

Wiltshire Council

**Annual Governance
Statement 2023/24**

Introduction

Wiltshire Council is a local authority that is responsible for providing services to over half a million residents, tens of thousands of varied businesses and over a million visitors per year. It aims to create a thriving economy, resilient society, sustainable environment and empowered people and this approach underlines everything we do. The Council secures funding from national government, local taxation and charges. So, as a public body, it needs to have a strong governance and assurance framework to make certain its business is conducted to the highest standards, ensuring:

- resources are directed in accordance with agreed policy and according to priorities;
- there is sound and inclusive decision making, conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards;
- there is clear accountability for the use of those resources in order to achieve desired outcomes for service users and communities; and
- public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for, and continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised is secured, having regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

This statement reflects how Wiltshire Council has met those standards in 2023/24 and beyond; as well as the ongoing actions it is taking to maintain and improve its governance arrangements. Evidence of how we have assessed ourselves has been grouped into sections as set out by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) in its publication 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework (2016)' and is consistent with the Local Code of Corporate Governance.

Approval of the Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

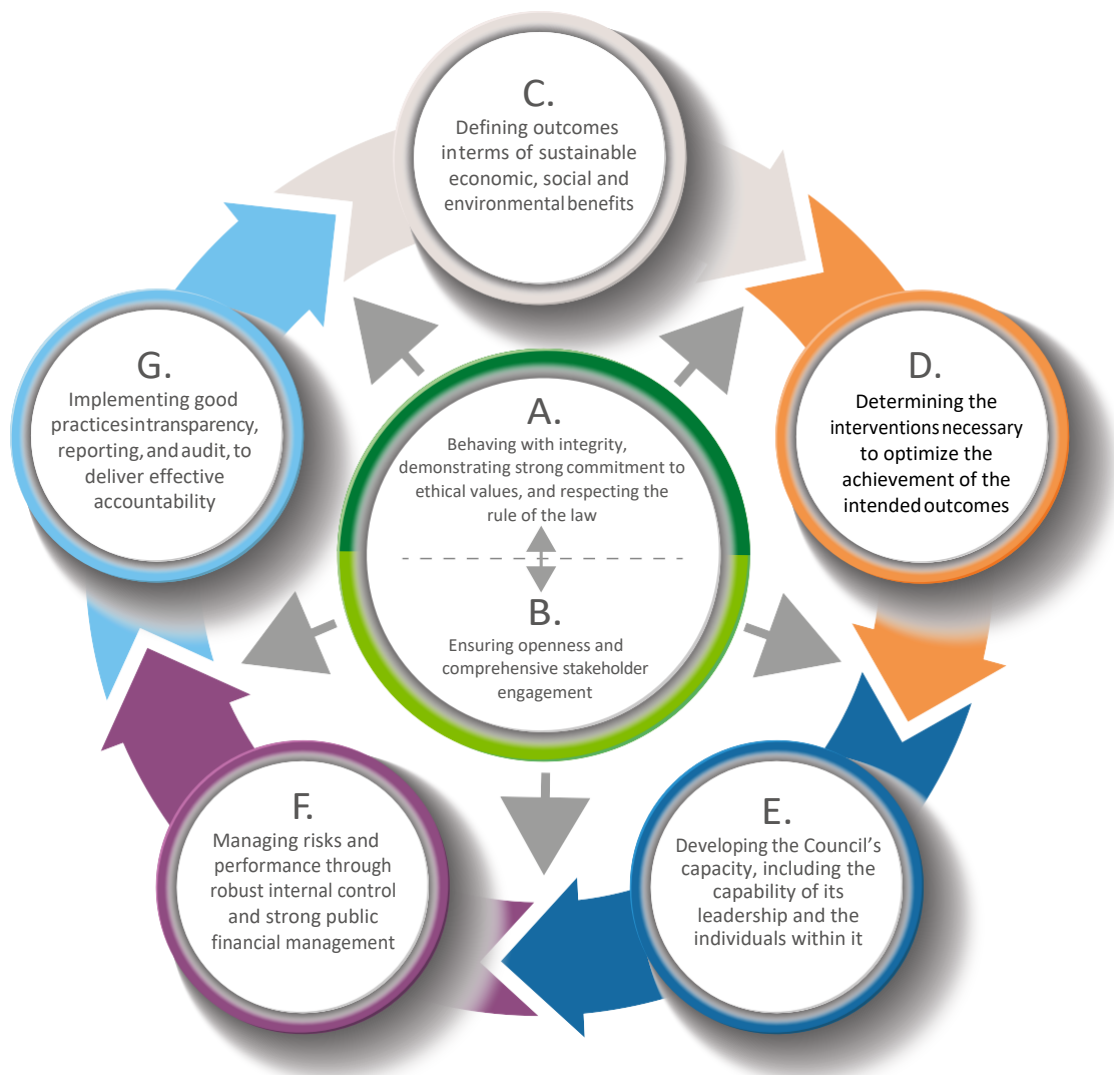
We are satisfied that this statement provides a substantial level of assurance that good governance is in place in Wiltshire Council and that appropriate arrangements are in place to address improvements identified in our review of compliance. Progress on these improvements and on addressing and mitigating the risks will be monitored through the year by senior officers and the Audit and Governance Committee.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
Chief Executive

