

# Dover District Council

## Annual Governance Assurance Statement

1 APRIL 2023 TO 31 MARCH 2024

### 1. WHAT WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR

We are responsible for ensuring that our business is conducted in line with the law and proper accounting standards, and for using public money economically, efficiently, and effectively. We have a duty under the Local Government Act 1999 to continually review and improve the way we work and at the same time have regard to a combination of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness.

In order to meet our responsibility, we have in place proper arrangements for overseeing what we do, and this is called Governance. These arrangements make sure that we do the right things in the right way, that our services reach the right people and that we are open, honest and accountable in the way that we deliver those services. This all contributes to our sound system of governance.

We have approved and adopted a Local Code of Corporate Governance and a copy of this is available on our website at <https://www.dover.gov.uk/Corporate-Information/Governance.aspx>.

### 2. THE AIM OF THE GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

The Governance Framework details the systems, processes, culture and values that we are controlled by and which we are answerable to. It also shows what we get involved with and how we engage with the community. It also shows how we monitor what we are achieving so that we can deliver services that are appropriate and value for money.

The system of internal control is an important part of the framework and is designed to manage risk to a reasonable level. It cannot remove all risk of failure to achieve policies and aims and can only provide reasonable protection. The system of internal control is based on an ongoing process designed to:

- Identify and prioritise anything that could prevent us from achieving our policies and aims.
- Assess how likely it is that identified risks might happen and what the result would be if they did.
- Manage those risks efficiently, effectively, and economically.

The Governance Framework describes what has been in place at Dover District Council for the year ended 31 March 2024 and up to the date of approval of the Council's accounts.

### 3. OUR GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

Our Governance Framework is underpinned by seven core principles and supported by our Corporate Plan as well as many systems, policies, procedures, and operations, which together ensure that the intended outcomes for our community and stakeholders are defined and achieved. Good governance is dynamic, and Dover District Council is committed to improving governance on a continuing basis through a process of evaluation and review.

The key features are:

(a) **Our Core and Supporting Principles**

The seven core principles are taken from the International Framework: *Good Governance in the Public Sector* and help this Council demonstrate good governance. Each of these principles translates into a range of specific requirements and they are also reflected in this Corporate Governance Local Code:

- A. Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law.
- B. Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.
- C. Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits.
- D. Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes.
- E. Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it.
- F. Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management.
- G. Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit to deliver effective accountability.

(b) **Our Corporate Plan**

This is our main strategic document providing a framework for the delivery of our services and providing context for all the other strategies and plans that we have.

The Corporate Plan for 2023-2027 is published and is available on the Council's website. The Council approved a new Corporate Plan in November 2023 which reflected the vision and themes of the new administration.

The following strategic priorities have been identified in the 2023-2027 Corporate Plan:

- Improving our housing.
- Growing our economy.
- Protecting our environment.
- Supporting our communities.
- Modernising our Council.

(c) **Business Plans**

The Business Plan is one of the central mechanisms for each Head of Service managing their own area of activity and therefore sits at the centre of the Corporate Governance process. The business plans support the aims of the Corporate Plan which include performance indicators that are used to measure our achievements.

(d) **Our Constitution**

Our Constitution details how we operate, how decisions are made and the procedures, which are to be followed. It also ensures that we work in an efficient and transparent way and that we are accountable to local people. The Monitoring Officer is responsible for keeping the Constitution under review.

(e) **The Executive**

The Executive are responsible for most decisions and is made up of the Leader and a Cabinet. Major decisions to be taken are published in advance in the Executive's Notice of Forthcoming Key Decisions and will generally be discussed in a meeting open to the public. All decisions must be in line with our overall policies and budget. Any decisions the Executive wishes to take outside the budget or policy framework must be referred to Council as a whole to decide.

(f) **Corporate Management Team**

The Corporate Management Team comprises the Chief Executive (and Head of Paid Service); Strategic Director (Finance and Housing) (and Section 151 Officer), Strategic Director (Corporate and Regulatory) and Strategic Director (Place and Environment).

Members of Corporate Management Team have a responsibility for the day to day running of each Directorate of the Council. They must regularly assess their Directorate's assurance arrangements and provide the Council with the opportunity to keep check on the adequacy of its overall arrangements.

