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Annual Governance Statement

2023/24

Stoke-on-Trent City Council Governance Statement 2023/24

1. Introduction

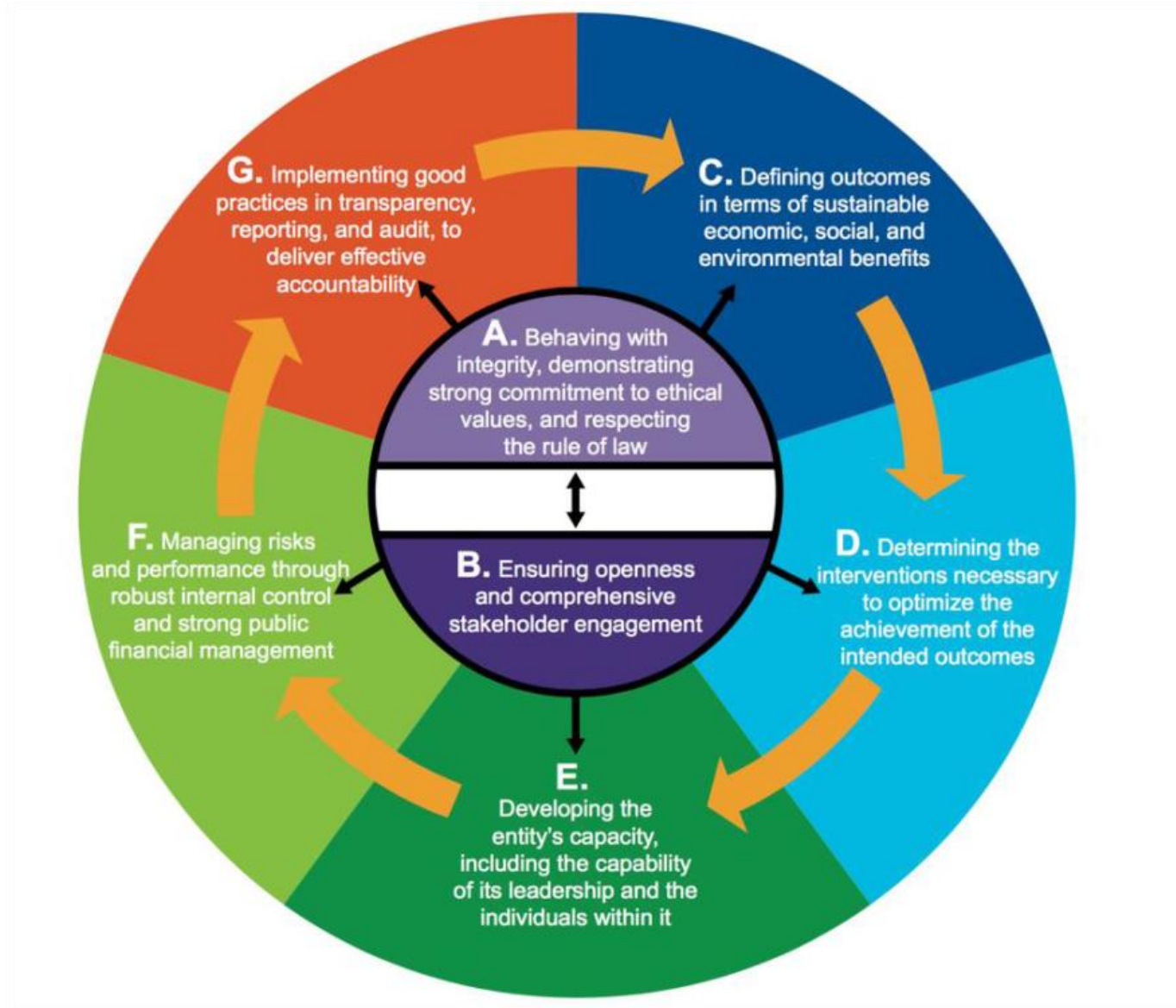
- 1.1 Each year the city council produces a governance statement that explains how it makes decisions, manages its resources and promotes values and high standards of conduct and behaviour. This statement complies with regulation 6(2) of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015.
- 1.2 Stoke-on-Trent City Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, that public money is safeguarded, correctly accounted for and used economically, efficiently and effectively to deliver quality services to the community it serves.
- 1.3 The city council is committed to embedding and achieving a robust set of corporate governance arrangements. The city council is managed within a robust framework as set out in the city council constitution, which clearly outlines how the city council operates, how decisions are made and what procedures need to be followed to ensure the city council is efficient, transparent and accountable to its local residents and stakeholders.
- 1.4 The Annual Governance Statement reports on:
 - i. how the city council complies with its own governance arrangements;
 - ii. how the city council monitors the effectiveness of the governance arrangements and;
 - iii. what improvements or changes in governance arrangements are proposed during the forthcoming year.
- 1.6 The governance framework is under continuous review and this has continued this year. The Monitoring Officer remains a member of Senior Management Team (SMT), corporate groups and is fully involved in the breadth of city council activity and decision making. A full constitutional review has been completed and the next full review of the constitution will take place in 3 years' time, until then amendments will be made on a frequent basis as constitutional updates.
- 1.7 The footnotes provided are internet links which will take you to the specific supporting documents and appropriate web pages.

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2. Scope of Responsibility

- 2.1 Stoke-on-Trent City Council is responsible for ensuring that its services are provided and conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently and effectively. The Local Government Act 1999 also places a duty on all councils to secure continuous improvement and to demonstrate economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
- 2.2 In discharging this overall responsibility, the city council is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, and arrangements for the management of risk.
- 2.3 The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and The International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) identified seven key principles relating to governance in their document *International Framework: Good Governance in the Public Sector (CIPFA/IFAC, 2016)*. A summary of the Seven Principles of Good Governance in the public sector and how they relate to each other is shown over:

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International Framework: Good Governance in the Public Sector (CIPFA/IFAC, 2016) (the 'International Framework')

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The Purpose of the Governance Framework

- 2.4 The Governance Framework comprises the systems and processes, culture and values by which Stoke-on-Trent City Council is directed and controlled. This, together with its activities and leadership, enables it to monitor and manage its performance for delivering cost effective services.
- 2.5 Effective performance and risk management allows the city council to have increased confidence in achieving its objectives and also allows the citizens of Stoke-on-Trent to have increased assurance in the city council's governance arrangements and its ability to deliver.
- 2.6 The system of internal control is a significant part of the governance framework and is designed to manage risk to an acceptable level. Risk cannot be eliminated and therefore controls can only provide reasonable and not absolute assurance of effectiveness. Internal control is based on a process to:
- Identify and prioritise risks that prevent the achievement of the city council aims and objectives;
 - Evaluate the likelihood that risks are realised and their impact;
 - Appropriately manage identified risks.
- 2.7 The city council has a number of committees that challenge and review the options considered and actions taken by the city council. The aim is to ensure that robust decisions are made that focus on achieving the best strategic outcomes for local residents within the available level of resources.
- 2.8 The city council has an Audit and Standards Committee,¹ which, has as part of its function the responsibility of considering the effectiveness of the city council's risk management arrangements, the control environment and associated anti-fraud and anti-corruption arrangements, and seeks assurance that action is being taken on issues identified by auditors and inspectors. In discharging this function, the Audit and Standards Committee will ensure compliance with such codes, protocols, statements and policies as are necessary to meet its responsibilities, which includes the appropriate arrangements for the management of risk.

¹ [Audit and Standards Committee Details](#)

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3. The 2023/24 Governance Framework

- 3.1 The CIPFA/IFAC framework (Good Governance in the Public Sector), provides advice and indicators to good governance which affords the city council the opportunity to review and test its governance and structures in delivering best practice.
- 3.2 The CIPFA/IFAC framework identifies the seven core principles of good governance as:
1. Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law.
 2. Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.
 3. Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits.
 4. Determining the interventions necessary to optimize the achievement of the intended outcomes.
 5. Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it.
 6. Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management.
 7. Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit to deliver effective accountability.
- 3.3 The governance framework covered by this statement has been in place at Stoke-on-Trent City Council for the year ended 31 March 2024 and is considered up to June 2024. An assessment of the city council's governance arrangements against each core principle is attached at Appendix 1.
- 3.4 In April 2024 Cabinet approved the new Our City Our Wellbeing Corporate Strategy for 2024-28, which was approved by full council in May. Our City, Our Wellbeing is a very different strategy to its predecessor, and represents a significant change of approach which is based around a fundamentally different relationship between the city council and our residents. It is about serving, supporting and enabling our citizens and communities, and responding to the genuine needs of residents of all ages in more effective and financially sustainable ways. The Corporate Strategy is a blueprint for transformation in the way that local government works – it makes the case for adopting new ways of working and of thinking about our core purpose and objectives. The Cabinet also approved a new Planning and Performance Framework which sets out arrangements for corporate monitoring and reporting of performance against these objectives and priorities.
- 3.5 The Our City, Our Wellbeing Corporate Strategy replaces the Stronger Together Strategic Vision and sets out seven core priorities: Healthier, Wealthier, Fairer, Cleaner, Greener, Safer, and Skilled. It also focuses on five cross-cutting themes which relate to partnership working to solve complex problems which affect population wellbeing: Supporting Family Life, Reclaiming our Streets, Addressing Hardship and Poverty, Ensuring Decent Homes for All, and Supporting People to Live Independently. Future governance statements will reflect the strategic aims and priorities contained in the Corporate Strategy.

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- 3.6 The city council continues to operate in a very uncertain and challenging economic environment which is placing significant pressure on its financial position. The current economic climate brings with it elevated levels of uncertainty and volatility at a macro level that increase the level of financial risk to all local authorities and wider public sector organisations. The council continues to experience significant demand and inflationary pressures as a result of this. Due to the particular challenges faced by the city council including the low levels of financial resilience and reserves, high demand for social care and a weak council tax base, this presents a greater financial risk than it does to those authorities that do not experience similar characteristics.
- 3.7 The council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2023/24 was approved by City Council on 23rd February 2023. As set out in the MTFS Section 25 statement the S151 Officer indicated that "whilst this budget is considered robust and sustainable at the time of writing, it must be acknowledged that it is framed in an extremely uncertain financial environment. In addition to the inherent uncertainty of the wider economic climate as outlined throughout the report the city council continues to see significant challenges in relation the demand and related costs of both Children's and Adult Social Care. To mitigate against this there is significant additional investment in these services; sufficient transformation resources are budgeted to target sustainable change in these areas, but delivery is critical. The city council's ability to manage these pressures over the coming years is vital to the delivery of a robust medium term financial strategy."
- 3.8 Since the budget was set in February 2023 the city council has continued to experience sustained and escalating demand in relation to children's social care with respect to numbers, complexity of need and unit costs. This has been coupled with continued high levels of inflation which is placing further risk on both the cost of care and wider costs across the council. This resulted in significant additional pressures being forecast during the financial year and was the primary driver behind a provisional overspend of £10m. Significant work was undertaken during the year to successfully mitigate other emerging pressures, however the pressure from Children's placements could not be mitigated within the current funding envelope. The recurrent and ongoing nature of this cost was also forecast to impact on the setting of future year budgets. Use of existing reserves, already at low levels, would further weaken the position leaving the council with a level of reserves than would be insufficient to manage any future risk or financial shocks. Therefore, in order to manage the significant cost pressures in 2023/24 and to enable a balanced budget to be set for 2024/25, the council required additional support from central government in the form of a capitalisation direction under the Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) framework.
- 3.9 The council's request for support centred around both the immediacy of the pressures caused by current placement costs as well as investment in targeted support and early help, in order to reduce the number of children entering into care and requiring placements. Only by reducing demand can the council mitigate the cost burden over the medium-term. Support for financial resilience including necessary redundancy costs has also been provided.
- 3.10 Throughout the year the council has continued to have open dialogue and engagement with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) to ensure a joint solution to the financial challenge could be reached. This culminated in an application for EFS in December 2023 and a capitalisation direction of £42.2m was subsequently approved in February 2024, enabling the council

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to effectively manage its 2023/24 position as well as setting a balanced budget for 2024/25. This is borrowing and must be repaid through capital receipts.

- 3.11 Despite submitting a four year recovery plan, no support has been provided by Government beyond 2024/25 at this time and the current MTFs shows a £17.9m funding gap for 2025/26 based on current assumptions. The council has completed its Financial Improvement and Productivity Plan which provides assurance to government on how the city council will address the financial pressures outlined within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy. All councils have been asked to provide such a plan and it will form an integral part of the overall Operating Plan and delivery against the council's objectives and vision. As part of the EFS framework, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) (formerly Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) have commissioned The Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) to undertake a Financial Management review of all councils in receipt of EFS and for Stoke-on-Trent City Council this has now taken place, although feedback is not anticipated until Quarter 3. After this review, a final decision on EFS is expected to be received. A programme of work to develop immediate mitigations and options to address the financial gap(s) in both in 2024/25 and in 2025/26 is in progress and has been undertaken at pace. Tight financial controls imposed by the S.151 Officer in 2023/24 remain in place in order to limit all but essential expenditure across the organisation. Dialogue between the council and MHCLG remains ongoing.
- 3.12 As part of this process, the council proactively requested the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) to undertake a financial management and financial resilience review. The purpose of this was to gain independent assurance that the council's finances were not only well-managed, but that the council had taken, or was taking, all necessary measures to be expected given the financial challenge it faces. The CIPFA review concluded that whilst there were operational improvements that could be made, that these were minor in nature and overall, the council has robust financial management in place, has taken, or is taking all material steps to manage emerging pressures where possible and the core driver to its challenging position was indeed the rising cost and demand in Children's Social Care. As part of the council's request for Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) from government, the council produced a credible resource plan that looks to reduce costs and demand within Children's Social Care over the coming 4-year period through investment in early intervention and early help. The core elements of the funding will be used to drive down demand for children's services and thus future costs, including £24 million to support social care placements and £11.2 million to support investment in Early Help Intervention

4. Review of Effectiveness

- 4.1 A review of the city council's governance arrangements draws on several sources including:
- Service updates from individual service managers

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- Reviews of partnership governance arrangements
- External inspections by government agencies
- Internal Audit reviews which consider and report upon compliance with corporate policies and procedures
- External audit reports

- 4.2 The Audit and Standards Committee plays a key role in the city council's review of the effectiveness of its governance framework. It seeks assurance on the adequacy of the city council's risk management, control and governance arrangements.
- 4.3 The Audit and Standards Committee receives regular training to ensure it has the appropriate knowledge and skills and undertook the core knowledge and skills questionnaire from CIPFA guidance with the results being built into training plans for the Committee. The Committee also completes a self-assessment against updated CIPFA guidance. The latest self-assessment was undertaken in January 2024. This demonstrated the Committee fully complies in over 77% of all areas, with a total score of 170 out of a possible 200. An action plan has been put into place to address areas for improvement.