Cllr Richard Clewer
Leader of Wiltshire Council

September 2024

The Local Code of Corporate Governance provides a means of demonstrating that a sound level of governance is operated. This local code acts as a means of assurance, but also a mechanism for achieving continuous improvement. This approach is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE *Delivering Good Governance in Local Government* framework. The principles are set out below:



The following pages set out a summary of the key governance controls, mapped against the CIPFA principles. These are supported by case studies to help demonstrate where positive improvement action has already been taken, and a note of improvement actions that the Council will take.

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

Respect for the rule of law

The Council's [Constitution](#) provides the framework within which the Council operates. It sets out how decisions are made and the procedures which must be followed to ensure that these are efficient, effective, transparent and accountable. The constitution is kept under review by the Standards Committee who request the Constitution Focus Group to review sections. In 2023/24 this included reviewing the procedural rules for Cabinet, Overview and Scrutiny Committees, access to information procedures, and arrangements for the Policy and Crime Panel

The Council publishes and promotes a code of conduct for its staff alongside **'Our Identity which is a framework, embedded through the employee lifecycle'**, that sets out expectations for how staff and managers are expected to lead, work and act to deliver services

Ethical considerations are also evident in the Council's procurement activity. A Socially Responsible Procurement Policy (SRPP) has been created and adopted. Procurement activity should achieve value for money, support the growth of our local economy, promote fair pay (tackling modern slavery) and support the protection of our environment.

The Council has continued a 'Positive Conduct, Positive Democracy' campaign, promoting fair and ethical good conduct amongst local council members and clerks in Wiltshire.

The Constitution includes at Part 12 the **Members' Code of Conduct**, which makes clear the obligation of elected members in promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct and ensuring the principles of public life (selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership) are adhered to. Pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests are [registered](#) and published on the website in accordance with the requirements of the Code of Conduct and underlying legislation. Following a year of operation the Council made further changes to its Code of Conduct in October 2023, and began a review of the arrangements for dealing with Code of Conduct.

There is a process for dealing with complaints under the codes of conduct for unitary, parish, town and city councillors in Wiltshire. This process and its application is set by the Council and reviewed regularly by the Council's **Standards Committee**. Minutes from the meetings of this Committee can be found [online](#). In 2023-24, 59 complaints were received; 11 regarding Wiltshire Council members and 48 regarding members of town, parish or city councils. Four complaints were referred for investigation with breaches found in two cases. An [annual update](#) from the Standards Committee has been provided to full council.

Behaving with integrity

Strong commitment to ethical values

How we can improve

Review contract management approaches to embed standard contract management activity; deliver policy and training to embed the Socially Responsible Procurement Policy across the Council; and strengthen our approach to working with SMEs and VCS.

Principle B - Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

The Council makes available a range of important information on its website including its strategic aims and ambitions in its published [Business Plan](#) and via its [publication scheme](#). The council has arrangements for dealing with requests under Freedom of Information laws. In 2023/24 there were 1766 requests with 93% responded to within 20 days.

Public engagement plays a key part in the decision-making process, across the full range of council services. Key consultations and public engagement campaigns undertaken during 2023/24 include: the Local Plan (Reg19); Local Cycling and Walking Plans for Calne, Melksham, Chippenham, Devizes and Trowbridge; moving traffic enforcement; Public Transport; Salisbury Public Protection Order; Air Quality Action Plan; Design Guide; Highways Matters; Ask the Leader; SEND strategy; Community Area priorities; a new carers service; Chippenham One Plan Public Consultation

Wiltshire Council's 18 **Area Boards** involve the local community in decision-making within the agreed scheme of delegation. The Area Boards facilitated 72 business meetings, 97 engagement events and 150 working groups to support the collaborative delivery of an agreed set of local priorities. Priorities are evidenced based and directly linked to the Wiltshire Council business plan, regarding themes such as young people, transport, cost of living, older people, health and wellbeing and economic

The council's [Statement of Community Involvement](#) (approved by Full Council in July 2020) sets out policy for engaging the community and other stakeholders in the preparation of Wiltshire's planning policy documents and in the consideration of planning applications. Timely, open, officer decision making is in place with the ability for local councillors to call-in **planning** decisions to committee in response to local concerns. A strategic planning committee oversees particular significant issues.