(g) **Governance Committee**

The seven appointed members of the Council provide independent assurance of the adequacy of the risk management framework and the associated control environment together with independent review of the Council's financial and non-financial performance to the extent that it affects the Council's exposure to risk and weakens the control environment. The Committee oversees the financial reporting process by considering the final Statement of Accounts. The Committee promotes high standards of conduct amongst the 32 members of Dover District Council and (up to) 317 members of Town and Parish Councils in the District. Complaints of service maladministration are investigated and reported to the Committee. Lessons learned from these complaints are reviewed and acted on.

The Chairman provides an Annual Report of the Governance Committee to the Annual Council Meeting

(h) **Overview and Scrutiny**

In July 2019, and as a result of the reduction in elected members, the Council voted to reduce to one overview and scrutiny committee who support and monitor the work of the Executive. A "call-in" procedure or addition to the work programme allows scrutiny to review Executive decisions before they are implemented, thus presenting challenge and the opportunity for a decision to be reconsidered. The Monitoring Officer provides an Annual Report of the Scrutiny Committees to the Annual Council Meeting.

(i) **Monitoring Officer**

The Monitoring Officer is charged by law with the responsibility for identifying and reporting on any acts or omissions of the Council which he considers to be contrary to law. He is also responsible for considering allegations of Members breaches of the codes of conduct. In January 2021, the Council agreed that this role could be undertaken on a part time basis with effect from 1 April 2021. The Deputy Monitoring Officer continues to work full time.

(j) **Our Solicitor**

The Solicitor to the Council provides his opinion on our compliance with our legal obligations. As from 1 January 2019 the same officer fulfils the role of Monitoring officer and Solicitor to the Council.

(k) **Data Protection Officer**

We have appointed a Data Protection Officer in accordance with Article 37 of the General Data Protection Regulation 2016. We support the Data Protection Officer by providing resources to undertake tasks and access to personal data and process and operations and to maintain expert knowledge. The Data Protection Officer his duties in an independent manner and we may not give the Data Protection Officer instruction on exercising his role. The Data Protection Officer is currently the Solicitor to the Council.

(l) **Financial procedures and Contract Standing Orders**

We have to ensure that we act in accordance with the law as well as various other regulations. We have developed policies and procedures for our officers to ensure that, as far as are possible, they understand their responsibilities both to the Council and to the public. Two key documents are the Financial Procedure Rules and the Contract Standing Orders, which are available to all officers via the Council's Intranet, as well as available to the public as part of the Constitution.

(m) **Financial Management**

Our financial management arrangements conform with the requirements of the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government. In addition to the Financial and Contractual procedure rules contained within the constitution; in order to maintain its financial management, the Council operates budgetary control procedures which are used in conjunction with a Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

Responsibility for ensuring that an effective system of internal financial control is maintained rests with the Section 151 Officer. The systems of internal financial control provide reasonable and not absolute assurance that assets are safeguarded, that transactions are authorised and properly recorded, and that material errors or irregularities are either prevented or would be detected quickly.

Internal financial control is based on a framework of management information, financial regulations and administrative procedures, which include the segregation of duties, management supervision and a system of delegation and accountability. On-going development and maintenance of the various processes may be the responsibility of other managers.

In particular, the process includes:

- The setting of annual budgets;
- Producing the Medium-Term Financial Plan;
- Monitoring of actual income and expenditure against the annual budget;
- A mid-year review of the annual budget;
- Setting of financial and performance targets, including the use of the prudential code and associated indicators;
- Quarterly reporting of the Council's financial position to Members;
- Clearly defined capital expenditure guidelines;
- Treasury Management Strategy;
- The monitoring of finances against a Medium-Term Financial Plan;
- Managing risk in key financial service areas;
- A continuous and effective internal audit.

Through our budget monitoring processes we are able to ensure that financial resources are being used to their best advantage, this includes quarterly management reporting to the Corporate Management Team and Members.

Financial planning is underpinned by business planning. Increased expenditure in any service area has to be justified to the Corporate Management Team, and where necessary approved by the Executive. Corporate Management Team is tasked with prioritising resources to ensure that the objectives within Corporate Plan are supported by the individual business plans, and that improvements are in line with corporate objectives.

(n) **Policies**

Corporate policies on a range of topics such as Equality, Information Governance and Data Protection are all subject to internal review. We keep all staff aware of changes in policy, or documentation through internal communications. The corporate training needs are identified each year and appropriate training for all, or key members of staff is provided.