Internal Audit and Review

- 4.4 The city council has a strong internal audit function and a positive working relationship with external audit. The arrangements for the provision of internal audit are contained within the city council's Financial Regulations which are included within the Constitution. The Director of Strategy & Resources, as Section 151 Officer is responsible for ensuring that there is an adequate and effective system of internal audit of the city council's accounting and other systems of internal control, as required by the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015.
- 4.5 In 2017 CIPFA published revised Public Sector Internal Audit Standards to promote further improvement in the professionalism, quality, consistency and effectiveness of internal audit across the public sector. The city council has adopted these standards and internal audit has carried out self-assessments with areas for improvement being addressed. An external review was undertaken in November 2022. This gave the city council's internal audit service the highest category of "Generally Conforms" to the requirements of the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards and those of the Local Government Application Note for the second time. An action plan has been produced to implement the recommendations and suggestions from the review, which are reported to the Audit and Standards Committee on a regular basis.
- 4.6 Internal Audit's Annual Plan is prioritised by a combination of key and statutory systems' assessments and reviews on the basis of risk, and the city council's corporate governance arrangements. The work incorporates reviews of the main financial systems, other systems identified as high risk, grant certification work and the continued development of proactive fraud work. The resulting work

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plan is discussed and agreed with Directors, the Audit and Standards Committee and shared with the city council's external auditor. All planned audit reports include an assessment of the adequacy of internal control and a prioritised action plan to address any areas needing improvement where for example, controls need to be improved or the overall control environment strengthened. These are provided to Directors, and other officers as appropriate, and a summary is provided to Members on a quarterly basis.

- 4.7 The internal audit review of the city council's control environment is set out in the annual report to Audit and Standards Committee which concluded that based on the full knowledge of the Chief Internal Auditor, including significant risks the council is facing and information from a variety of other assurance sources, the level of assurance on the adequacy and effectiveness of the city council's control environment is Satisfactory. This includes an assessment of the level of assurance the city council's governance arrangements can provide. A number of governance audits were completed or in progress in 2023/24 including the Transparency (Mandatory); Management of Risk; Information Governance; and Review of Strategic Risk Register, Safeguarding Children's Partnership and Budget Management.
- 4.8 Whilst a Satisfactory opinion on the control environment as a whole is positive, individual audit reviews have highlighted a number of opportunities to improve control further which are to be addressed through the implementation of internal audit recommendations. In addition, the council plans to continue its Financial Assurance programme of work to systematically review and strengthen, where necessary, existing controls and processes to ensure consistent and robust application at all levels.

External Audit and Review

- 4.9 Mazars LLP have been appointed by the Public Sector Auditor Appointments (PSAA²) as the city council's external auditor from 2023/24 for a five year period. Their annual work programme is set in accordance with the Code of Audit Practice issued by the National Audit Office and includes nationally prescribed and locally determined activities. City council officers work closely with external audit to provide information and assurance in support of those conclusions and acts on any recommendations made as a result.
- 4.10 The city council received an 'except for' Value for Money (VFM) conclusion for 2019/20 due to the issues identified within Children's Services, all other services were viewed as having the proper arrangements in place. The issues within Children's Services identified weaknesses in proper arrangements for understanding and using appropriate and reliable performance information to support informed decision making and performance management, and managing risks effectively and maintaining a sound system of internal control. The city council has received an unqualified opinion on the financial statements for 2019/20. The accounts from 2020/21 onwards have been pending final sign off due to a mixture of local and national accounting issues. Statutory Instrument (2024) No. 907 - "The Accounts and Audit (Amendment) Regulations 2024" imposed a backstop date of 13 December 2024 by which date external auditors were required to issue their opinions on any financial statements prior to 2023/24 that remain outstanding. The

² PSAA website provides information regarding the National Audit Office Code of Practice in relation to audits of local authorities

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council's previous auditors, Ernst Young, had insufficient time to complete their audit work and therefore issued disclaiming audit reports which were reported to the Audit & Standards Committee in November 2024. In addition, Ernst Young did not issue a value for money opinion but have highlighted previous concerns regarding children's services and the council's financial position. Updates on these areas are included in the paragraphs below.

External Inspections

- 4.11 The city council is subject to a number of inspections by regulatory bodies on many of the services that it provides. During 2023/24 the following inspections were undertaken:
- 4.12 The city council has 5 internal services registered with Care Quality Commission (CQC), these are:
- The Meadows – Last Inspection Aug 2019 – CQC Rating Good latest PIR review 6th July 2023
 - Marrow House – Last inspection Aug 2019 – CQC Rating Good latest PIR (Performance Information Request) review 6th July 2023
 - Enablement service – Last inspection June 2018 – CQC Rating Good latest PIR review 6th July 2023
 - School Street – Last inspection Nov 2017 – CQC Rating Good latest PIR review 6th July 2023
 - Shared Lives – no inspection has taken place since registration in May 2019 therefore no rating however last PIR reviewed June 2023
 - Community Care and Support Service – The Service recently ended on the 31st January 2024.
- 4.13 Since the pandemic the CQC have continued to monitor regulated activity remotely where possible and monitor data regularly to inform where they need to re-assess a service's rating. All services are required to return a provider information request (PIR) with key information aligned to the Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE's) to allow them to make an informed decision on whether services require further inspection. All internal services have submitted PIR's as requested and the CQC have taken no further action based on the information submitted and ratings remain the same where rated.
- 4.14 In July 2023, the CQC reviewed data relating to the Meadows, School Street, the Enablement Service and Marrow House and highlighted on their website that no action is required in relation to forthcoming inspections or change to ratings. Shared Lives also submitted a PIR in June 2023 and no areas of concern has been highlighted.
- 4.15 In October 2022 Ofsted undertook a full inspection of our children's social care services (ILACS). The review looked at the impact of leaders on social work practice; the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection; and children in care and care leavers. The results of the review were an overall effectiveness score of 'requires improvement to be good', with the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers rated 'good'.

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- 4.16 The inspection report recognised the “substantial” and “significant” progress that the council has made since the 2019 inspection, and identified a “coordinated and relentless drive to continue to improve children’s experiences”. Since the inspection, the council have refreshed its continuous improvement plan to ensure it has a comprehensive plan to respond to all inspection feedback and take all services to ‘good’ and beyond. This improvement plan has been formally submitted to Ofsted and is being delivered through a robust project management approach.
- 4.17 In October 2023, Ofsted undertook a Focussed Visit which looked at the local authority’s arrangements for planning and achieving permanence for children up to the age of 10 years. This Inspection identified that senior leaders had maintained a focus on improvement and as a result, more children are achieving security and stability through permanence at home with their parents, with connected or foster carers or through adoption. Ofsted identified that senior leaders have an accurate understanding of strengths of the service and areas requiring further development. Challenges with recruitment and retention were identified but noted to be subject to proactive intervention. Improvements in the quality of management oversight and provision of life story work were identified.
- 4.18 The council have had two six month reviews with the Department for Education and the Children’s Commissioner to review the children’s social care improvement journey. In March 2023 the review recognised the significant achievement of the ILACS outcome, the holistic nature of the Improvement Plan and a strong partnership commitment to working together. It noted further development of the strategic partnership infrastructure is required. The review recognised ongoing social worker recruitment and retention challenges and unsustainably high numbers of children in care with an increasing trajectory. The need to progress identified Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) priorities ahead of inspection was identified. The review in October 2023 saw the DfE Commissioner identify multiple strengths and improvements, but which due to the financial position of the LA proposed that whilst the role of the DfE Commissioner should end, the Statutory Direction should remain with support from an experienced Improvement Advisor. The Improvement Advisor has chaired the Improvement Board subsequently on a 6 weekly basis.
- 4.19 The council’s Annual Conversation with Ofsted took place in May 2023 to cover all areas of children and family services. The conversation considered all areas of children’s services; Children’s Social Care, Early Years, Schools, Further Education and Skills and further considered current capacity issues for the local authority. There were no formal recommendations made as a result of the Annual Conversation. The 2024 children’s services annual conversation is planned for August 2024.
- 4.20 In March 2024, the council took part in the West Midlands children’s services peer challenge, where the council were paired with and outstanding regional local authority to review our services and share learning, and the council have made changes in response to feedback at this event. The DCS (Director of Children’s Services) network also agreed annual shared priorities as a result of this event. The council have continued to utilise DfE funding to innovate and extend the reach of impactful services; Family Group Conferencing and multi-agency edge of care approaches (Catalyst) have added value. A PAUSE Project is now operational and Lifelong Links work has been added to the remit of the Family Group Conference service. A Local Government Association children’s resources Peer Challenge was commissioned in August 2023. This confirmed that the council’s strategic plans, including investment in early intervention, were an appropriate course of action. Reviewers did not identify any practice issues.

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- 4.21 The council's youth justice service was inspected in September 2022 which gave an overall rating of 'requires improvement'. The council has used the recommendations to inform improvement activity which is overseen by the Youth Justice Management Board. The council's small group homes are regularly inspected with the vast majority currently rated as 'good'. Registered managers of the homes prepare action plans in response to inspection feedback and these action plans are progressed and monitored. One home has received an Inadequate grade and compliance notice in April 2024 (Daisy House) and necessary interventions are being progressed rapidly to address this.
- 4.22 In September 2022 the council had an Ofsted monitoring visit of adult and community learning following the previous 'Inadequate' judgement following the inspection visit in 2019, and the 'Requires Improvement' judgement in September 2021. That monitoring visit report reflected the focussed improvements made in respect of the recommendations made. In 2022-23 the Post 16 Learning service sat within two directorates and had two senior leadership teams. The Children and Family Services (CAFS) directorate continued to be responsible for the Funding Quality and Compliance team while the Housing Development and Growth directorate managed the delivery teams. As part of the improvement plan the two parts have been brought together and now wholly sit within CAFS.
- 4.23 In July 2023 Ofsted conducted a 3-day full inspection and graded the service 'Good' in all 7 areas. The report recognised the enormous progress made by the service since the last report and the improvements made within the service. There has been evidenced consistent improvement over the last 4 years that have been reflective of our achievement, attendance and retention rates. Following on from the full inspection we have reviewed our Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) taking into consideration the areas in which Ofsted mentioned as areas for improvement. These are;
- Leaders should ensure that the starting points of all learners and apprentices are used to plan learning, ensuring that all learners and apprentices make the progress of which they are capable.
 - Leaders should ensure that all learners and apprentices are supported to act on the feedback they receive so that the quality of their work improves over time.
 - Leaders should ensure that all learners and apprentices are set challenging targets which support them to achieve their best. The council are currently reshaping its adult and community learning provision and are focussed on continuing the improvement journey through close monitoring and governance processes including refreshed board structures.
- 4.24 In January 2024 Ofsted and CQC undertook a joint area inspection of SEND and Alternative Provision (AP). The outcome was outcome 2 which states that outcomes are inconsistent for children and young people in the City. Nevertheless, inspectors recognised the improvement work that had been undertaken as the right things to do but had not yet consistently demonstrated impact as they were relatively recent developments. The areas for improvement are:
- The local partnership should further improve the timeliness of the identification, assessment, and implementation of support to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND.

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- The local partnership should continue to work to improve the visibility and engagement of children and young people with SEND within their communities while in education and their broader life experiences
 - The local partnership should continue to work to develop the timeliness and quality of EHC (Education Health Care) plans so they always accurately identify needs and clearly articulate the provision needed for the child and young person.
 - The local partnership should continue to develop its systems and processes to ensure that the voice of children and young people with SEND is heard and acted upon at an individual and strategic level.
 - The local partnership should continue to improve the oversight of children and young people attending and quality assurance of alternative provisions and out-of-county placements, including residential settings.
- 4.25 The directorate in partnership with health colleagues have responded to the actions through a refreshed improvement plan. Underneath the SEND Delivery Group there will be five workstreams under each of the five SEND Strategy priorities. All of the areas identified for improvement through the inspection sit under a priority area. The workstreams are responsible for the action and activity, collating the evidence of progress and impact and reporting this into the SEND Delivery Group.
- 4.26 There is a collective commitment across our partnerships for a restorative based approach to working with our children, families and communities, and also with each other. This will be evident in the way we challenge and support each other, doing 'with', not 'to', repairing and restoring relationships, holding each other to account, and working to a shared vision and outcomes. It represents a value base that will drive improvements in professional practice and ensure that we hear and act on the voice of our children and young people. To this end, our Executive Board for SEND and Inclusion is co-chaired by our City Director and the Chief Executive of the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICB (Integrated Care Board), providing executive oversight and leading together on the development and delivery of our current inclusion strategy. Our revised governance model for education provides opportunities for engagement with partners at all levels, and we continue to work closely with our schools to embed the graduated approach. Alongside this, a number of NHS Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICS (Integrated Care System) Programme Boards drive forward partnership working and ownership in areas such as mental health, children and young people and learning disability and autism, allowing for a whole system view.
- 4.27 The city council has a refreshed corporate and children and families directorate leadership team in place. The team has worked quickly to improve the timeliness of assessments and plans for children and young people with SEND and in AP, as well as delivering on our safety valve agreement with the Department for Education to address our High Needs expenditure. Oversight of the delivery of the SEND and AP improvement plan is owned by the Stoke-on-Trent Executive Board for SEND and Inclusion. This Board will regularly review progress against this plan, monitoring progress and responding to barriers or areas of concern, as well as tracking financial and performance targets. The Board will stay alert to sector developments and changes in our children's services and respond accordingly in adapting this plan.
- 4.28 Progress will be reported regularly to Cabinet Members Briefing (CMB) so that our councillors are well-sighted on delivery and any risks and issues and can support and challenge as appropriate. The Children's Improvement Board will also scrutinise progress as

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part of our continued improvement journey, and act as a key forum to engage partners on shared actions. The improvement plan will be refreshed annually. It is imperative that we measure how successful we are in making progress against our priorities. We have identified key indicators linked to the priorities, the indicators reflect and measure the impact that the agreed actions have on the lives of the children, young people and their families. The council will continue to communicate openly and transparently throughout implementation, sharing progress against the actions and about any challenges that we may face.