Committee meetings are open to the public, and **agenda papers and minutes** are available on the internet in various formats along with forward work plans/ calendars.

The Council supports a range of partnerships including: the [Health and Wellbeing Board](#), promoting integrated working between the council and the NHS; the [Wiltshire Police and Crime Panel](#) which scrutinises decisions of the Police and Crime Commissioner (joint committee with Swindon Borough Council); and has integrated the work of the Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership into the council. A council director now chairs the [Local Resilience Forum](#) which has also been peer reviewed. The council engages the military through various structures to ensure the Armed Forces Covenant is applied in service provision. Membership of the groups is kept under review as legislation, roles and responsibilities change.

The **Wiltshire Compact** is an agreed set of guidelines and principles to foster good working relationships between the voluntary sector and the public sector. The council has commenced work with the voluntary sector on a new strategic framework, which will identify the current areas of positive practice and where future improvements can be made.

Officer decisions are published [online](#) in some circumstances including when cabinet members delegate implementation of decisions to officers. A training module is being prepared for rollout in 2024/25 to increase the level of officer decision publication, including those arising from discussion at programme boards.

How we can improve

Develop a renewed framework for working with the Voluntary and Community Sector
Implement a council-wide system for publishing officer decisions in line with the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014
Review the role and function of Area Boards so that they add maximum value
Report annually on the performance of key partnerships to Audit and Governance Committee

Principle C - Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits

The [Business Plan](#) 2022-32 outlines the guiding themes, missions and outcomes set to be delivered through service plans and by working with partner organisations and local communities. Service delivery plans are refreshed on an annual basis.

The Council receives reports on the combined economic, social and environmental impacts of its policies in the form of various reports including the **Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA)**. These also inform community led action planning and other schemes.

Following the publication of the report of the Local Government Association's **Peer Review** on Wiltshire Council in 2022, an [action plan](#) was developed and also considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee. A short follow up visit from the LGA took place later in 2023 with recommendations incorporated into the Annual Governance Statement

Community facilities have a key role in supporting people to live more active and fulfilled lives. The campus programme has provided sustainable assets for towns that provide a place, facilities and services that help to combat isolation and loneliness and increase opportunities for social interaction; and in so doing build strong communities. Several campuses have been completed already including Calne in November 2020 and Cricklade in February 2021. New facilities have now opened in Melksham and £25m has been allocated for a new building in Trowbridge, with consultation underway on the East Wing site opposite County Hall.

Defining outcomes

A [Local Development Scheme](#) sets out the timetable for updating the council's Local Plan to 2038. Consultation completed on the draft Wiltshire Local Plan review during 2023 and good progress was made on the draft Gypsies and Travellers Development Plan Document with consultation planned in 2024. Both plans are set to proceed to examination by start 2025.

Parishes throughout the county can continue to request community asset transfers. Significant **service delegation and asset transfer** packages have previously been agreed with Bradford on Avon, Devizes, Chippenham Town Councils and Pewsey Parish Council, Salisbury City Council and Trowbridge town council and a full agreement has recently been reached with Westbury town Council under a revised policy agreed in September 2022. Further exploratory work is now underway with other interested Town Councils under the most recent policy. Requirements for the public estate are likely to evolve further in coming years with related opportunities for capital receipts, jobs and housing.

Investment in transformation of **adult social care (TASC)** has delivered assistive technology; an expanded shared lives service; development of Wiltshire Support at Home and the Wiltshire Living Well at Home Service. A pilot on a new system-wide approach to transitional safeguarding has been led by the **Families and Children Transformation (FACT)** programme. FACT has also led on implementing improved whole-system early intervention and prevention approaches (Family Help) including a Family Hub model currently being rolled out; an innovative Risk Outside The Home pathway; the launch of the Family Drug and Alcohol Court; and a Dads Matter Too project. Strategic Highways and Waste transformation programmes are in progress to deliver the emerging **Depot strategy** to meet new service requirements. Whilst these are two discrete programmes, there are multiple high-impact interdependencies so, in addition to the usual boards, a specific Quality Assurance group is in place to ensure joined-up decisions. Due to the nature of the outcomes sought, both programmes also have Member steering groups to ensure appropriate challenge and oversight of the officer-led delivery.

Sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits

How we can improve

Develop a more clearly articulated strategic narrative of place, using the Local Plan as key spatial narrative.

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

Regular Performance and financial updates are reported to senior officers and councillors, including scrutiny through the **Financial Planning Task Group** and **Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee**.

The council's [annual budget](#) setting process has seen updates to the Medium Term Financial Strategy, Capital Strategy and ongoing Capital Programme. Work is ongoing on an integrated capital and asset management strategy for future years.

In addition to specific boards in place for major transformation projects, corporate-level oversight of the portfolio of transformation projects is undertaken by the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) through the Transformation Board, supported with advice from HR and IT. The **Transformation Board** (chaired by the Chief Executive) oversees the resourcing and prioritisation of projects and programmes which contribute to major transformation and delivery of the Business Plan priorities. Reports will be provided to the Cabinet via the quarterly performance monitoring on their ongoing work (Performance Outcomes Board). Certain programmes, such as the Evolve programme to introduce a new Oracle business management system, are subject to specific member-led Scrutiny Task Groups which report progress and outcomes back into the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee. In 2024, that committee are to introduce a broader Transformation Task Group to look at the overarching transformation processes, controls, governance and outcomes.

The Council took part in the Local Government Association's Corporate **Peer Review** in 2022. The report was published in early 2023 and praised organisational culture and governance, scrutiny and recent improvements to the Audit and Governance Committee. An [action plan](#) has been considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee. A short follow up visit from the LGA took place later in 2023 with recommendations incorporated into this AGS.

The [Corporate Procurement Strategy](#) (to be reviewed) provides the framework for the council to obtain value and social capital from all of its bought in goods and services. The strategy focuses on identifying and delivering efficiencies, but not at the expense of quality; and developing and embracing the principles of sustainable procurement.

The procurement strategy is used to encourage the adoption of a mixed economy approach, evaluating on the basis of whole life costings and breaking down barriers to participate in council opportunities. Using transparent processes, the council commits to meeting its obligation to ensure that all of our procurement activity addresses relevant social, economic and environmental standards.

The Cabinet Shareholder Group reviewed the business plans for the Council's local housing and development companies on 26 March 2024 and 25 June 2024. The housing company's plan builds on its previous goal of acquiring 250 homes by Year 5, setting a new target of 1,250 homes by Year 15. The development company's plan continues to support the development of four council-owned sites, aiming to deliver 81 new homes. The development company has already purchased two of these sites from the Council to advance their development. In 2023/24, the housing company acquired 71 properties, increasing its total portfolio to 163 homes. With the approval of the 2024/25 business plan, the housing company plans to purchase a further 87 properties - increasing the portfolio to 250 homes and fulfilling the company's initial five-year goal. The development company has begun construction on its first site in Calne, which will provide 9 new homes for residents. It plans to start work on two more sites in 2024/25, bringing another 27 homes to market. In 2023/24, the companies hired three direct employees, bringing their total staff to five. Following the approval of the 2024/25 business plan, further hires will be made to support planned growth. The Stone Circle Energy Company remains dormant.

How we can improve

Consider how developing a comprehensive Asset Management and Capital Investment Strategy could support future transformation and place shaping ambitions and inform future budget decisions. Continue to ensure the approach to transformation is embedded and understood across the council.

Determining and planning interventions

Optimising achievement of intended outcomes

Principle E - Developing capacity, including the capability of the Council's leadership and the individuals within it.

Developing capacity

A workforce strategy has been developed to ensure we have a skilled, adaptive and engaged workforce who collaborate with our partners to deliver our business plan priorities. This strategy has been developed to support us to ensure we have the right people in the right place at the right time with the right skills, capability and behaviours. A corporate action plan and associated KPIs are being finalised, alongside directorate specific plans to ensure delivery against the strategy.

The Employee Experience survey was conducted in early 2023 (next one due in 2025), and focussed on the areas of Employee Engagement, Inclusion and Diversity, and Well-being. Over 97% of the 2,427 respondents understood what was expected of them in their role and wanted to do the best job possible for our communities. Median relationships with colleagues and managers also showed impressive scores of 9 out of 10 indicating positive working relationships. Respondents indicated a Median mental health score of 7 out of 10, and mental health scores were one of the drivers for how likely they would be to recommend us as an employer - we see the mental health of our staff as a priority and continue to develop tools to support those who struggle with it, such as launching Mental Health Advocates, providing resources and counselling. The findings from the survey have provided insights for our services Workforce Strategy Action Plans which are being developed

As well as the training provided as part of induction a range of learning material is made available to staff and councillors online via the Oracle system.