(o) **Risk**

The risk management strategy, which forms part of the Corporate Governance Local Code, shows the role both Members and Officers have in the identification and minimisation of risk. Risks are recorded in a Corporate Risk Register and are then subject to regular review. A new risk management strategy was adopted by the Council during 2023/24.

(p) **Service Assurance**

A Service Assurance Statement is produced annually by all Directors of this Council and of Shared Services detailing their assessment of their services. They are required to give assurance that risks have been identified that sound business arrangements operate in their service areas, and that the service is subject to monitoring and review in order to assess performance.

(q) **Performance Management Framework**

Progress towards the achievement of our objectives is monitored through our Performance Management Framework. A quarterly Performance Report is produced

and reviewed by Corporate Management Team, by Cabinet and by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

(r) **Internal Audit**

The Internal Audit function for the Council is performed by the East Kent Audit Partnership (EKAP), which provides internal audit services to the councils of Canterbury, Dover, Folkestone and Thanet. As a result of this collaborative approach the partnership is able to provide a mechanism for promulgating best practice to the East Kent authorities that use its services. The East Kent Audit Partnership Internal Audit Team reports to the Section 151 Officer. They operate under a Charter, which defines their relationship with officers, and the Governance and Audit Committee. Through their audit assurance work, internal audit provides an opinion on the effectiveness of the systems of internal control. As part of the annual review of governance arrangements and in particular the system of internal control, the Council undertakes an annual review of the effectiveness of the system of internal audit.

Internal Audit has responsibility to:

- Report on the level of assurance in respect of the Council's internal control systems.
- Provide an overall independent annual Opinion from the Head of the Audit Partnership highlighting areas of concern. This is compiled from the Internal Audit work programme and a review of the Council's risk management and Corporate Governance arrangements.

(s) **External Audit**

The work is currently undertaken by Grant Thornton, who are required to deliver their audit work in line with Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and in accordance with the Code of Practice issued by the National Audit Office (NAO) on behalf of the Comptroller and Auditor General in April 2015.

(t) **Core Strategy and Local Plan**

The Core Strategy is the overarching statutory planning document for the District and was adopted by the Council in February 2010. The Core Strategy identifies the overall economic, social and environmental objectives for the District and the amount, type and broad location of development that is needed to fulfil those objectives. The Land Allocations Local Plan, which was adopted in 2015, identifies and allocates specific sites that are suitable for development in order to meet the Core Strategy's requirements.

The production of a new District Local Plan, which will replace the policies and proposals in the Council's Adopted Core Strategy, Land Allocations Local Plan and 'saved' policies from the 2002 Local Plan, is nearing completion. Following submission for examination on Friday 31 March 2023, examination hearing sessions took place in November and December 2023. The Inspectors wrote to the Council in February 2024 <https://www.doverdistrictlocalplan.co.uk/uploads/Examination-Documents/ED45-Initial-Findings-Dover-002-26.2.24.pdf> setting out their initial findings and what modifications they consider to be necessary to make the plan sound. It is expected that, following a consultation on the modifications and subject to the Inspectors final report, it will be ready for adoption in Autumn 2024. Further

details of the progress to adopt the new Local Plan can be found at the dedicated website [here](#).

(u) **District Profile**

This report is a backward look at the state of the district, highlighting key information.

Not all information is collected and reported annually, as it is collated from a wide range of sources that is sporadically updated. In addition, periodically the process of capturing information is changed, this in turn makes year-on-year comparisons and trends difficult to assess. The report is published on our website and there will be regular updates as new data is published, with members informed in a timely manner of any significant changes.

(v) **Communication and Consultation**

Strategies are in place. We have active Twitter, Facebook and Instagram accounts, enabling the Council to communicate effectively with our communities and also enabling members of the public to communicate their views on a wide range of matters. In 2015 the Council launched its 'Keep Me Posted' email alert service which enables members of the public to subscribe to email messages from the Council on a wide range of topics.

(w) **Equality**

As part of our equality's responsibilities, we publish our equality objectives and annual review our progress against the targets to ensure that all groups in our community have a better understanding of how we make our decisions and how they can have an input. A revised equality policy was adopted by Cabinet in November 2023.

(x) **Whistleblowing**

A confidential reporting hotline is in place to enable internal and external whistle blowing. Informants are requested to be open in their disclosure, but it is recognised that on occasions informants will wish to remain anonymous. There are also processes in place for staff to report through their line managers, Corporate Management Team or East Kent Audit Partnership.