- 4.29 The Social Housing Regulation Bill was enacted in July 2023 to become the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023. In preparation for new regulation, the Housing and Community Safety Division undertook a self-assessment against the Housing Consumer Standards in summer 2023, supplemented by an external review being commissioned through the Housing Quality Network (HQN), commencing in August and concluding in November 2023. Subsequently, the Regulator of Social Housing officially launched its new Consumer Standards and the inspection approach in February 2024, with an initial meeting held with the Regulator in April 2024. Inspections will take place on a four-yearly cycle, with six weeks' notice being given prior to a planned inspection in most instances. Providers who will be inspected in the first quarter of 2024/25 have all been notified; Stoke-on-Trent City Council is not in this group. The council are continuing to prepare for inspection through the housing transformation and service improvement programme.
- 4.30 The findings from the council's self-assessment and HQN review have informed the service improvement and transformation plan, now into implementation through a restructured Regulatory & Strategic Services Team, together with new governance arrangements, reporting to a Housing Transformation Board, with sub-groups focusing on maintaining compliance with each of the four Consumer Standards (Neighbourhood & Community, Safety & Quality, Tenancy, and Transparency, Influence & Accountability), together with an additional group focusing on Quality, Culture and Leadership. Findings from the HQN Consumer Standards Review have been shared to ensure that the co-regulatory role is fully understood in readiness for future inspection. The HQN review and progress with implementation of the improvement plan is scheduled for Overview & Scrutiny later in the summer 2024. Progress will continue to be monitored through the Housing Transformation Board maintaining oversight and scrutiny.
- 4.31 The council's public mortuary is subject to licensing conditions which are set and governed by the Human Tissue Authority. In July 2024 inspectors arrived at the Public mortuary to undertake an audit of the facility, following an earlier inspection in October 23. This inspection considers the facility against national procedures and standards. There were a number of 'fails' including a number of major ones, which are currently being worked through as a priority. The audit will not be signed off until all issues have been fully addressed.
- 4.32 The outcome of the city council's assessment of its governance arrangements in 2023/24 is summarised below. A more detailed assessment against the seven CIPFA/IFAC principles is set out in **Appendix 1**.

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5. Framework – key improvement areas

5.1 The following paragraphs detail key elements of the framework which have undergone significant improvements and further developments are planned over the coming year.

Organisational Framework

5.2 The Organisational Framework is designed to ensure that every team across the organisation is always focused on what it needs to do to improve outcomes for residents, and that service teams have the confidence to develop and transform their services, work to meet this requirement. To be able to do this with confidence, the council also requires a clear system of accountability that ensures priorities are being delivered and money is being spent wisely. The Organisational Framework is intended to provide a system of development and assurance that should give Members confidence that the council is performing at a high level. The aim is to create a 'one council' ethos and culture that starts to break down departmental and divisional boundaries, to enable and encourage teamwork across different directorates and services where that is likely to be the most effective approach to improving outcomes.

5.3 There are five key elements of the Organisational Framework:

1. **Operating Plan** - The annual Operating Plan for 2024/25 has been drafted and was approved by Cabinet in May. It translates the Corporate Strategy into priorities for delivery and improvement, setting out the allocation of resources in line with the budget, key performance measures, efficiency and productivity requirements, identified key risks and mitigations and details of key enablers of continuous improvement.
2. **Performance Management** - Delivery of the Corporate Strategy will be underpinned by a set of carefully chosen performance indicators which will be closely aligned to the priorities and objectives set out in the strategic plan and operating plan.
3. **Assurance Model** - A system of assurance based around the core responsibilities of managers. The purpose of this system is to ensure rapid escalation and early support to managers and teams that need support.
4. **Governance for Delivery** - A single governance framework that respects the council's status as a Member-led authority and accords with a single accountability framework.
5. **Organisational Development** - Enabling functions to ensure that the organisation becomes more integrated, with different teams working together in pursuit of common goals.

5.4 The Our City, Our Wellbeing Corporate Strategy focuses on five cross-cutting themes which relate to partnership working to solve complex problems which affect population wellbeing:

- Supporting family life: ensuring families are helping to give their children the best start in life.
- Reclaiming our streets: enabling residents to take back ownership of our streets and public spaces.
- Addressing hardship and poverty: helping to maximise income and improve residents' quality of life.

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- Ensuring decent homes for all: using our influence to help eradicate problems such as fuel poverty, damp and mould.
- Supporting people to live independently: working with partners to improve support and accommodation.

The Corporate Strategy also introduced a new set of corporate values for the organisation and its staff to uphold and demonstrate at all times:

- Empowerment: enabling communities to help improve their own lives and places.
- Openness: sharing the ideas and information needed to solve key challenges.
- Empathy: caring about our residents and how we can best serve them.
- Partnership: pooling energy and expertise to tackle important challenges.
- Stewardship: taking ownership of our responsibilities to residents and businesses.
- Representation: championing our city and fostering civic pride.

- 5.5 The 2024/25 Operating Plan includes a focus on achieving an organisational and cultural shift to facilitate the transition away from the traditional approach of 'doing to' and 'delivery' towards more 'doing with' and 'enabling'. This approach entails a greater emphasis on partnership working, collaboration, co-design and the establishment of empowered, influential networks around thematic issues and complex problems affecting the city and its residents, businesses and communities. This cultural shift towards becoming a more outward-facing, collaborative organisation is reflected in the new corporate values. The Plan set out proposals to invest in workforce development to equip staff with the skills needed to embrace new ways of working; recruitment and retention; increased use of digital functionality to release more resources for the delivery of essential services, and effective use of council property and assets to leverage improved outcomes for residents and communities.
- 5.6 The Operating Plan also focuses on the need for transformation in the way that some frontline services operate in order to deliver improved outcomes and to achieve greater financial sustainability. Working with our partners, including voluntary, community and faith organisations, the council will invest in early support services, getting alongside people in their communities, giving them the tools to deal with the challenges they face. The council will seek to adopt the perspective of understanding the strengths of people and communities, rather than just seeing their needs, and will aim to give some of its powers and resources away to strengthen community development work and build greater resilience in disadvantaged neighbourhoods throughout the city.
- 5.7 The Operating Plan describes the nature and scale of the financial challenges facing the council due to the impact of national funding reductions, rapidly increasing levels of demand for services such as social care, and low levels of financial resilience due to a relatively weak council tax base. It sets out a plan to use £42.2 million of Exceptional Financial Support from the Government to invest in developing and delivering more preventative approaches to front line service delivery, including a credible resource plan that looks to reduce costs and demand within Children's Social Care over the coming four-year period through investment in early intervention and early help. The council's plan is to repay this borrowing over the medium-term using its pipeline of capital receipts, generated through the disposal of land and property assets.

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5.8 The Operating Plan also details the next steps towards delivering the council's transformation and change management programme, with key projects including:

- Transforming Procurement – Creating a sustainable operating model for procurement services while reducing potential risks to the council.
- The Hub Implementation – Expanding the development of a one-stop intranet site.
- SAP Insight – Delivering integrated business systems across HR, Finance and Payroll services to improve handling of transactions and service management data.
- Public Protection Transformation – increasing capacity to tackle local and statutory priorities more effectively.
- Digital – New service management systems, websites and online transactions.
- Leisure and Wellbeing Transformation – Transitioning to a community-focused leisure service which supports sport and rehabilitation opportunities to help improve health outcomes.
- Family Support – Joint working with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to provide early help for families who need support in order to prevent vulnerable children being taken into care.
- Children and Family Services Transformation - aimed at helping to reduce the number of children who need to be taken into local authority care.
- A programme of work to increase the financial sustainability of Adult Social Care services by reducing levels of demand through effective preventative approaches.
- Housing Transformation Programme – this includes a concerted focus on damp and mould problems in the city's housing stock.

5.9 During 2023/24 the council approved a suite of strategies designed to support delivery and priorities. These included:

- Local Transport Plan - 2023/24 Capital Programme and Supporting Highways Capital Programme.
- Cost of Living Plan.
- Stoke-on-Trent City Council Energy Strategy (2023-33).
- Older People's Housing Strategy 2023-2028.
- Children's Social Care Sufficiency Strategy.
- Community Safety Strategy 2024-27.
- Fuel Poverty Strategy 2023-28
- Permanency Strategy
- Procurement Strategy 2024-27.
- City of Stoke-on-Trent Commercial Strategy.

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Collectively, these strategies will help the city council to improve outcomes across a range of services and priorities and achieve its strategic priorities for the organisation and the wider city.

Team Plans

- 5.10 In April 2023 team plans were finalised that focused on continuous improvement and driving efficiency. The Team Plans are designed to encourage managers and teams to consider how they contribute to corporate priorities, and where there may be scope to work differently in future to help strengthen collaboration and partnership working to improve outcomes for our residents. Team Plans are a critically important element of the Organisational Framework. They reinforce the 'golden thread' linking priorities and outcomes in the Corporate Strategy with all levels of business planning across the organisation. The process for developing team plans for the 2023/24 Financial Year started early in the new calendar year with a number of additional asks for every team to detail how they will support children and young people, social value, apprenticeships, restorative practice, financial control and smarter working.

Strategic Measures

- 5.11 The 2023/24 monitoring year saw a small number of changes to the strategic measures. The performance of the strategic measures continues to be reported to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committees on a quarterly basis.
- 5.12 The new Corporate Strategy includes a revised Planning and Performance Framework for the 2024-28 period, this details how performance management works at the council and includes a new set of population outcome and wellbeing measures aligned to the priorities in the strategic plan which will replace the previous set of strategic measures. The performance of the population outcome and wellbeing measures will be reported to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committees on an annual basis with a basket of corporate measures considered by members each quarter.

Analytics

- 5.13 In order to achieve the strategic objective of improving the use of data in decision making and service improvement to improve outcomes for residents it is necessary to commit to developing analytics within the council. This involves the creation of an engine room and business intelligence system to best support operational planning. This will provide:
- Real time insights – to understand the impact of our actions
 - Predictive analytics - to plan well for the future

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- Self-service - drillable management dashboards
- Efficient reporting - saving officer & member time/£, paperless/light reporting
- Integrated reporting - triangulation of data across multiple systems to identify synergies
- Deep dive analysis - focus on deep dive cross functional analysis

5.14 Utilising analytics and Geographic Information System (GIS) plays a pivotal role in key projects by identifying and addressing specific issues in more deprived and underserved communities.

Management of Risk Arrangements

- 5.15 The city council recognises that the management of risk assists achievement of its objectives, and is committed to identifying and responding to risks which could impact on its strategic aims, business plans and operations. The management of these risks assist members and officers to deliver the council's priorities. The Director of Strategy and Resources (Section 151 Officer) and the Assistant Director – Governance and Registration (Monitoring Officer) are the joint senior leads for the management of risk. The current Management of Risk Policy, which is reviewed on an annual basis, was approved by Cabinet in April 2024 and "...applies to all directorates and to all areas of operation including all service provision, initiatives, projects and developments. It requires that all council managers, officers and elected members address the issue of day to day risk management and associated risk whilst making any and all policy decisions."
- 5.16 The city council's strategic risk register, which focuses on identifying those risks that may significantly impact on the achievement of its strategic objectives and priorities is maintained and managed by its senior management team, and is reviewed on a quarterly basis by the Audit and Standards Committee. This is supported by the management of directorate and operational risks, with a framework in place for the recording and maintenance of risk registers by the respective responsible officers. In addition to this the management of risk also forms an integral part of the city council's approach to project governance.
- 5.17 In 2023 the city council's insurers; Zurich, undertook a review of its risk management arrangements. At the time the review noted:
- "There is a strong belief in the council's risk management arrangements and confidence in its embedding at strategic level. This stems from recent changes to improve the risk management framework and integrated practices in recent years which has improved the focus on governance and strategic risk management. Corporate risks are regularly considered and confidence of support in leadership by the City Director is clearly articulated..."
 - "Regular risk reporting is presented to portfolio holders and at governing Committees where there is opportunity to challenge."
 - "It is noteworthy, that the council has a clear risk aware culture and a confidence in its ability to continuously consider and manage risk even though there are some areas of improvement for consistent application."

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5.18 In response to the review's report a plan to further develop the council's approach to the management of risk was put in place. As part of this; training for both officers and Members continues to be developed, the Authority's "Hub" includes guidance on the management of risk and, directorate and operational risk registers continue to be developed and included in the agendas of meetings. In September 2023 senior officers undertook a workshop to examine the efficacy of the strategic risk register and it was concluded that there were too many to manage at a strategic level. This presented opportunities to merge similar themed risks under one risk to ensure enough strategic focus for the risk area or to de-escalate certain risks to a directorate or department level of management where the risks can be more closely managed and monitored through risk reporting. The city council's insurers carried out a desktop review of the strategic risk register to benchmark/ assess the risks with their knowledge of the wider sector and similar sized councils and they agreed with the council's assessment that there were "...too many to manage at a strategic level, however, they do reflect the public sector challenges." Following these reviews, the strategic risk register, as at the end of the year, listed 26 strategic risks which reflected the potential challenges that faced the city council and presented a more focussed strategic risk profile.

Financial Resilience

5.19 The city council, along with the rest of the local government sector, is seeing growing financial pressure driven by the rapidly rising levels of inflation. This is a global phenomenon with a mix of causes which disproportionately impacts on those local authority areas with a relatively low-wage economy such as Stoke-on-Trent. This is having a significant adverse impact on the council's overall financial position including pay inflation; demand increasing for core services; and goods and services becoming more expensive to buy. Both Children's and Adults' Social Care are seeing significant continuing increases in both demand and cost of placements.

5.20 The current macroeconomic challenges are currently driving an exponential increase in demand for both Children's Social Care and Adult Social Care services that at current levels and cost is not financially sustainable. Investment in early intervention and targeted support proposed within the councils application for EFS aims to drive down the number of Children requiring social care placements in order to return the council to a sustainable financial footing.