The alignment of service responsibilities to roles at the top of the organisation continues to develop to ensure joined up and effective working. All senior leaders participate in an annual 360 feedback process to support self awareness and development and this feeds into a wider talent management and succession planning framework

The council continues to learn by seeking **best practice** both regionally and nationally and responding to the findings of CQC, Ofsted and HMIP inspections (recently rated 'outstanding' for looked after children and 'good' for youth justice). As well as the corporate peer challenge voluntary peer challenges have also been conducted in the areas of planning, libraries and leisure and for special educational needs and disabilities.

Managers complete **annual appraisals** with their staff and use these to discuss performance/behaviours, and agree training and development plans. Exit interviews also provide the council with insight and learning.

Since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy in 2017 we have started 660 staff on apprenticeships ranging from Level 2-7. We have 163 staff active on apprenticeships across all directorates. Grade D-F posts are considered for apprenticeships when recruited externally. The Leadership & Management apprenticeship continues to do well, and we now have staff progressing from L3 to L5. We have several staff undertaking the Senior Leader apprenticeship. We continue to establish the Social Worker and OT apprenticeships to support recruitment. Adult Social care are utilising apprenticeship to develop and support progression & retention. Many service areas use apprenticeship to upskill existing staff and fill hard to fill roles eg. in Highways and Planning.

Developing the capability of the Council's leadership and other individuals

How we can improve

Rollout training and awareness on decision making processes, and organisational discipline

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

In 2023/24 performance and risk processes continued to be updated and improved. The redesigned Corporate Performance Scorecard, with updated performance targets, was reported quarterly to Cabinet as well as to Oversight and Scrutiny Management Committee. In both forums the report has been the focus of increased questioning and discussion, demonstrating positive engagement with data by elected members. A new Central Performance Outcome Board (POB), chaired by the CEO, has been established. The Central POB brings together the Leader, Deputy Leader and Corporate Directors to focus on exception reporting of performance challenges and horizon scanning from Performance Outcome Boards, reflecting best practice in officer and elected member cohesion. Performance Outcome Boards continue to operate in all services.

Risk processes continue to operate under the oversight of the Audit and Governance Committee. A comprehensive review of risk management processes, including a detailed internal audit, has been completed and implementation of the agreed action plan is almost complete. A new Risk Management Policy has been approved by Cabinet and is being implemented, supported by creation of a new Strategic Risk Working Group as well as improved training and guidance for officers and an updated risk register. A review of the council's strategic risks is now underway. Both sustained inflationary pressures and staff capacity have been de-escalated from issues to risks.

Wiltshire's section 151 Officer or **Chief Finance Officer** has a statutory duty to ensure that the Council has a strong financial control environment, including an effective and independent Internal Audit function in accordance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations.

The Council is the administering authority for more than 180 employers through the Wiltshire Pension Fund, and the [Pension Committee](#) exercises its responsibilities in relation to investment management where it sets investment policy and appoints and monitors external investment managers. This has included participation in the Brunel Pension Partnership (as agreed by full council). The operation of a separate **Local Pension Board** continues with the purpose of scrutinising the Council as Administrator for the Wiltshire Pension Fund and ensuring the efficient and effective governance of the scheme.

Monitoring Officer comments: *"During 2023/24 I have held regular meetings with the Director of Children's Services in her statutory role. In those meetings I have been informed about two decisions to home children in unregistered placements. Unregistered provision is when a child who is being provided with some form of 'care' is living somewhere that is not registered with Ofsted. Together we developed an escalation and assurance process that clearly shows an audit trail of all options considered by the DCS and her team and consultation with Ofsted and other key internal and external stakeholders. Strong controls are in place to mitigate any risks. The latest position is that the providers delivering the care have applied to Ofsted to become registered. However, as these are examples of unlawful decisions I am reporting them as part of the Annual Governance Statement. I have chosen not to report these in any other forum, as part of my statutory duty, because the circumstances (the unavailability of any other suitable registered accommodation and the fact that the decisions are made by the DCS personally) would not allow any other body, such as Cabinet, to prevent these decisions being taken."*

How we can improve: Develop a Data Quality Strategy outlining objectives, roles, reporting, security and sharing.