(y) **Employment Management**

The Council's Human Resources Team, in consultation with Accountancy, manage the Authority to Recruit process. Any requests that are not within agreed budgets are considered by the Authority to Recruit group before being referred to the Corporate Management Team who provides the final decision as to which posts can be filled.

(z) **Partnerships**

Partnership evaluation criteria have been established to help ensure that all key governance criteria are incorporated into new and existing partnerships.

**4. REVIEW OF EFFECTIVENESS OF THE GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK**

We have a responsibility for conducting, at least annually, a review of the effectiveness of our governance framework including the system of internal control. This review is informed

by the ongoing monitoring and review by the Strategic Director (Finance and Housing), East Kent Internal Audit Partnership and the Head of the Audit Partnership's Annual Report, the work of our Strategic Directors and Heads of Services and their managers who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment. This review is also informed by the findings and reports of our external auditors together with any other review agencies or inspectorates.

(a) **The Monitoring Officer has responsibility for:**

- Monitoring the Constitution and keeping it up to date.
- Identifying and reporting on any acts or omissions of the Council which he considers to be contrary to law.
- Ensuring ethical standards and conduct are met.

(b) **The Strategic Director (Finance and Housing) has responsibility for:**

- Publishing financial information and statements accurately and reliably.
- Confirmation that resources are managed efficiently and effectively.
- Review of the Effectiveness of Internal Audit.
- The External Auditor's Annual Audit and Inspection Letter, service assessments and other associated reviews and ensuring that they are acted upon.

(c) **The Strategic Director (Corporate and Regulatory) has responsibility for:**

- Overseeing and monitoring the Corporate Governance Local Code.
- Maintaining and updating the code if required by best practice.
- Reporting annually to members on performance and compliance with the code.
- The overall review of the internal control opinion and framework evidence, including service assurance statements, the audit review of Corporate Governance, Performance reporting, Risk management arrangements and the individual audit and risk management assessments.

(d) **All Strategic Directors have responsibility via a Service Assurance Statement to ensure that:**

- Risks have been identified. They are recorded and monitored in accordance with the Council's Risk Management Strategy.
- Staff are fully aware of the requirements of their job and have access to the appropriate Council rules and policies to assist them.
- Internal and External Audit reports and recommendations have been acted on.
- Reports from other review agencies have been acted on.
- Business arrangements are conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards.
- Public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently and effectively.
- The service has in place appropriate management and reporting arrangements to enable it to satisfy itself that its approach to Corporate Governance is both adequate and effective.
- A statement of assurance that improvement plans exist to rectify any acknowledged deficiency.



- (e) **Solicitor to the Council has responsibility:**
- Via his annual statement to give his opinion on the Council's compliance with relevant laws and regulations, and its legal obligations and requirements.
- (f) **Cabinet has responsibility for:**
- All Executive Decisions in respect of functions delegated to it by the Leader of the Council
  - Setting robust and challenging targets and
  - Monitoring the achievement of key priorities
- (g) **Council has responsibility for:**
- Agreeing or amending the Policy Framework
  - Agreeing or amending the budget, including the borrowing or capital expenditure strategy and setting the Council Tax
- (h) **Overview and Scrutiny Committee has responsibility for:**
- Scrutiny of budgets and major policies
  - Monitoring the achievement of key priorities
- (i) **Governance Committee has a responsibility for:**
- Ensuring effective internal audit and internal control arrangements
  - Receiving the annual Internal Audit Programme of work
  - Receiving quarterly updates from the Head of the Audit Partnership on the assurance which can be placed against various systems and processes during the year.
  - Reviewing the annual assessment at the year end.
  - Receiving the annual review of internal control
  - Receiving the annual constitutional review
  - Reviewing risk management arrangements
  - Receiving Quarterly Treasury Management Reports
  - Receiving the Annual Statement of Accounts
  - Ethical standards of members and complaints against members
- (j) **Internal Audit has responsibility to:**
- Provide an independent annual statement on the systems of internal control, highlighting areas of concern.
  - Report on the level of assurance in respect of the Council's internal control systems.
  - Provide an overall Assurance Statement from the Head of the Audit Partnership. This is compiled from the Internal Audit work programme and a review of this Council's Corporate Governance arrangements.