5.21 The council has also strengthened financial controls across the organisation, including implementation of the following measures during 2023/24:

- Centralisation of all discretionary budgets with application process to access funds, approved by the s.151/Deputy s.151.
- Centralisation of all other budgets below £10k, with the same application process in place.
- Recruitment Freeze on all but critical posts, with City Director and S.151 approval at Establishment Board required (not new, previously implemented)
- Removal of finance system privileges, now restricted to S.151/Deputy s.151 and Senior Finance Managers.
- No new contracts without s.151 approval
- No contract extensions without s.151 approval
- No spend against discretionary frameworks without s.151 approval.

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- Placement package delegated approvals escalated.
- Further purchase card restrictions

5.22 The council continues to aim to hold a minimum balance of circa 5% of the net revenue budget. Given the revenue pressures the council faced in 2023/24 this would have not been possible in the absence of EFS. Therefore, an element of the EFS applied is planned to be used to maintain this 5% balance moving into 2024/25.

5.23 In light of the financial challenges currently faced by the authority, a framework of financial control has been embedded in order to strengthen budget and risk management across the authority:

- Financial Review Group (FRG) – this monitors, manages and challenges the use of resources and financial performance across the city council. Additional emphasis is being put on embedding a culture of personal responsibility and accountability, performance management and continuous improvement of services through the operational framework.
- Transformation Board – The transformation programme seeks to embed a culture of continuous change as business as usual and to move towards the city council becoming a learning organisation. The post COVID recovery work is feeding into the programme, assessing how this period has changed service delivery, for example, agile working and channel shift.
- Commissioning and Contract Management Board - looking at commissioning arrangements across the authority and particularly on children's and adults' placements.
- Establishment Board - to respond to the human resources elements associated with the delivery and financial challenges faced by the city council and to support delivery of an increasingly effective and productive workforce. This will include monitoring of changes to establishment and agency, consultants and interim staff (through a dedicated sub group).
- Capital and Asset Management Board – to ensure that the city council's portfolio of significant programmes and projects have been properly tested through a gateway process in terms of deliverability, affordability and VFM and are aligned to strategic objectives and are delivered on time, to quality and to budget.
- Commercial Board – this monitors commercial financial risk and advises on alternative future delivery models for services in order to drive efficiency. The authority is putting measures in place to ensure that it will be fully compliant with the new Procurement Act when the latter receives Royal Assent. These measures include: briefing members; ensuring that Procurement professionals are participating in Crown Commercial Services briefings; and publishing a Commercial Pipeline well ahead of the statutory date for doing so. Preparation is also taking place for the new subsidy arrangements.
- Digital & Data Board - an officer sub-board of the Senior Management Team that provides strategic oversight of all digital and data projects and programmes of the council, to act as a control mechanism and approve all software systems including renewals and major upgrades and to manage and oversee all aspects of data architecture.
- Annual Assurance Process – These agreements set out the expectations to budget holders with respect to financial and business management and enable budget holders to provide assurance over the financial position as well as to give a mechanism through which risk can be escalated and managed.

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- 5.24 In addition, the Section 151 Officer continues to communicate with all senior managers to outline the significant financial challenge that lies ahead for the council and to remind managers of their financial management responsibilities as a senior leader in ensuring ownership, accountability and delivery. Communications also set out key opportunities and additional support available.

Financial Management Code

- 5.25 In support of strengthening the financial framework, CIPFA has developed the Financial Management Code (FM Code), which sets out the principles by which authorities should be guided in managing their finances and the specific standards that they should, as a minimum, seek to achieve. The FM Code standards covers areas including responsibilities of the CFO (Chief Finance Officer)/ leadership team, governance and financial management, Medium Term Financial Plan and financial resilience assessments, the annual budgeting process and monitoring of financial performance.
- 5.26 The FM Code is designed to be flexible to the nature, needs and circumstances of individual authorities. It is up to each authority to determine the extent to which it complies with the FM Code and to identify what action it may wish to take to better meet the standards that the FM Code sets out. An initial assessment was carried out in early 2021 and the findings indicate that the council are broadly compliant against the FM standards with a further assessment planned over the next 12 months.
- 5.27 Following the initial assessment, further work has been undertaken to improve longer-term planning by extending the MTFS to 5 years in detail and 10 years at a higher level, and scenario planning is also now evident particularly in respect of Children's Services. In addition, to ensure the strength of financial management, reviews are underway of existing systems such as financial regulations; financial controls; training programme for both members and officers etc to ensure they are sufficiently promoted and embedded. Consideration will also be given to national reports, such as those published in the public interest, to learn from others where applicable. Additional resources have been approved to recruit to a new financial assurance team which will focus on the delivery of a programme of review and refresh of all financial processes and procedures across the city council to strengthen the financial environment.
- 5.28 The council continues to face challenges with recruitment and retention of professional finance staff, something that is prevalent nationally but is being experienced more acutely at Stoke-on-Trent City Council. This creates risk in terms of capacity and capability. A number of measures have been put in place to manage this risk including the use of targeted market supplements to salaries, the creation of opportunities for trainee and part-qualified staff and a programme of training development, that will be delivered in 2024/25. However, it should be noted that this remains a risk and will be monitored continuously. Interim staff will be used where necessary and proportionate.

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Enterprise Resource Planning System

- 5.29 The council is embarking on an authority wide transformation to replace our existing Finance and HR systems (Civica Financials and ResourceLink). These systems have become outdated and lack full integration, resulting in our teams having to carryout substantial manual reconciliations, as there is no single central view of our data. This brought about the opportunity to replace these outdated systems with a modern integrated solution, which following a robust selection process undertaken in March 2023, SAP (Systems, Applications and Products) was selected as the preferred ERP (Enterprise Resourcing Planning) solution for HR, Finance, Procurement and Payroll.
- 5.30 The benefits of moving to SAP will mean that managers have improved access to review data for their areas of responsibility. It will enable us to design and implement SAP with best practice processes that are simple, consistent and streamlined, enabling us to become a more effective and efficient council. It will reduce or eliminate the need for 'off-system' processes as well as reducing transaction processing and administration times, meaning that we can focus on more value added activities. The system is a modern digital solution, with a high degree of usability, self-service and mobile capability to increase data entry compliance, that is planned to go live during 2025.

Commercial Risk

- 5.31 The current economic climate also creates significant commercial risk for the council due to high inflation and in-turn high annual pay awards. The cost-of-living crisis is also impacting on the levels of income the council might ordinarily expect to see from external customers and residents. This is also having a direct impact on general traded services within the city council. To mitigate this, governance has been further strengthened with the creation of two key boards which give additional oversight to financial and commercial risk. The Financial Review Group, chaired by the S.151 Officer and attended by the Senior Management Team, provides senior oversight of the financial performance of the organisation and allows for action to be taken where performance is not on target. The establishment of a Commercial Board, chaired by the City Director, allows for management and oversight of commercial risk, transformational change and a forward-looking analysis of service delivery models.
- 5.32 Robust governance around the authorities wholly owned companies, Fortior Homes and Unitas, has also been a core part of managing financial and operating risk. A refinancing of company debt within Fortior Homes has been successfully completed this year which will provide a stable and sustainable financial platform for the company in what is a highly volatile economic climate. The authority is not however immune to the impact of high-inflation and rising interest rates which will inevitably impact on the risk profile of a number of areas of the council, including its commercial investments. The council is therefore closely monitoring risk around all capital loans, investments and developments.

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Recruitment & Retention

- 5.33 The city council is facing a number of recruitment and retention challenges. These challenges are felt across a wide range of roles but most keenly across our professional services e.g. social workers, planning, legal, finance etc. This is not a position that is unique to the city council as 90% of all local authorities are reporting the same concerns. In order to try and address the challenges, the council is taking forward a number of actions both collectively as part of a consortium of local authorities but also more locally. A new recruitment website has been launched in the last few weeks and we will monitor the impact of this going forward. Alongside this we have defined a marketing strategy, which will also include new branding in order to ensure the council stands out across social media platforms. The council continue to explore where else to advertise in order to attract a more diverse range of talent from across the local area. The recruitment process is being transformed to make it more diverse and enable us to attract the right people for the right jobs across the City. Extensive work is being done in relation to educational engagement in order to ensure we are seen as a viable employment option for our young people.
- 5.34 Recruitment is however only half of the story and the council are also facing similar challenges in respect of retention. It is evident that it is currently an applicant's market and that salary levels across the private sector, coupled with the growth in hybrid working, means that there are more opportunities than ever for employees to earn higher rates of pay and without having to move out of the area. The council are addressing this possibility through market supplements on a number of roles and continue to review pay and grading structures. However, the council is also mindful of its financial situation and therefore increased salary levels cannot and should not be the only answer. Job quality is just (if not sometimes more important) than salary and the council are continually reviewing how to improve this. There are many dimensions to this and there is no one size fits all solution. The council are looking at how to make improvements to career progression, what training and development is available (including better access to apprenticeships) and other benefits that can be introduced.

Cyber Security Arrangements

- 5.35 With more and more digitised services and with world events such as the Russia/Ukraine conflict along with upcoming elections in the UK and the US, cybercrime is very much on the rise and is expected to increase further in 2024. At a recent presentation given to Digital Leaders, the Head of the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) stated a targeted attack against public sector organisations was not a case of 'if' but 'when'. This is a sobering message and whilst the council can do little to prevent a sophisticated targeted attack, it can do everything possible to not make itself a target, and to mitigate the risk should an attack be successful. Whilst the council are encouraging the community to transact with it digitally, it must ensure these transactions are secure. With this in mind, there is therefore a twin track approach of prevention and mitigation. The council have therefore installed new hardware and software to improve its security capability. One such an example is an innovative tie up with the local health authority and county council via the ICS to have a shared SOC/SIEM (Security Operations Centre and Security Incident and Event Management) providing a local cybersecurity community. The most important weapon in the council's armoury is staff awareness; the weakest point of any security system is usually people, who unlike machines can be coerced to doing something they wouldn't normally do, such as click a link or

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reveal a password. Cyber Security training for council staff is now mandatory. The council are also making structural and operational changes to improve capacity and capability in this area and have recently appointed a Cyber Security Manager. Whilst the council hopes to never be successfully compromised by a cyber-attack, it must be planned for. The NCSC have an 'exercise in a box' which the council complete annually to ensure the ICT Team are prepared. The council are also ensuring that cyber resilience is built into all directorate Business Continuity Plans, so that all functions are prepared to operate without ICT for a sustained period.

Other Governance Improvements

Corporate Governance

- 5.36 During 2023/4 the council continued to develop an assurance process with all senior managers to ensure the council has the right governance and assurance arrangements in place. The process is designed to set the culture and tone of what is expected of managers in discharging their responsibilities as well as providing managers with the opportunity to identify areas where additional support or training is required. An online form was developed across a number of key areas including financial management, risk, governance and decision making, cyber security and internal control. Feedback on the process was positive with manager's saying the process provided them with an opportunity to expand on issues already being discussed at 1-2-1s. Following completion of surveys in 2023/24, key areas have been collated and reported to SMT to inform future governance arrangements.
- 5.37 The council has a confidential reporting procedure in place which provides a process to encourage people working with the council to report suspected wrongdoing as soon as possible, in the knowledge that they are able to raise genuine concerns in good faith without fear of reprisals; their confidentiality will be respected; and their concerns will be taken seriously and properly investigated where appropriate. The number, nature and outcomes of confidential disclosures made to Council officers is recorded and monitored. During 2023/24 no referral was made under the confidential reporting procedure. In 2022/23 two referrals was made under the procedure which are both now closed.
- 5.38 Information Governance best practice has continued to develop within the authority with training on cyber security rolled out. A cyber security audit has been carried out, including a penetration test exercise, which is on the whole positive and useful feedback has been provided which will form an action plan to be actioned by the new cyber security manager who has since his arrival continued to raise the profile of cyber security within the council. The Information Governance Group continued to develop chaired by the SIRO (senior Information Risk Owner), Vice-chaired by the Chief Digital Officer and Caldicott Guardian and including the council's Data Protection Officer and representatives from legal, communications, IT, Information Rights, Learning and Development and each department. The group continues to be effective in raising the profile of Information Governance with each directorate now having its own group. The

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authority continued working with public sector partners in the region, collaborating to improve the detection and response to cyber threats with a managed SOC service.

5.39 Chief Officer declarations of interest are now available online and reviewed annually. Declarations of Interest and declarations of interest for other officers have also been rolled out. Following the election in May 2023 a full review took place of conflicts ring fencing arrangements and these have been implanted for elected members where required. The officer level strategic co-ordinating boards continue to operate well and greater clarity in terms of the decision-making pathway for reports, these arrangements have been improved by a Data and Digital Board.

5.40 A four-month review of the procurement operating model was completed in 2023. The review considered four areas as part of a Procurement Effectiveness Framework including; Category Management and Sourcing, Governance and Financial Regulations, Developing Capability, Management Information and Technology whilst providing an overall view of the council's procurement effectiveness including an assessment of key risks. The aim of the review was to provide recommendations that will create a landscape to;

- build best practice in terms of sourcing and contracting,
- create a high performing team,
- create policy and processes that enable an effective organisation,
- ensure that Procurement is both a compliant and a cost-effective service,
- create a sustainable operating model for the Council's procurement services, and
- reduce the risks associated with procurement activity in the authority.

5.41 As a result of the findings of the review, and informed by the procurement effectiveness framework, there were seven recommendations which have are a key part in the transformation of a new procurement and commercial services organisation and have been adopted in the council's procurement strategy for 2024 – 2027. Procurement and commercial services through a transformation of sourcing, contracts management and supplier payments, sets out the approach the council are taking to achieve best value through the use of professional and “commercially confident” resources as well as the use of technology, innovation, best practices and procedures. This approach is an ambitious programme of improvement, which sets high standards for procurement and all staff across the council. It is supported by a three-year improvement plan to drive further improvement in procurement performance and match not only the council's own aspirations but national good practice benchmarks.