Continue implementing the new risk management approach and develop a corporate approach to benchmarking and service review

Build on the collaborative approach to budget setting, aligning organisational processes more closely to the outcomes in the Business Plan to ensure a focus on the resources used and outcomes to be achieved

Principle G - Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting and audit to deliver accountability

The Council complies with reporting requirements such as an [online structure chart](#) and senior salaries and expenses.

The ambitions set out in the **Local Code of Corporate Governance** are reviewed regularly and updates have been provided to the Audit and Governance Committee. The committee has provided an [annual update](#) to full council on its activity during 23/24.

The Council has independent external auditors (Grant Thornton) and SWAP Internal Audit Services, who provide an internal audit function. SWAP works with a rolling internal audit plan which enables their work to be flexible and responsive to the ever-changing risks of a fast-paced organisation. The plan is built with management as the year progresses based on a continuous risk assessment linked to the council's risks. SWAP is providing regular updates to the [Audit and Governance Committee](#), and it is through this process and through regular access to the live rolling plan document that the Council's Corporate Leadership Team and Audit & Governance Committee members are able to assess whether the audit work building through the year provides sufficient coverage of key risks. As part of the 2023/24 annual opinion report SWAP provided a reasonable opinion in respect of the areas reviewed during that year as most were found to be adequately controlled and generally risks are well managed, however some areas require the introduction or improvement of internal controls to ensure the achievement of the Council's objectives. On a positive note, no new significant corporate risks were identified during the year and previously identified significant corporate risks of Pension Fund Key controls and ICT Network Boundary Defences continued to be monitored throughout the year. SWAP will be working with the council across the 2024/25 financial year to ensure that these risks are adequately mitigated (and these have already very much lessened during 2024).

There is a strong culture operating in the Council of acting to the highest standards. This is rooted in the behaviours expected of councillors and staff and upheld by the senior leaders. Where any resident feels the Council has not acted properly the Council has a **corporate complaints procedure**. The number of complaints received has reduced from the previous year, with XX in 2023/24 compared with 437 in 22/23 (382-21/22, 380-20/21, 459-19/20, 588-18/19, 624-17/18 and 671 in 16/17). An [Annual Complaints Report](#) provides a breakdown of trends in the complaints received and the actions to be taken to address problem areas identified by all council directorates. The Council received on 17 July the [Annual Letter](#) of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. There were XX detailed investigations undertaken by the Ombudsman in the year ending 31 March 2024. The number of complaints upheld by the Ombudsman were XX. This compares with 18 (of 31), 21 (of 35), 9 (of 16), 19 (of 37) and 10 (of 19) in the preceding years. This is an uphold rate of XX% which is lower than the average rate of XX% for similar authorities. The council has complied with all recommendations and in X% of upheld cases had already provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint was considered.

Overview and Scrutiny has reviewed 90% of the decisions taken by the council's Cabinet, with 67% of eligible members taking part. Reviews have looked at the demand pressures faced by emergency health services, activities and support for young people, how affordable housing is allocated based on need, customer complaints, financial management, performance of council services and the governance of the Stone Circle companies. An [Annual Report sets](#) out the year's activity in detail.

The Council's external auditors, Grant Thornton LLP, have been asked for their comments on the draft AGS and these will be reflected in the final draft. The Council continues to work with the **External Auditors** [Deloitte LLP and Grant Thornton LLP] on all aspects of the outstanding Accounts and Audit processes to draw these to conclusion as effectively and efficiently as possible and is considering the options for this. This work will include the finalisation of the outstanding accounts and audit processes for 2019/20-2023/24. Details of the conclusion and opinion can be found in the auditor's ISA 260 reports.

Monitoring Officer comments: *"I have considered the non-completion of accounts this year by our external auditor. The Council has a legal duty to make the available documentation which supports their audited accounts during the first 10 working days of June each year (Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015). We have been unable to facilitate that this year. This is an historic issue. Once draft accounts for years 2021/22 and 2022/3 are issued in draft the Council will mimic the statutory 10 working day period and provide public access for the relevant documentation. A note has been added to our website making the position clear to residents. However, as this is an example of an unlawful decision, I am reporting that as part of the Annual Governance Statement. I have chosen not to report this in any other forum, as part of my statutory duty, because the circumstances (non-completion of the accounts partly as a result of the actions of our external auditors), would not allow, any other body, such as full Council, to prevent this decision being taken"*

How we can improve

Review how performance can be communicated to the public to deliver maximum openness and transparency, including financial information as part of this.