## 5. **THIS YEAR'S REVIEW**

### (a) **Council**

Article 15 of the Council's Constitution makes provision for the regular review of the Constitution by the Monitoring Officer. The key focus of the review in 2023/24 was reviewing the incorporation of changes previously agreed by the full Council (such as amendments to the Members' Allowances Scheme); reflecting structural changes to the Council's organisational structure; reflecting legislative changes in the Scheme of Officer Delegations; the collation of changes made by decision-making bodies such as the Cabinet or Council during the course of the previous year; the addition of a revised Code of Conduct for Members and general administrative amendments.

### (b) **Cabinet**

Key Executive decisions were considered by the Cabinet, in particular relating to the budget and medium-term financial plan, and the delivery of key regeneration priorities.

The Council's Strategic Performance Dashboard was received and reviewed quarterly. This examines our performance against agreed performance targets and our key priorities.

### (c) **Scrutiny**

The Council's key priorities and Performance Indicators were reviewed regularly and challenged if necessary.

The Annual Report of the work of the Scrutiny Committees for 2023/24 was presented to the Annual Council Meeting on 22 May 2024. This identified sound governance arrangements, including an effective scrutiny process, which underpins the achievement of the Council's corporate objectives.

### (d) **Governance Committee**

The Governance Committee received quarterly updates from the Head of East Kent Audit Partnership on the assurance which can be placed against various systems and processes during the year, including reviews of internal controls, along with the annual assessment. The Committee kept a check on those areas that have not achieved expected levels of audit assurance.

This Committee also reviewed the effectiveness of the Council's risk management arrangements.

The Monitoring Officer is responsible for ensuring that the Constitution is reviewed regularly. It is not practical to undertake a review of the whole Constitution each year, so specific areas are selected each year. The key focus of the review in 2023/24 was reviewing the incorporation of changes previously agreed by the full Council (such as amendments to the Members' Allowances Scheme); reflecting structural changes to the Council's organisational structure; reflecting legislative changes in the Scheme of Officer Delegations; the collation of changes made by decision-making bodies such as the Cabinet or Council during the course of the previous year; the addition of a revised Code of Conduct for Members and general administrative amendments. The Governance Committee recommended the changes for approval by the Council. All are documented on our website.

The Annual Report of the work of the Governance Committee for 2023/24 was presented to the Annual Council Meeting on 22 May 2024. This gave a positive opinion on the system of internal control. The Governance Committee continued to be assured of the integrity and reliability of data held in financial statements. The work undertaken by Internal and External Audit provided detailed assurance on those areas of the Council's work which were the subject of reports.

The assurances from the Strategic Director (Corporate and Regulatory), Strategic Director (Finance and Housing), Strategic Director (Place and Environment) and the work of Internal and External Audit together support the Committee in forming their opinion of the financial statements. The audit of the 2020/21 accounts started in January 2023 and was anticipated to be completed in July 2023, the audit process was not completed and, at its meeting on 28 March 2024, the Governance Committee agreed to ratify the approach agreed with the external auditor to disclaim the outstanding historic accounts in accordance with the then Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Community's proposed backstop date of 30 September 2024. The legislation for the backstop was not passed before the general election and so an element of uncertainty remains as the new government will need to review whether it wants to implement the backstop and, if so, what timetable it happens by.

The outstanding historic accounts have all now been published (2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23) and were presented to the Governance Committee in June 2024. The 2023/24 Statement of Accounts have been published and the audit process is planned to start in October, with presentation to Governance Committee by March 2025.

The submission of this Annual Report continues to enhance the effective communication of our governance processes.

The Governance Committee received annual reports on the progress of formal service complaints against the Council and lessons learned from those complaints.

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman received 25 complaints and enquiries against the Council during the 2023/24 municipal year. The breakdown of those complaints is twelve in respect of Planning and Development, six relating to Housing (excluding those matters that are the responsibility of the Housing Ombudsman), three relating to Corporate and Other services, three relating to Environmental Services, Public Protection and Regulation, and one relating to another service.

The outcome of the 25 complaints received by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman were as follows:

- Closed after initial enquiries – 12
- Referred back for local resolution – 6
- Upheld – 4
- Advice given – 1
- Incomplete/Invalid – 1
- Not upheld – 1

The outcomes of the four upheld complaints were as follows:

- An apology (in all cases), with

- A review of policy/procedures and staff training (in two cases)
- Financial redress (in one case)

The Housing Ombudsman made no determinations against the Council during 2023/24.

The Kent Model Code of Conduct continues to be regularly reviewed in order to ensure that it remains fit for purpose. The ability to declare a non-financial interest has been welcomed by Members and has been utilised on several occasions to ensure transparency in decision-making.