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- 5.42 In January 2023 a new report management process was introduced using the Modern.gov platform. The web based system has meant that all Cabinet reports are drafted using an inbuilt template designed to provide a logical and standard approach to support decision making. The system provides an automated workflow which allows report authors to manage the steps and input required. The key advantage is that there is only one version of the report which relevant officers can review and add comments to during the preparation process. The system hosts the agenda and paperwork for internal Operational Business Meetings which further supports version control and contributes to a comprehensive audit trail of approval and review prior to reports being published with Cabinet agenda papers.
- 5.43 An improved process for assigning complaints to service areas was delivered across the authority in September 2023. A single point of contact (SPOC) was established for every section within directorates placing the responsibility for complaint handling at the appropriate level for every stage of the complaints process. Improved and standardised automated reporting of current and overdue feedback has been implemented for each directorate which is distributed via executive assistants to follow up with the responsible owner to help ensure improved complaint response SLA (Service Level Agreement) compliance. A long-term automated complaint reporting solution via Power BI dashboards is currently under development. This will enable service areas to self-serve their own complaints data requirements, allow the customer feedback team to monitor SLA compliance of the end to end complaints process, and also enable senior management to monitor complaints performance across the authority. The corporate complaints policy has been updated and published on the Customer Feedback website along with some initial improvements to the website content. The statutory CAFS and ASC (Adult Social Care) policies are also due to be updated and published this year. The complaints project has also aligned with the Housing Complaints Handling project to ensure effective delivery of any crossover activities. The next key focus of the project is to establish a culture of complaint learning across the authority.
- 5.44 The city council's financial assessments team's functions include carrying out financial assessments for residential and non-residential care, acting as appointees and deputies for adults who lack capacity and the provision of direct payments for children and adults. In April 2020 the service transferred from Corporate Finance to Revenues and Benefits. Following the transfer of the service, a review of staffing, processes and procedures and internal controls was undertaken. One of the key risks identified within this review related to Court of Protection reconciliation processes and as such focus was concentrated on this area. A number of potential internal control and reconciliation weaknesses were identified that needed to be considered and addressed. Following an internal audit review, an action plan was developed and a full reconciliation of the existing individual accounts commenced. This included new reconciliation procedures being put in to place for new transactions, guidance and training of staff regarding the new processes. A historic reconciliation was also undertaken which included the review of 100,000s of transactions. The council have been in ongoing dialogue with the Office of the Public Guardian (OPG) regarding the reconciliation and they have offered their support to the council in addressing the issues and the council will maintain an open dialogue with the OPG as further improvements are undertaken. The

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issues regarding balances have now been addressed and a report was presented to the Audit and Standards Committee in March 2023 and May 2024 under closed agenda items. A transformation project for the overall Financial Assessments service is underway and a number of improvements have been made to processes. The process for carrying out the reconciliation for Court of Protection work is being transferred from a manual process to an automated one. This will reduce the risk of manual intervention in relation to the Court of Protection function.

- 5.45 A new member enquiry system has been implemented in order to modernise the ways of managing the casework raised by councillors, allowing officers and councillors to work more efficiently via increased automation and improved workflows, reporting and functionality that easily allows Members to log and manage genuine casework cases. The new system for councillors involves the use of a simple online form to log cases, which will be automatically allocated and reviewed by service leads. All of the cases raised by councillors will be saved on one system, to allow officers to action / see a live dashboard of all open cases raised on behalf of councillors and constituents. The system is hoping to improve communication between services and elected members whilst ensuring that case details and records of communications are logged in an auditable trail. Reports can be created from the system to allow for senior management to undertake regular performance monitoring on service error and identity areas of improvement.
- 5.46 The city council recognises the importance of assisting Elected Members to develop their knowledge and to learn new skills. In May 2023, following the all-out election, a comprehensive induction programme was delivered for all newly elected Members with encouragement provided to all returning Members to take part and update and refresh their training. Member development in Stoke-on-Trent does not stand alone but is continuous and an integral part of the council's business and opportunities for Member development are sought in a variety of ways, which can include simple signposting to national programs and opportunities, all Member Briefings and briefings delivered to political groups. When the new Administration was announced in May 2023, individual portfolio holder briefings were quickly mobilised and bespoke information packs were issued which were relevant to and targeted towards supporting the new Cabinet members.
- 5.47 The Local Government Association (LGA) offers a range of peer-supported improvement programmes, including Peer Challenge and Councillor Mentoring. Peer challenge and peer support are fundamental parts to support self-regulation and sector-led improvement. Member peers are accredited to support councils and their councillors with their improvement and learning by providing a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge. Each of the four political groups at the LGA has a pool of expert peers able to confidentially advise members. This is arranged directly through political groups.
- 5.48 The council continues to pursue a very practical approach to tackling the climate emergency by identifying and pursuing individual programmes and projects that it considers can make the biggest difference, particularly with respect to energy generation and efficiency, public transport, air quality and tree planting. As of 2023 the council has published its energy strategy working toward net zero with

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actions plans for the period up to 2033. The current administration has a more strategic and co-ordinated approach to sustainability. Addressing climate change is a requirement of all Cabinet members through their portfolios and all relevant council strategies, plans and programmes and all procurement now takes sustainability and corporate social responsibility into account. The council continues to adopt strategies for energy consumption reduction with a new building energy monitoring system operational and live insights into building energy usage. In the last twelve months the council has almost completed its programme of LED street lighting replacement work further reducing energy consumption and emissions alongside measures across its estate. Consequently, total emissions from gas and electricity consumption across the council have reduced by a further 9% from last year. The focus going forward includes a deep dive review into the overall efficiency of the top 30 most energy hungry buildings to identify further measures that can be adopted and the development of a Sustainability strategy and action plan covering all areas of the councils activities. The council continues to try to identify and secure further opportunities to make efficiencies and reduce carbon with further investment in energy efficiency in its estate and social housing stock. The recently successfully completed social housing decarbonisation scheme has enabled the council to secure additional funding to invest in further decarbonisation measures. As the council and government agenda and policy evolves around net zero, the council will continue to deliver decarbonisation projects which will be configured into a city wide approach to net zero in the future.

Children's Services

- 5.49 A Financial Review Board carefully scrutinises planned spend against system pressures. The children's services budget is insufficient to manage the demand created by placements. Strenuous efforts to discharge children from care where safe to do are being progressed and work is in place to aim to reduce overall volumes of work and numbers of children entering care. However, the impact of early intervention initiatives has not yet had a significant impact on numbers of children entering care and planned discharges are slower than required by budget pressures. Numbers of adopters are also lower than the number of children with plans for adoption on a ratio of about 3:1.
- 5.50 The Corporate Parenting Strategy has been updated and will be considered by Cabinet in Summer 2024. In recognising that the Corporate Parenting Panel can be improved and more innovative, we have invited an LGA Peer Review, supported by the DfE Improvement Advisor, during 2024.
- 5.51 The CSC (Children's Social Care) placement Sufficiency Strategy has been updated and there is a focus within commissioning to improve market management of children's residential placements which are placing a huge financial burden on the council's budget. Whilst the council has a high number of foster carers for the size of the population, our sufficiency remains insufficient for need. There is a national shortage of suitable foster homes for children in care (the recent Care Review recommended that central government invests to secure an additional 9,000 foster carers). Consequently, there are many instances in which Stoke-on-Trent children, who

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could be in foster care, are required to live in children's homes because there is no foster carer availability. One consequence of this is that children's homes end up full of children who could be in foster care and therefore are not available to care for those who really need to live in a residential home. Where there are suitable vacancies in residential or foster homes, they are often not in the local area. For our children, the consequence of this is that too many end up having to live in residential or foster care that is far from their home communities. This is not conducive to them receiving ideal care and can inhibit plans for them to be able to return back to their birth family. A further risk is the inability to find homes for a very small number of children. This situation has improved in the last 12 months despite increasing numbers of children in care, although we still have low (currently 2) numbers of children in unregistered residential settings. A small number of children have been supported at home when this is no longer in their best interests due to placement sufficiency issues.

5.52 The children's social care market is reasonably healthy in that, for the most part, providers do not appear to be at any immediate financial risk. However, there are insufficient quality homes for children with complex needs. In addition, market pressures have resulted in significant increases in the cost of placements which represents a significant challenge for the local authority. In response to these issues the city council has continued to cement a variety of changes:

- Produced an updated Sufficiency Strategy and Implementation Plan. This sets out precisely how we plan to secure additional foster care, residential care and supported accommodation for our cared for children.
- Regular provider network events to build effective joint working with local providers and engage them in discussion about how they can provide the specific homes our children need.
- Additional scrutiny of the highest cost placements. Panel processes have been reviewed and strengthened in 2024 and financial monitoring is now linked to placement planning more directly. Additional accountant capacity has supported this development.
- Review of the fee breakdown we ask for from providers so that it is less onerous for them, whilst giving us the key information we need to understand value for money of the placement.

5.53 The Stoke-on-Trent Safeguarding Children Partnership continues to grow in maturity, with new arrangements in place for multi-agency partners to share leadership. Multi-agency partnership arrangements include an Executive Board, Quality Assurance Group and sub-groups for Practice Review and Learning and Development. The council has also established a new Education Safeguarding sub-group to develop our leadership and assurance in this space. The council has agreed a quality assurance and scrutiny framework, which is being implemented alongside our multi-agency training programme. The council has now published its first annual report and

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continue to progress against partnership priorities and to implement learning from practice reviews. The second Annual Report will be published shortly. Audit activity has progressed in 2023/2024 and s175 and s11 audits have been completed.

- 5.54 The council has a robust quality assurance framework in place for children's social care and continue to further develop quality assurance arrangements across education services, following a review of all governance structures including terms of reference and membership of boards undertaken in April 2023, particularly in relation to SEND. The council has an established programme management approach providing senior management with a clear line of sight and timely oversight of the large range of project plans which support the over-arching Continuous Improvement Plan and delivery of key directorate strategies. The council use service area and a directorate risk register to manage and mitigate emerging strategic risks. In addition, there are regular reports to DFE, particularly in relation to Early Years, SEND, NEETS (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and attendance which monitor performance against deliverables and statutory compliance.
- 5.55 Due to the pressures identified in the High Needs Block funding and the need to manage the safety valve savings, the council has established a High Needs Board. The DfE approved a safety valve payment of £10 million, subject to compliance and satisfactory progress with certain conditions set. This funding has now been paid to the city council over a 4 year period (£9.1 million to reduce the deficit and £0.9 million capacity funding). The overall deficit on Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) as at 31 March 2023 was £14.5 million. At March 2024 this has reduced to £12.4 million. There is an agreed action plan in place which initially covered the financial years from 2020/21 to 2023/24, with a focus on two key strands: firstly, to reduce the number of independent sector placements (this will be achieved through the increase of provision within the city including expansion of special schools, resource bases and free schools); and secondly, to work with mainstream schools to ensure that the pupils with special educational needs can have appropriate provision within a mainstream setting. Due to emerging challenges relating to forecast increases in the demand for EHCPs (Education Health Care Plans), alternative provision placements due to rising exclusions, and delays in capital project delivery, there are significant pressures forecast against the safety value agreement which will make delivery against the existing profiles difficult. The council are currently engaging with the DfE to discuss mitigating actions to address these challenges. Discussions are also ongoing with the Schools' Forum in respect of how they can support the plan. The High Needs Board meets regularly to analyse the expenditure and the impact on vulnerable learners of any realignments of funding. The Board also oversee the match of funding to need in order to meet statutory duties for vulnerable learners. The new Inclusion Board monitors the statutory duty with regard to learners with SEND and those who are vulnerable and in need of additional/ specialist support. Preparing for Ofsted inspections, multi-agency working, funding, expenditure, provision, co-production of alternative provision, transition and quality of provision all form part of the work of the Board.

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Adult Social Care

- 5.56 The council continues to face challenges from external care home providers due to the council's financial position and the need to make difficult decisions in relation to fees paid to care providers. During 2023-24 the council took the decisions to cease providing 'council top ups' where the council, rather than family members, pay an additional weekly fee to the care home. As a result, the number of council 'top ups' have reduced by 26%. The number of people receiving domiciliary care services in their own home has continued to increase over the past 12 months, however the number of people entering residential care has also continued to increase. Commissioners and brokerage staff have continued to work with extra care providers and social work colleagues to explore alternative options to residential care.
- 5.57 The cost of care exercised undertaken on Working Age Adults (WAA), evidenced that the council's hourly rate for supported living was an appropriate fee and commissioners have consistently sourced care at this rate. For care home placements for WAA, Commissioners have utilised a tool called Care Cubed to ensure costs being quoted are appropriate and supported with negotiations. During 2023/24 the Care Brokers took on the role of sourcing care for all WAA services, this freed up social work capacity and since taking on the responsibility care brokers have made cost avoidance savings across all service types.
- 5.58 The contract monitoring and quality assurance of commissioned care providers has been reviewed during 2023-24 and further work will be undertaken to embed quality assurance across all commissioning roles during 2024-25. Quality of care provision across the City is of high quality with no inadequate rated providers during 2023-24. The Commissioning team have been working more proactively with care providers to identify any concerns and to work with providers to address issues before they escalate. Commissioners have also been reviewing how to better engage with people in receipt of social care services and involve them and their carers in commissioning and reviewing commissioned services.
- 5.59 The Care Act 2014 places a duty on each local authority to establish a Safeguarding Adult Board (SAB) and specifies the responsibilities of the local authority and connected partners with whom they work, to protect adults at risk of abuse or neglect. The Board has a broad membership of partners in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent and is chaired by an independent chair appointed by Staffordshire County Council and Stoke-on-Trent City Council in conjunction with Board members. The Safeguarding Partnership Board publishes an annual report, and also a 'more accessible' version, outlining updates from the previous year and how this work has contributed to effective practice in all areas. The board is committed to learning and improving practice from safeguarding adult reviews. They host a programme of learning events through the year to assist with the delivery of Review findings and the SSASPB (Stoke and Staffordshire Adult Safeguarding Partnership Board) Strategic Plan. Following the local authority's target operating model, the safeguarding team has expanded to include professional leads & social workers to work across commissioning to support providers in any areas of concerns from a safeguarding perspective. This includes a preventative approach to escalations. This includes multi

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agency working with the partners under the MASH (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub) and links to the local authority's new front door model. The local authority is in full attendance at all board executive meetings and sub-group meetings focusing on all areas of safeguarding vulnerable adults including prevention and engagement and the SAR (Safeguarding Adult Review) sub group.

