget managers to ensure that tools and training are available to enable them to fulfil their financial management responsibilities.	Louise Aynsley
Finance	Implement actions arising from the review against the CIPFA Financial Management Code (FM code) following approval from Audit Committee.	Louise Aynsley
Internal Audit	Work throughout 2024/25 to ensure compliance with new Internal Audit standards.	Peter Frost
Corporate Performance	Develop, and submit to DLUHC (by 19th July 2025), a Productivity Plan setting out what the County Council has done to transform the organisation and its services.	Caroline Davison
Human Resources	Utilising the HR Oracle Fusion system, provide a suite of improved and extended data and information for managers, giving them the oversight and workforce knowledge to support decision making and planning.	Jeanette Bray

ACTION PLAN FOR 2024/25 cont...

Area	Governance matters identified	Lead Officer
Human Resources	Facilitate the delivery of staff changes and restructures to achieve the budget savings allocated across the organisation for 2024/25 and contribute to/advise on the plans for savings in 2025/26.	Jeanette Bray
Human Resources	Progress the delivery of the Workforce Strategy through a refreshed action plan for 2024/25, monitoring progress through agreed performance indicators.	Jeanette Bray
Information Governance	Implement additional measures to minimise the number of security incidents and data breaches occurring, including targeting additional training for those services where incidents are most prevalent.	Peter Knight
Information Governance	Review the Council's data protection compliance tools, including the suite of privacy notices, and registers of datasets.	Peter Knight
Information Governance	Engage proactively with the Council's overall approach to Artificial Intelligence (AI) to ensure the adoption of any AI products is undertaken appropriately and safely.	Peter Knight
Information Governance	Implement an online system for registering and managing Data Protection Impact Assessments (DPIAs).	Peter Knight
Information Governance	Implement a case management system for FOI and EIR requests to enhance the efficiency of managing information requests.	Peter Knight
Procurement	Lead the implementation of the new Procurement Act 2023 and Procurement Regulations 2024, due to come into force in October 2024.	Matt West
Procurement	Implement key update modules on Oracle Fusion (Oracle Fusion – helpdesk and the new self-service update).	Matt West
Equalities & Inclusion	Increase work with service providers to better understand who is making use of our services and who isn't, in terms of people with protected characteristics.	Richard Cracknell
Equalities & Inclusion	Monitor of our Equality Impact Assessment process to see how accurately we have identified the impacts of service changes on service users with protected characteristics.	Richard Cracknell
Equalities & Inclusion	Continue supporting our staff networks and EDI and Race Equality Champions programme to engender cultural change within the organisation and to increase cultural competence in working with our partners and within our communities.	Richard Cracknell

ACTION PLAN FOR 2024/25
cont...

Area	Governance matters identified	Lead Officer
Wholly Owned Companies	Continue to progress SLA and Partnership agreement reviews and updates	Matt West
Wholly Owned Companies	Continue looking to improve the partnership arrangements and feedback process to support the shareholder group, County Council, and the partnership.	Matt West
Edmundham Developments	Update the Audit Committee regarding the governance arrangements for Edmundham Developments and the implementation of the actions agreed in September 2023.	Rob Hancock
Edmundham Developments	Ensure the first site Settled Business Plans are agreed via the relevant arrangements ahead of first starts on site, and that necessary land transfers take place.	Rob Hancock
External Inspections	Deliver the SEND Priority Action Plan (submitted to Ofsted and the CQC in March 2024) and commence implementation of the SEND Strategy 2024-29.	Sarah-Jane Smedmor
External Inspections	Implement actions arising from external inspections.	Various officers
Government Policy & Reform	Recognise and, where appropriate, take action on the impact of new and emerging government policy, reform, and consultation.	Various officers

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