(f) **Review of Internal Audit**

The effectiveness of internal audit is monitored by the Section 151 Officer through:

- Quarterly review meetings with the Head of Internal Audit
- Sign off of the Audit Plan
- Review of the internal audit annual report
- Attendance at Governance Committee
- Review of individual audit reports
- Meetings with the S151 officers of the other partners

(g) **The Work of Internal Audit**

The internal audit function for the Council is performed by the East Kent Audit Partnership (EKAP), which provides internal audit services to the councils of Canterbury, Dover, Folkestone and Thanet. As a result of this collaborative approach the partnership is able to provide a mechanism for promulgating best practice to the East Kent authorities that use its services. The East Kent Audit Partnership Internal Audit Team reports to the Section 151 Officer. They operate under a Charter, which defines their relationship with officers, and the Governance and Audit Committee. Through their audit assurance work, internal audit provides an opinion on the effectiveness of the systems of internal control. As part of the annual review of governance arrangements and in particular the system of internal control, the Council undertakes an annual review of the effectiveness of the system of internal audit.

Internal Audit has responsibility to:

- Report on the level of assurance in respect of the Council's internal control systems.
- Provide an overall independent annual Opinion from the Head of the Audit Partnership highlighting areas of concern. This is compiled from the Internal Audit work programme and a review of the Council's risk management and Corporate Governance arrangements.

The overall opinion of the System of Internal Controls in operation throughout 2023/24 based on the work of the East Kent Audit Partnership is presented in their annual report to the Governance Committee in June.

- The internal auditors are independent to the management of the Council and have direct access to the Chair of the Governance if required. They provide a regular update to the Committee at each of the quarterly meetings and may attend any special meetings that may be convened during the year.

- As at 31 March 2024 the Internal Auditors completed 318.37 days of review equating to 100.12% of planned completion.
- The EKAP undertakes a regular schedule of follow up audits to ensure that management have implemented the action plans arising from each audit. Members can see full details within the Internal Audit Annual Report.
- In March 2024 External Quality Assessment (EQA) considered the level of compliance demonstrated by the EKAP with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS). The results of this assessment showed that internal audit is at the highest level of compliance; assessed as "Generally Conforms" the full EQA report was reported to the July 2024 Governance Committee. In preparation for new Global Internal Audit Standards from 2025, the EKAP was also provided with an action plan. The next EQA of the EKAP is due in five years, by which time the new standards will have become established.
- As part of EKAP's quality monitoring arrangements Members should be aware that following the completion of each audit, a satisfaction questionnaire is completed by the managers of the service that has been audited enabling the officers involved to comment on the conduct and outcome of the audit. This information is used, in part, to inform the quality assessment and continuous improvement.

(h) **External Reviews**

There were no external reviews held this year.

(i) **Training**

Comprehensive Training is provided at the outset for the new Council, and this is refreshed during the four-year term, to ensure that the councillors have the skills and expertise to make sound and effective decisions.

The officer personal performance review includes a personal development plan, where training and development needs are discussed and agreed. These will now be provided annually to the Head of HR, Payroll and Communications to help inform the training needs of the organisation, some of which will be delivered corporately via the Corporate Training Plan. In 2023/24 a number of Managers and Team Leaders continued to work towards an Institute of Learning and Management qualification (level 3 or level 5), which helps enhance their skills and knowledge as leaders in the organisation.

(j) **Members Code of Conduct**

The municipal year 2023/24 has seen the Monitoring Officer receive 23 complaints. This is down from the 33 complaints which were received in 2022/23. While this is still above the historical average of 15 cases per annum, it represents a significant decrease compared to 2022/23. There are also encouraging signs based on the number of complaints received during Quarter 4 2023/24, that there could be further reductions for 2024/25. The reduction in the overall number of complaints has seen an improvement in the processing time for complaints as a result in Quarter 4, 2023/24.

The Governance Committee Hearing Panel was called upon to meet once during 2023/24 and made a finding of a breach of the Code of Conduct in respect of a member of a Town/Parish Council. In accordance with Annex 1 of the Arrangements, it is reported that there were no decisions of Informal Resolution were agreed in respect of a Member of the District Council or a Town/Parish Council. There were no complaints were referred to investigation during 2023/24.

During the municipal year 2023/24 there were five requests for dispensations which were all refused.