- 5.60 The 'People' Commissioning and Contracts Board (CoCo Board) covers the Children and Family Services and Adult Social Care, Health Integration and Wellbeing directorate, and Public Health Commissioning activity. This Board has oversight of the delivery of the 3-year Commissioning and Procurement Plan covering spend on spot and block contracts sitting within children's, adults and public health. The Board provides effective governance and oversight of activity and spend across these areas and the relationship with the Commercial Board, as well as the new Procurement Assurance Board (PAB) established in 2024. The work of the CoCo Board ensures the completion of performance and risk dashboards to give early sight of issues emerging. Extensive baselining of all contracting activity has been completed and work will continue on the more granular spot provision to ensure we are managing the market costs and quality appropriately. The Commercial Board oversees the development of the commercial activities of the council, including supporting the council in its shareholder function with respect to the two arms-length companies, in its delivery of traded services and in broader commercial activity as required. The Commercial Board will be chaired by the City Director. The PAB provides a new gateway approach to Procurement and is aligned to the Commercial Board.

Public Health

- 5.61 The public health grant is used to provide a range of vital preventative services that help to support health. During 2023/24 the council undertook a range of activities to review how this grant was been spent to ensure best use of resources. Activities included:
- benchmarking against other local authorities on the amount of spend to wider council services (known as Wider Determinants of Health).
 - Reviewing all contributions made to wider council services, i.e. the non-mandated public health spend.
 - Reviewing all council budgets to consider which services were most appropriate to receive a contribution, based on the level of public health benefit expected, reflecting the conditions for the use of the grant
 - Services which should not continue to receive a contribution were identified
 - A set of criteria has been introduced as a framework to guide allocation
 - A form, known as a Plan on a Page (PoAP), was developed to be completed by all Service Managers whose service was to receive a contribution to set out the public health benefits to be leveraged and how these would be evidenced
 - A guidance document was also developed

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Planning and Housing

- 5.62 The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) are an independent government funded group that completed a review of the council's planning service in April 2023. The review covered three areas: Planning Policy and the Local Plan, Development Management and Enforcement, Planning Obligations/S106 governance. The recommendations made by the PAS review have generally progressed well over the last year. In Development Management, key early wins have been fully implemented and a number of other improvements, such as updating the scheme of delegation and code of conduct, have also been completed. Work to take a firmer approach with applicants and their agents is also progressing well; with the expected challenges managed and a consistent line held. Revised pre-application charges have also been implemented and these compliment the above approach. The remaining actions include the on-going implementation of the new back office IT system; which has hit challenges due to the lack of technical expertise and competing statutory priorities. The next major phase of work is centred on engagement with local planning agents and developers to improve the quality of submissions. This ties into the creation of a new Local Validation List. In respect of Planning Policy, the recommendations around governance and accountability have been implemented. The recommendations made more generally around capacity and resource have made mixed progress. Discussions around the Local Plan have progressed well recently and a business case has been made to help bring in the required resource to deliver the new timetable.
- 5.63 As part of an enhanced regulatory system, the government introduced the Building Safety Act 2022 to better manage high-risk residential buildings, defined as those buildings greater than 7 storeys or 18m in height. The council has 16 such residential buildings in its council housing stock, and in the first instance was required to register all such buildings with the Building Safety Regulator (established as a part of the 2022 act) by the 30th September 2023 which has been completed. Any changes proposed to these high-risk buildings that require building control consent will be determined by the Building Safety Regulator, rather than the council's building control team. Furthermore, the council as landlord is required by the Building Safety Act 2022 to prepare building safety cases for each of its high-risk buildings, which set out how the health and safety risks of the buildings are being managed. These building safety cases are currently being prepared and are on target to be completed by the dates required by the Building Safety Regulator.

Partnerships

- 5.64 The city council currently has a number of entities in which it has an interest either as an owner, shareholder or as a member. These include Fortior Homes Ltd; Unitas Stoke-on-Trent Ltd; Stoke-on-Trent Regeneration Ltd and Stoke Energy Co Ltd. The latter company is dormant. A fifth company Rhead Homes Ltd has been wound up. Fortior and Unitas play an important role for the city council in not only providing financial return and delivering services, but also in terms of delivering city council objectives and as users of city council supplied services. The city council wants these ventures to be successful, however, they do come with a degree of risk. The city council needs to ensure it has robust processes and arrangements in place to protect its interests and to ensure that, as shareholder

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and lender, the city council can be assured the companies are effectively managed. The council is supporting Unitas following the resignation of the Chair and Director.

- 5.65 The council has continued to adopt robust shareholder governance arrangements with regard to its interests in Unitas and Fortior. Strategic decisions with regard to these companies and the council's interest are vested in Cabinet and include determining the council's interests and approving business plans. Day to day shareholder functions have been delegated to the shareholders representative who is the City Director, this includes approvals and consents on restricted matters as defined in the shareholder agreement. The City Director operates this function through the shareholder group consisting of key officers (including finance, legal and client side) and Cabinet members. Meetings include the attendance of board representatives for liaison purposes for part of the meetings and times for the group to discuss issues and consider matters in private. The council has separate client side liaison arrangements with regard to Unitas. Additionally, the council operates an advanced Conflicts Ring Fencing policy and procedure to ensure that there are no conflicts for officers and directors working with or for companies and councils.

Asset Management

- 5.66 In June 2023 SMT agreed to adopt an Integrated Asset Management system incorporating a Corporate Landlord Model and a new Strategic Land and Property Asset Management Plan. In the October 2023 the council undertook a CIPFA External Insurance Review to adopt the above approach. This work will result in a council wide Land and Property Asset Management Plan, which will link the use of assets to deliver the Corporate Priorities. It will also result in a Corporate Landlord Model, providing a single point of control for the estate, allowing a corporate landlord model, organisations should take a strategic approach and aim to:
- unlock the financial and social value of assets by integrating thinking about property with financial, regeneration and other corporate priorities
 - deliver economies of scale by consolidating resources, making best use of capacity and eliminating duplication
 - remove any gaps in asset management – for example, ensuring all assets are subject to regular condition and regulatory compliance surveys
 - improve efficiency and establish procurement arrangements that get the best from the market and cover the whole organisation consistently
 - identify opportunities for greater partnership working across the public sector.
- 5.67 The city council are in contract with Transform Schools Stoke on Trent Ltd (TSSL) for the delivery of a maintenance and facilities management service for some 88 schools across the council's education estate. This is a PFI relationship and the contract period comes to an end in October 2025, there is a joint risk in that the council as administrator of the contract has an ethical responsibility to ensure the schools are left in the best possible state of repair and maintenance (both for academy and retained schools) and also

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a contractual responsibility to act in a proper fashion in its capacity as administrator. A dedicated project team and programme board have been established under the oversight of the City Director to deliver handback and mitigate this risk.

- 5.68 Through discussions with the council's new insurers (two separate insurers providing building insurance cover to commercial and public buildings respectively) there has been a need to revisit the engagement and information provided. This has been reviewed and an updated process and inspection regime has been introduced. To obtain maximum value from contract re-procurement the property team are now playing a more active role in qualifying the nature of cover required subject to the council's intentions in respect of the building i.e. different cover may be required if the premises are vacant and/or earmarked for demolition and redevelopment, which in turn would require a different inspection and reporting regime. This new more proactive approach to building insurance is being managed through close co-operation between the insurance team, property and the Corporate Property management team. The risk to be monitored is in respect of changes in the use of property or its disposal not being reported and should regular building checks either not take place or not be conducted in line with the insurer's requirements, this could potentially invalidate our cover and in some instances mean that properties are not fully insured. The above processes and enhanced management are mitigating the risk and the relationship with the insurers has improved through this more direct engagement approach.

Coroner's Services

- 5.69 Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Coronial areas merged in October 2023. This arrangement is governed by a Joint Committee made up of Councillors from both authorities. This Committee meets quarterly in order to monitor finances and oversee any practice or developmental issues. The Committee arranged for October 2024 will deal with a request for additional resources.

6. Significant Governance Issues

- 6.1 In 2023/24 no further significant governance issues were identified other than those included in this statement. All findings of regulatory inspections received during the period covered by this statement are being addressed and progress will be reported at regular intervals through the appropriate committee.

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7. Declaration by City Council

- 7.1 We have been advised on the results of the review of the effectiveness of the governance framework by the Audit and Standards Committee. The city council continues to develop plans to ensure continuous improvement of the arrangements are in place and these will continue to be enhanced.
- 7.2 Over the coming year, we will continue to strengthen the city council's governance arrangements and will monitor the implementation of recommendations to improve and enhance the arrangements as part of our next annual review.

Signed:

..... Leader of the Council: Cllr Jane Ashworth
Date:

..... City Director: Jon Rouse
Date:

..... Section 151 Officer: Nick Edmonds
Date:

..... Monitoring Officer: James Doble
Date:

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APPENDIX 1

Principle A – Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law.

Ref	How we can demonstrate that the city council meets this principle	Evidence
PA.1	<p>The city council promotes high standards of ethical behaviour by developing, maintaining and monitoring a Code of Conduct for Members of the city council. The Code of Conduct clearly sets out the standards expected for elected Councillors to ensure they operate in a clear, transparent manner and treat each other, and members of the public, with respect and courtesy. The Code and the city council’s policies and procedures are communicated via corporate induction sessions and are available on the city council’s intranet site.</p>	<p>Members Code of Conduct & Staff Code of Conduct are included in the city council’s Constitution <u>Constitution</u></p>
PA.2	<p>The Codes of Conduct for Members and city council employees include the requirement to disclose interests (including statutory Disclosable Pecuniary Interests) and to declare gifts and hospitality. The Members Gifts and Hospitality Register is available on the city council’s website on the Transparency pages.</p>	<p><u>Councillor’s Register of Interests</u></p>
PA.3	<p>Comprising of nine councillors, allocated on the basis of the political composition of the council, the city council’s Audit and Standards Committee is responsible for helping Members to adhere to the Members Code of Conduct and promoting other elements of sound ethical behaviour.</p> <p>The Committee, in conjunction with the Monitoring Officer, deals with complaints against Members and this may involve the undertaking of investigations or some other form of action being taken, such as additional training. The Committee also issues (and updates) local codes of guidance from time to time, such as a Code on Criminal Records Bureau checks and guidance on dealing with planning and licensing determinations.</p>	<p><u>Audit and Standards Committee</u></p> <p><u>Modern Day Slavery and Human Trafficking Statement 2022</u></p>

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<p>PA.4</p>	<p>A full review of procurement has been undertaken in 2023. As a result of this, and informed by the procurement effectiveness framework, the council has adopted a procurement strategy for 2024 - 2027. Procurement and commercial services through a transformation of sourcing, contracts management and supplier payments, sets out the approach the council is taking to achieve best value through the use of professional and “commercially confident” resources as well as the use of technology, innovation, best practices and procedures.</p>	<p><u>Procurement Strategy 2024 - 2027</u></p> <p><u>Procurement Code</u></p> <p><u>Responsible Procurement Code</u></p> <p><u>Commercial Strategy</u></p>
<p>PA.5</p>	<p>The city council has an established corporate compliments, comments and complaints process. In the event that the procedure is exhausted, the Ombudsman is required to carry out an investigation into a complaint.</p> <p>The Ombudsman’s Annual letter is published on the LGO's own website.</p>	<p><u>Compliments, Comments and Complaints Process</u></p> <p><u>Stoke-on-Trent City Council Corporate Compliments, Comments and Compliments Policy 2024</u></p> <p><u>Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code</u></p> <p><u>LGO Annual Review Letter 2024</u></p>
<p>PA.6</p>	<p>The city council has a Counter-Fraud & Error Strategy as well as a Confidential Reporting (Whistleblowing) Procedure to ensure that members and employees of the authority are not influenced by prejudice, bias or conflicts of interest in dealing with different stakeholders. The Audit and Standards Committee receives regular update reports outlining progress in implementing key anti-fraud actions to protect the city council’s interests.</p>	<p><u>Statement on Countering Fraud, Corruption & Error April 2024</u></p> <p><u>Statement on Countering Fraud, Corruption & Error Strategy</u></p> <p><u>Confidential Reporting (Whistleblowing) Procedure</u></p>

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Principle B – Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

Ref	How we can demonstrate that the city council meets this principle	Evidence
PB.1	<p>The city council publishes its decisions on its website; on this page you can find a record of executive decisions made under the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations</p>	<p><u>Notice of Decisions</u></p>
PB.2	<p>The city council is committed to openness and transparency. Meeting items are only discussed in private if they absolutely cannot be discussed in any other way³. City council and Cabinet Meetings are broadcast live on the internet, and are available online to be watched after the event.</p>	<p><u>City council Meeting Webcasts</u> <u>Cabinet & City Council Meetings</u></p>
PB.3	<p>The city council places communications at the centre of all that it does. The communications strategy which is underpinned by the city council's vision sets out an approach which aims to improve communications with local people as well as a number of key stakeholders across the city through a series of pre-agreed campaigns. This approach proactively supports engaging local people and stakeholders in democracy and city council services in a number of ways across a number of digital and more traditional channels.</p> <p>The city council's Community Cohesion Strategy has been developed taking into account the views of young people and consultation with statutory, voluntary and community partners.</p>	<p>Corporate Communication Strategies Quarterly Priorities are agreed with Cabinet Leads, the City Director and Directors (internal only)</p> <p><u>Community Cohesion Strategy 2020-2024</u></p> <p><u>No Platform for Extremism</u></p>

³ Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012

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<p>PB.4</p>	<p>The city council has an established customer feedback procedure which enables those in the City to engage with the organisation and offer ideas, suggestions, compliments and complaints. The Annual Customer Feedback Report for 2022/23 was published in January 2024 and shows a decrease compared to 2021/22 across most directorates in stage 1 corporate complaints. The number of stage 2 corporate complaints recorded has increased this year. The 2023/24 report is currently being produced.</p>	<p><u>Customer Feedback Procedure</u> <u>Customer Service Strategy 2021 - 2024</u> <u>Annual Customer Feedback Report 2022/2023</u></p>
<p>PB.5</p>	<p>The City Council Operating Plan for 2024/2025 was reported to the Cabinet in May 2024 on the delivery of the priorities and objectives of the Our City Our Wellbeing strategy.</p>	<p><u>Our City, Our Wellbeing Corporate Strategy 2024-2028</u> <u>Operating Plan 2024-2025</u> <u>Strategic Planning and Performance Framework</u> <u>Corporate Strategy Consultation Summary</u></p>
<p>PB.6</p>	<p>The city council communicates through its website regarding the city council's vision, achievements, financial position and performance. The website has recently been redeveloped to provide the public with easier access to information and services. Various parts of the organisation use a variety of social media, including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, google+, Pinterest and Flickr to engage and inform communities and stakeholders. The Communications Team also provides related media releases, where appropriate.</p>	<p><u>Facebook</u> <u>Main News Page</u> Our Week (internal document only) Our Learning (internal document only) Our Wellbeing (internal document only)</p>

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<p>PB.7</p>	<p>Engaging with our communities is essential to ensure that we are a resident led authority. Consultation exercises are carried out as required; for example, consultation on the Budget has become a regular component of the budget setting process. Consultation meetings were held across the Medium-term Financial Strategy period to consult on the budget proposals.</p> <p>The city council also conducted a number of online consultations in the year including the rights of way improvement plan; how do you use your chemist; elective home education policy, social workers survey to support carers and</p>	<p><u>Budget Consultation 2023-2024</u></p> <p><u>Budget Consultation 2024-2025</u> <u>Budget Consultation 2024-2025 Feedback (Annex B)</u></p> <p><u>Budget Consultation book 2024-2025</u></p>
<p>PB.8</p>	<p>Enhancing the accountability for service delivery and effectiveness of other public service providers is demonstrated through the reporting mechanisms for joint arrangements, such as the Health and Well Being Board, Adult Strategic Partnership, CYS Partnership, Responsible Authorities Group and the Youth Offending Service Board, - all of whom deliver services in partnership with Staffordshire PCT, Staffordshire Police, Probation Services and the city council. The city council works in close partnership with the Stoke and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership to develop investment and business growth across the region.</p>	<p><u>Health and Wellbeing Board</u></p> <p><u>Place to Be - Adult Services Strategy 2023/2026</u></p> <p><u>Adults' Strategic Partnership Plan</u></p> <p><u>Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Adult Safeguarding Partnership Board</u></p> <p><u>SSASPB Annual Report 2022/2023</u></p>
<p>PB.9</p>	<p>Directors of Public Health in England have a statutory duty to produce an annual report outlining the health of their local population. The council is committed to improving the health of our city and reducing inequalities.</p>	<p><u>Director of Public Health Annual Report 2023</u></p>

Stoke-on-Trent City Council Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

Principle C – Defining Outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits.

Ref	How we can demonstrate that the city council meets this principle	Evidence
PC.1	<p>In May 2024, the city council agreed the strategic vision for the coming period, 2024 - 2028. The new vision comprises six key themes and has been developed in consultation with Cabinet. The vision is the basis for a more detailed operating plan for 2024/25.</p>	<p><u>Our City, Our Wellbeing Corporate Strategy 2024-2028</u> <u>Strategic Planning and Performance Framework</u> <u>Operating Plan 2024-2025</u> <u>Corporate Strategy Consultation Summary</u> <u>Silicon Stoke Prospectus</u> <u>Library Strategy 2022/2025</u> <u>Playing Pitch Strategy 2021/2040</u> <u>Stoke-on-Trent Cultural Strategy 2022/2028</u> <u>Stoke-on-Trent Green Space Strategy Interim Update May 2022</u> <u>Visitor Economy Strategy 2022/2027</u> <u>Transport Strategy and Delivery Plan 2022/2031</u> <u>Local Transport Plan 2023/24 to 2025/26</u> <u>Local Transport Plan 2023/24 to 2025/26 App 1</u> <u>Enhanced Bus Partnership Plan and Scheme</u> <u>Community Renewal Fund Prospectus</u></p>

Stoke-on-Trent City Council Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

<p>PC.2</p>	<p>The council's Our City Our Wellbeing strategy, sets out the council's ambition to generate a greater sense of wellbeing at individual, family, neighbourhood and city-wide levels. The key themes are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthier • Wealthier • Safer • Greener • Cleaner • Fairer <p>The council's Medium Term Financial Strategy has been aligned to support the delivery of the above strategic priorities.</p>	<p><u>Strategic Measures Q1 2023/2024 (1)</u> <u>Strategic Measures Q1 2023/2024 (2)</u></p> <p><u>Strategic Measures Q2 2023/2024 (1)</u> <u>Strategic Measures Q2 2023/2024 (2)</u></p> <p><u>Strategic Measures Q3 2023/2024 (1)</u> <u>Strategic Measures Q3 2023/2024 (2)</u></p> <p><u>Strategic Measures Q4 2023/2024 (1)</u> <u>Strategic Measures Q4 2023/2024 (2)</u></p> <p><u>Medium Term Financial Strategy and Council Tax Setting 2024/25 (Appendix)</u></p> <p><u>Medium Term Financial Strategy & Council Tax Setting 2024/2025 Appendix A Addendum (Item 8) to Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024/2025.pdf</u></p>
<p>PC.3</p>	<p>The city council has adopted in full CIPFA's Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities and their Treasury Management Code of Practice. The city council receives specialist support from Arlingclose on all aspects of borrowing, lending and investments.</p> <p>Reserves strategy and forecasts are clearly set out in the Medium Term Financial Strategy and are monitored through the quarterly Finance updates. Opportunities for strengthening the reserves position are routinely considered as part of the account closure exercise. The revenue budget is set and will be reviewed on a regular basis.</p>	<p><u>Capital Financial Strategy 2023/2024</u> <u>Capital Investment Programme Funding 2023/2024 - Annex M</u> <u>Capital Investment Programme 2023/2024 - 2031/2032 Summary of Changes Appendix A</u> <u>Capital Investment Programme Update - Detailed Programme HDG Appendix B</u> <u>Capital Investment Programme Update - Detailed CAFS Appendix B(ii)</u></p>

Stoke-on-Trent City Council Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

		<p><u>Capital Investment Programme Update - Detailed Programme ASCHIW Appendix B(iii)</u> <u>Capital Investment Programme Update - Detailed Programme STAR Appendix B(iv)</u></p> <p><u>Capital Investment Programme Update Appendix C</u> <u>Capital Investment Programme 2023/2024 Annex Ci</u> <u>Capital Investment Programme 2023/2024 Annex Cii</u> <u>Capital Investment Programme 2023/2024 Annex Ciii</u></p> <p><u>Capital Investment Programme Update Appendix D</u></p> <p><u>Medium Term Financial Strategy and Council Tax Setting 2024/25 (Appendix)</u></p> <p><u>Medium Term Financial Strategy & Council Tax Setting 2024/2025 Appendix A</u></p> <p><u>Addendum (Item 7) to Medium Term Financial Strategy 2023/2024.pdf</u></p> <p><u>CIPFA Treasury Management Code of Practice 2023/2024</u></p>
<p>PC.4</p>	<p>The annual report on the Treasury Management Strategy for 2023/24, incorporating the Minimum Revenue Provision Policy Statement, Investment Strategy and Prudential and Treasury Indicators required under Part 1 of the Local Government Act 2003 was approved by city council in February 2023 (having been considered by the Audit and Standards Committee).</p> <p>Member awareness and engagement on Treasury Management issues is progressed through development events and regular updates.</p>	<p><u>Treasury Management Annual Borrowing and Investment Strategy 2023/2024 & Minimum Revenue Provision</u> <u>Treasury Management Annual Borrowing and Investment Strategy 2024/2025 & Minimum Revenue Provision</u> <u>Treasury Management and Policy Statement 2023/2024</u> <u>Minimum Revenue Provision Policy 2023/2024</u></p>

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PC.5

The council have produced an Asset Management Plan to set out the continuing work of Asset Maximisation and brings together the priorities for delivery for operational property, the accommodation strategies and plans and how the decisions taken to drive these also provide a greater level of opportunity for physical regeneration within the City.

Asset Management Plan 2022-2024

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Stoke-on-Trent City Council Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

Principle D – Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes.

Ref	How we can demonstrate that the city council meets this principle	Evidence
PD.1	<p>Financial and non-financial performance reports are presented on a monthly basis at Senior Management Team Meetings (SMT) and taken to Cabinet each quarter.</p> <p>The content of the reports demonstrates the city council’s progress in achieving against the performance measures and budgets across city council activities and are used to highlight examples of excellence in service delivery, as well as monitoring areas requiring improvement. Reports are also provided to Overview and Scrutiny Committees for each respective service area.</p>	<p><u>Financial Performance Q1 2023/2024</u> <u>Financial Performance Q1 2023/2024 App A</u> <u>Financial Performance Q1 2023/2024 Annex A</u> <u>Financial Performance Q1 2023/2024 Annex B</u> <u>Financial Performance Q1 2023/2024 Annex Ci</u> <u>Financial Performance Q1 2023/2024 Annex Cii</u> <u>Financial Performance Q1 2023/2024 Annex Ciii</u></p> <p><u>Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024</u> <u>Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024 App A</u> <u>Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024 Annex A</u> <u>Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024 Annex B</u> <u>Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024 Annex Ci</u> <u>Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024 Annex Cii</u> <u>Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024 Annex Ciii</u> <u>Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024 Annex D</u> <u>Financial Performance Q2 2022/2023 Annex E</u></p> <p><u>Treasury Management Mid-Year Review 2023/2024</u></p> <p><u>Financial Performance Report Q3 2023/2024</u> <u>Financial Performance Q3 2023/2024 App A</u> <u>Financial Performance Q3 2023/2024 Annex A</u> <u>Financial Performance Q3 2023/2024 Annex B</u> <u>Financial Performance Q3 2023/2024 Annex Ci</u> <u>Financial Performance Q3 2023/2024 Annex Cii</u> <u>Financial Performance Q3 2023/2024 Annex Ciii</u></p> <p><u>Financial Performance Report 2023-2024</u> <u>Provisional Outturn Appendix A</u></p>

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The city council monitors a set of strategic measures to understand performance against our priorities. The Strategic Measures are reported to the Senior Management Team (SMT), Cabinet and Overview & Scrutiny on a quarterly basis and are refreshed annually to ensure they remain up to date and relevant. SMT consider corporate health performance information on a monthly basis which includes customer feedback, sickness absence & HR data, health & safety and customer services information. Key Directorate KPIs are also reviewed on a monthly basis with a focus on a specific directorate each month. The city council continues to work with partners and reports performance on a quarterly basis to various boards including Health & Wellbeing Board and Children & Young Peoples Strategic Partnership Board.

[Financial Performance Report 2023-2024 Annex A 2023-24 Savings - Provisional Outturn](#)
[Financial Performance Report 2023-2024 Annex B -2023-2024 HRA Provisional Outturn](#)
[Financial Performance Report 2023-2024 – Annex Ci - 2023-24 to 2032-33 Cap Inv Prg - Provisional Outturn](#)
[Financial Performance Report 2023-2024 - Annex Cii - Cap Inv Prg 2023-24 Provisional Outturn Detail](#)
[Financial Performance Report 2023-2024 Annex Ciii- 2023-24 Cap Inv Prg - Provisional Outturn Summary](#)
[Financial Performance Report 2024-2024 - Annex D - Risk Register - Provisional Outturn](#)

[Strategic Measures Q1 2023/2024 \(1\)](#)
[Strategic Measures Q1 2023/2024 \(2\)](#)
[Strategic Measures Q2 2023/2024 \(1\)](#)
[Strategic Measures Q2 2023/2024 \(2\)](#)
[Strategic Measures Q3 2023/2024 \(1\)](#)
[Strategic Measures Q3 2023/2024 \(2\)](#)
[Strategic Measures Q4 2023/2024 \(1\)](#)
[Strategic Measures Q4 2023/2024 \(2\)](#)

[Treasury Management Q3 Review 2023/2024](#)

[Overview & Scrutiny Committees](#)

Stoke-on-Trent City Council Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

PD.2

In determining the courses of action to take decisions are informed by the city council's strategic priorities and objectives (its strategy and key performance indicators) which subsequently inform a clear planning methodology and long term direction for its business activities. To support this, the city council ensures it has an adequate and all-inclusive budget process.

Medium Term Financial Strategy & Council Tax Setting 2023/2024

Medium Term Financial Strategy & Council Tax Setting 2024/2025 Appendix A

Medium Term Financial Strategy & Council Tax Setting 2024/2025

Addendum (Item 8) to Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024/2025

Strategic Measures Q1 2023/2024 (1)

Strategic Measures Q1 2023/2024 (2)

Strategic Measures Q2 2023/2024 (1)

Strategic Measures Q2 2023/2024 (2)

Strategic Measures Q3 2023/2024 (1)

Strategic Measures Q3 2023/2024 (2)

Strategic Measures Q4 2023/2024 (1)

Strategic Measures Q4 2023/2024 (2)

Financial Resilience and Governance Update 2023

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<p>PD.3</p>	<p>A Housing Strategy has been created to enhance Stoke-on-Trent’s housing offer so that people at all stages of life can find and live in a quality home they want at a price they can afford.</p> <p>Following a review of the complains procedure, a housing ombudsman complaint handling code has been developed.</p> <p>A tenant’s Charter and Service Standards has also been put into place.</p>	<p><u>Housing Strategy 2022-27</u></p> <p><u>Housing Revenue Account Asset Management Strategy 2022/2027</u></p> <p><u>Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code</u></p> <p><u>Tenants Charter and Service Standards</u></p>
<p>PD.4</p>	<p>“Making Stoke-on-Trent a digitally inclusive city”. Enabling more people to access the internet has the potential to transform the way in which citizens access local services and make choices about aspects of their own lives, while simultaneously reducing demand for key services.</p>	<p><u>Digital Strategy 2021-2024</u></p>
<p>PD.5</p>	<p>Our vision is for Stoke-on-Trent to be a vibrant, healthy and caring city which supports its citizens to live more fulfilling, independent and healthy lives. Our objective is to promote personal responsibility, early intervention and independence by involving communities in the way our services are shaped. We will encourage community leadership, a strong focus on efficiency, value for money and ease of access to services.</p>	<p><u>Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2021 - 2025</u></p> <p><u>Joint Dementia Strategy 2021-2024</u></p> <p><u>Young Peoples Learning and Skills Strategy 2022 - 2027</u></p> <p><u>Joint Commissioning Strategy For SEND 2023/2028</u></p> <p><u>Annual Youth Justice Plan 2023/2024</u></p>
<p>PD.6</p>	<p>A set of Equality Objectives for the city council for the period 2021-2024 have been developed.</p>	<p><u>Equality and Diversity Strategy 2022/2025</u></p> <p><u>Equality Objectives 2021-2024</u></p>

Stoke-on-Trent City Council Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

Principle E – Developing the entity’s capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it.