## **6. SIGNIFICANT GOVERNANCE ISSUES DURING THE YEAR**

- (a) The Annual Reports of the Scrutiny and Governance Committees provide a positive statement and opinion regarding the governance arrangements and the effectiveness of the internal control environment operating across this Council.
- (b) There were 25 cases reviewed by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman during 2023/24, with four cases of fault and injustice being found. There was no finding of fault issued as a public report under section 30(1)) of the Local Government Act 1974 that would have required a formal response from the Council.
- (c) The Notice of Forthcoming Key Decisions continues to publish key decisions to be taken by the Cabinet. Cabinet Reports are considered by Finance, Legal and Equalities Officers and then by CMT to ensure that outcomes are consistent with the Council's corporate direction.
- (d) A suite of performance indicator targets was previously approved by Cabinet and were then measured via the quarterly Strategic Performance Dashboard reports. A revised set of targets will be brought forward and reported in 2024/25.
- (e) The Council continues to progress with the requirements of data protection legislation and GDPR. Including, but not limited to all staff training, reviewing data processing activity, developing our suite of privacy notices and retention schedules for services across the Council, and completing our records of processing activity using a new privacy management solution. Data Protection and the Rights and Freedoms of Individuals are at the forefront of personal data processing activities.
- (f) In October 2023, the Council started its statutory review of Polling Districts, Places and Stations and the proposals for the Polling District, Polling Places and Polling Stations Scheme were approved at an extraordinary meeting of the Council in November 2023.
- (g) Following the District Council Elections in May 2023, the new administration a revised Corporate Plan for 2023-2027 was approved by Council reflecting the Council's vision was to build a better and fairer future for the district

## **7. IMPROVEMENTS DURING THE YEAR**

- (a) At the end of 2023/24, the disaggregation of the joint ICT service completed with responsibility for ICT Security returning to Dover. The Council now continues to work with the Cabinet Office to obtain continued Public Sector Network (PSN) Compliance. This included IT Equipment, systems and software upgrades to ensure PSN compliance and to ensure that staff and members can work safely and securely from any location.

- (b) The East Kent Corporate Information Governance Group has ceased to meet since the disaggregation of the joint ICT service was completed. The Council now has an internal Security & Information Governance Group and the Information Governance Policies (16 in total) will be kept under regular review by the group. The Strategic Director (Corporate and Regulatory) remains appointed as the Council's Senior Information Risk Officer (SIRO) with the Digital and Technology Manager as the Deputy SIRO.
- (c) The 2024/25 Pay Policy Statement was delivered and adopted at the Council Meeting in March 2024.
- (d) The Council adopted an updated Corporate Complaints Policy following the implementation of The Building Safety Act 2022 which removed the third stage in the complaints process for housing complaints. The policy was also updated to bring it into line with the Housing Ombudsman's recommended practice for written acknowledgements of housing complaints.
- (e) A review of the Corporate Governance Local Code was agreed whereby a number of changes to post titles that need to be updated to reflect changes to the organisation were amended to bring it in line with the current organisational structure of the Council.
- (f) A revision to the Contract Standing Orders was approved by to correct a typographical error in the version previously adopted and in addition, agree two further amendments for clarity purposes in respect of the Council's obligations under the Local Government Transparency Code. Council agreed a further revision to ensure that the Contract Standing Orders are reflective of current legislation and working practices.
- (h) The Council confirmed its continued participation in the East Kent Joint Independent Remuneration Panel be confirmed until 30 November 2027. The Council appointed a representative to the Panel for a four-year commencing on 1 December 2023 with the remaining vacancy being advertised.
- (g) A new Risk Management Strategy and accompanying tool kit were adopted and it was agreed that the Risk Management Strategy be incorporated into the Local Code of Corporate Governance.
- (h) A revised Members' Allowances Scheme for 2024/25 was approved.

8. **OPINION OF THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR (CORPORATE AND REGULATORY)**

I can confirm that the governance arrangements provide and continue to be regarded as fit for purpose in accordance with the governance framework and will ensure that that the implementation is monitored as part of the next annual review.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
**Louise May**  
 Strategic Director (Corporate and Regulatory)

9. **STATEMENT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL AND THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

We have reviewed the effectiveness of the Council's governance framework and noted the opinion and commitment of the Head of Governance. We sign this Annual Governance Assurance Statement on behalf of the Council.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
**Councillor Kevin Mills**  
Leader of the Council

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
**Nadeem Aziz**  
Chief Executive