Ref	How we can demonstrate that the city council meets this principle	Evidence	
PE.1	The city council participates in multiple benchmarking exercises and uses the information for financial and service quality comparisons. Learning from other entities enables the city council to achieve value for money and best practice service delivery.	Benchmarking <u>Corporate Peer Review</u> <u>CIPFA External Assurance Review</u> <u>Financial Review Management Response - Financial Performance Q2 2022/2023 Annex E</u>	
PE.2	The city council has four statutory ⁴ posts with responsibility for governance.	Statutory / Mandatory posts	Post within current structure
		Head of Paid Service	City Director
		Chief Financial Officer and s151 Officer	Director of Strategy & Resources
		Monitoring Officer	Assistant Director Governance & Registrars

⁴ There are other statutory roles, including the Director of Children’s Services and the Caldicott Guardian, currently held by the Assistant Director – Commissioning, Health and Social Care

Stoke-on-Trent City Council Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

		Senior Information Risk Owner	Assistant Director Governance & Registrars
PE.3	<p>The Constitution sets out a Scheme of Delegation, Financial Regulations and Contract Procedure Rules.</p> <p>The Scheme of Delegation gives officers authority to act within the policies and objectives defined by the executive and the city council as a whole. The scheme has been extended to Assistant Directors and work continues to extend further to Strategic Managers. The Financial Regulations underpin the effective management of the city council's financial arrangements and the Contract Procedure Rules govern the making of contracts for and on behalf of the city council.</p> <p>The city council's Constitution sets out the framework for decision making and the formal reporting of those decisions. Decision making is underpinned by a framework of policies, plans and strategies. These are referred to as the Budget and Policy Framework and are identified within the Constitution. The Constitution is kept under review by the Assistant Director - Governance, (the city council's Monitoring Officer).</p> <p>These documents are comprehensively reviewed on a regular basis by the Constitution Working Group with amendments being approved by full city council.</p>	<u>Constitution</u>	

Stoke-on-Trent City Council Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

<p>PE.4</p>	<p>For our elected Members, the city council produces an annual Learning and Development Plan supported by a calendar of training events and workshops. These continued to adhere to the best practice guidelines given in the Local Government Association’s Member Development Charter.</p>	<p>Councillor Induction Plan 2023-2027 (Internal only) <u>Role of a Councillor</u></p>
<p>PE.5</p>	<p>In compliance with the data transparency code, the city council has published its senior management structure and pay structure.</p> <p>The city council publishes an annual pay policy, last approved by city council in March 2024.</p> <p>Information is also provided about member’s remuneration.</p>	<p><u>Pay Policy Statement 2024/2025</u></p> <p><u>Members Allowances 2023/2024</u></p> <p>Terms and Conditions Review (Internal document only).</p>
<p>PE.6</p>	<p>The city council recognises that its employees are central to its success. Training for staff is developed via information from annual P.L.A.N - Progress, Learning, Actions, Nurture. The employee performance framework exists to promote performance and identify development needs. A revised performance appraisal process is currently being developed.</p> <p>Staff also undertake a range of compulsory e-learning on topics such as health and safety and data protection.</p> <p>Regular senior leadership events took place throughout 2023/24. These events are led by the City Director for all Senior Managers and included a variety of management tops and information sharing.</p>	<p>P.L.A.N – Progress, Learning, Actions, Nurture</p> <p>E-learning Programme</p> <p>Senior Leadership Management Programme</p>

Stoke-on-Trent City Council Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

Principle F – Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management

Ref	How we can demonstrate that the city council meets this principle	Evidence
PF.1	<p>The Management of Risk Policy sets out the city council’s strategy for ensuring that effective risk management is embedded within all areas of the city council’s operations. It also requires that all managers and Councillors address the issue of associated risk whilst making any and all policy decisions. The Audit and Standards Committee reviews the Strategic Risk Register annually.</p> <p>The system of internal control is designed to identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of the city council’s policies, aims and objectives and to evaluate the likelihood of those risks being realised and the impact should they be realised, and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically.</p>	<p><u>Strategic Risk Register</u></p> <p><u>Management of Risk Policy</u></p> <p><u>Risk Management Health Check</u></p>

Stoke-on-Trent City Council Annual Governance Statement 2023/24


PF.2

The city council's Financial Management arrangements conform to the governance requirements of the CIPFA statement on the role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government (2016). Information on the financial performance of the city council provided to budget managers and senior officers is well presented, timely, complete and accurate. Real time desk top budget information is available to budget holders across the city council.

- [Financial Performance Q1 2023/2024](#)
- [Financial Performance Q1 2023/2024 App A](#)
- [Financial Performance Q1 2023/2024 Annex A](#)
- [Financial Performance Q1 2023/2024 Annex B](#)
- [Financial Performance Q1 2023/2024 Annex Ci](#)
- [Financial Performance Q1 2023/2024 Annex Cii](#)
- [Financial Performance Q1 2023/2024 Annex Ciii](#)
- [Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024](#)
- [Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024 App A](#)
- [Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024 Annex A](#)
- [Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024 Annex B](#)
- [Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024 Annex Ci](#)
- [Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024 Annex Cii](#)
- [Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024 Annex Ciii](#)
- [Financial Performance Q2 2023/2024 Annex D](#)
- [Financial Performance Q2 2022/2023 Annex E](#)
- [Financial Performance Report Q3 2023/2024](#)
- [Financial Performance Q3 2023/2024 App A](#)
- [Financial Performance Q3 2023/2024 Annex A](#)
- [Financial Performance Q3 2023/2024 Annex B](#)
- [Financial Performance Q3 2023/2024 Annex Ci](#)
- [Financial Performance Q3 2023/2024 Annex Cii](#)
- [Financial Performance Q3 2023/2024 Annex Ciii](#)

- [Financial Performance Report 2023-2024 Provisional Outturn Appendix A](#)
- [Financial Performance Report 2023-2024 Annex A 2023-24 Savings - Provisional Outturn](#)
- [Financial Performance Report 2023-2024 Annex B - 2023-2024 HRA Provisional Outturn](#)
- [Financial Performance Report 2023-2024 – Annex Ci - 2023-24 to 2032-33 Cap Inv Prg - Provisional Outturn](#)
- [Financial Performance Report 2023-2024 - Annex Cii - Cap Inv Prg 2023-24 Provisional Outturn Detail](#)
- [Financial Performance Report 2023-2024 Annex Ciii- 2023-24 Cap Inv Prg - Provisional Outturn Summary](#)
- [Financial Performance Report 2024-2024 - Annex D - Risk Register - Provisional Outturn](#)

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 <p data-bbox="492 287 1388 1452">DRAFT</p>	<p data-bbox="1429 268 1971 558"><u>Strategic Measures Q1 2023/2024 (1)</u> <u>Strategic Measures Q1 2023/2024 (2)</u> <u>Strategic Measures Q2 2023/2024 (1)</u> <u>Strategic Measures Q2 2023/2024 (2)</u> <u>Strategic Measures Q3 2023/2024 (1)</u> <u>Strategic Measures Q3 2023/2024 (2)</u> <u>Strategic Measures Q4 2023/2024 (1)</u> <u>Strategic Measures Q4 2023/2024 (2)</u></p> <p data-bbox="1429 630 2123 774"><u>Treasury Management Annual Report 2023/2024 and Quarter 1 2024/2025 Performance Summary</u> <u>Treasury Management Annual Report 2023/2024 and Quarter 1 2024/2025 Appendix 1</u></p> <p data-bbox="1429 813 2049 917"><u>Addendum to Agenda Item 5 Treasury Management Annual Report 2023-2024 and Quarter 1 2024-2025</u></p>
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Stoke-on-Trent City Council Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

<p>PF.3</p>	<p>The city council’s policies and staff training programme promote compliance with information legislation. To support this, data protection courses have been further updated for both officers and councillors. Training for senior managers is complete and relevant policies are in place in line with current legislation. We comply with standards for public sector data handling and security and have achieved Public Services Network certification every year since its launch. The city council has met the standards required by the new NHS Data Security and Protection Toolkit.</p> <p>The city council is a signatory to the One Staffordshire county-wide information sharing protocol to ensure that when data is shared with our partners it is done in a transparent, compliant and consistent way.</p>	<p>Data Protection Policy (Internal only)</p> <p>Data Sharing Policy (Internal only)</p> <p>Information Governance Policy (Internal only)</p>
<p>PF.4</p>	<p>The city council’s review of the effectiveness of the system of internal control is informed by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directorate assurance based on management information, performance information, officer assurance statements and Scrutiny reports • The work undertaken by Internal Audit during the year. • The work undertaken by the External Auditor reported in their annual audit and inspection letter. • Other work undertaken by independent inspection bodies. 	<p><u>Internal Audit Monitoring Half Year Monitoring Report 23/24</u></p> <p><u>Internal Audit Monitoring Q3 23/24</u></p> <p><u>Internal Audit Monitoring 23/24 Q3 Appendix 1</u></p> <p><u>Internal Audit Annual Report 2023/2024</u></p> <p><u>Internal Audit Annual Report 2023/2024 App 2 EQA</u></p> <p><u>External Review of Internal Audit March 2023</u></p> <p><u>External Review of Internal Audit Appendix</u></p>

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PF.5

The city council has a Corporate Strategy for the prevention and detection of fraud and corruption. A key area of work continues to be Housing Tenancy Fraud and in particular Right to Buy where the implementation of enhanced due diligence checks and robust anti-money laundering controls have been hugely successful in preventing non bona fide Right to Buy applications thereby protecting the public purse. Results of fraud investigations are publicised on the internet using the city council's social media presence and also in the local media to promote the city council's 'Zero Tolerance Against Fraud' approach.

The city council participates in the National Fraud Initiative (NFI), this is a range of annual and biennial data matching exercises led by the Cabinet Office that matches electronic data within and between public and private sector bodies to prevent and detect fraud. Regular updates on these exercises are provided to the Audit and Standards Committee.

Statement on Countering Fraud, Corruption & Error Strategy January 2023

National Fraud Initiative

Staffordshire Counter Fraud Partnership

Stoke-on-Trent City Council Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

Principle G – Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit, to deliver effective accountability.

Ref	How we can demonstrate that the city council meets this principle	Evidence
PG.1	<p>In line with the Local Government Transparency Code 2015, the city council is required to publish certain types of information for transparency purposes, this information can be found on the city council’s website along with monthly Transparency Reports.</p> <p>A record of executive decisions made under the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012 are published on the city council’s website. Information is also provided about member’s remuneration.</p>	<p><u>Transparency Report September 2023</u></p> <p><u>Members Allowances 2023/2024</u></p> <p><u>Notice of Decisions</u></p>
PG.2	<p>The city council operates a number of Overview and Scrutiny Committees that consist of Elected Members who undertake annual work programmes. The Overview and Scrutiny Committees are aligned to the directorates within the city council. Their two main functions are to hold decision makers to account and to also develop and review policy.</p>	<p><u>Overview & Scrutiny</u></p>
PG.3	<p>The Statement of Accounts is published and produced in compliance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 presenting a true and fair view of the financial performance of the city council in the delivery of services to the citizens of Stoke-on-Trent. The accounts are subject to independent external audit and are made available via the city council’s website. This is seen as an essential feature of public accountability and stewardship as it provides an annual report on how the city council has used the public funds for which it is responsible.</p>	<p><u>Statement of Accounts 2020/2021</u></p> <p><u>Statement of Accounts 2021/2022</u></p> <p><u>Statement of Accounts 2022/2023</u></p> <p><u>Stoke-on-Trent City Council Audit Results Report 2020/2021 to 2022/2023</u></p> <p><u>Stoke-on-Trent City Council Value for Money Interim report 2020/2021 to 2022/2023</u></p> <p><u>Accounting Policies Adopted for 2023/2024</u></p>

Stoke-on-Trent City Council Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

<p>PG.4</p>	<p>The Audit and Standards Committee has responsibility for conducting an annual review of the effectiveness of the governance framework, including the system of internal control. The review of effectiveness will be informed by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ City council officers, responsible for the development and maintenance of the governance environment □ The Strategic Manager, Audit and Fraud’s annual report □ Comments and observations made by external auditors and external review agencies and inspectors. <p>The Committee also report on their activities to full council.</p>	<p><u>Roles and Responsibilities</u> <u>Roles and Responsibilities - Appendix A</u></p> <p><u>Audit and Standards Committee Annual Report 2023/2024</u></p>
<p>PG.5</p>	<p>The city council’s assurance arrangements conform to the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on the role of the Head of Internal Audit (2020). Information on the work of Internal Audit is provided to managers and senior officers and is well presented, complete and accurate. Summary reports are provided to the Audit and Standards Committee on a quarterly basis.</p> <p>The annual report of the Strategic Manager, Audit and Fraud summarises the audit work undertaken during 2023/2024. Where recommendations have been made to improve processes, these are being addressed by appropriate officers. From the work undertaken in 2023/2024 by Internal Audit, the Strategic Manager, Audit and Fraud was able to give the following assurance:</p> <p><i>“From the work carried out by Internal Audit during 2023/24, it has been concluded that the level of assurance on the adequacy and effectiveness of the city council’s control environment is Satisfactory.”</i></p>	<p><u>Internal Audit Charter 2024/2025</u></p> <p><u>Internal Audit Strategy and Plan 2024/2025</u></p> <p><u>Annual Audit and Standards Committee Plan</u></p> <p><u>Internal Audit Annual Report 2023/2024</u> <u>Internal Audit Annual Report 2023/2024 App 2</u> <u>EQA Action Plan</u></p>

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