

Appendix 2

Annual Governance Statement 2020/2021

The Council's Annual Governance Statement (AGS) follows the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the UK 2020/21 and comprises the following sections:

- Scope of responsibility
- The purpose of the governance framework
- The governance framework
- Review of effectiveness
- Update on the significant governance issues that were declared last year
- Significant governance issues for the year-end 2021

Scope of responsibility

Belfast City Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, that public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for, and is used economically, efficiently and effectively. The Council also has a duty under Part 12 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 to make arrangements for continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of strategic effectiveness, service quality, service availability, fairness, sustainability, efficiency and innovation.

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

The Council has prepared an Annual Governance Statement, which is consistent with the principles of the new CIPFA/SOLACE Framework *Delivering Good Governance in Local Government (2016 edition)*. This statement explains how the Council has complied with the code and meets the requirements of the Local Government (Accounts and Audit) Regulations (Northern Ireland 2015) in relation to the publication of an annual governance statement.

The purpose of the governance framework

The governance framework comprises the systems and processes, and culture and values, by which the Council is directed and controlled and the activities through which it accounts to, engages with and leads its communities. It enables the Council to monitor the achievement of its strategic objectives and to consider whether those objectives have led to the delivery of appropriate services and value for money.

The system of internal control is a significant part of that framework and is designed to manage risk to a reasonable level. It cannot eliminate all risk of failure to achieve policies, aims and objectives and can therefore only provide reasonable and not absolute assurance of effectiveness. The system of internal control is based on an ongoing process designed to identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of the Council's policies, aims and objectives, to evaluate the likelihood of those risks being realised and the impact should they be realised, and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically.

The governance framework continues to be in place at Belfast City Council for the year ending 31st March 2021 and up to the date of approval of the Annual Governance Statement and statement of accounts. The following section sets out the key elements of the governance framework.

The governance framework

In response to Covid-19 we the Council altered our normal decision-making processes to ensure that we followed Public Health Agency guidance on social distancing and essential travel while maintaining continuity of critical services.

Committee and Council: The committee decision-making process was delegated to the Chief Executive under Standing Order 41 as agreed at a Special Council meeting on 13 March 2020. A process was established where the reports were issued as normal and the views of each party were collated by Democratic Services to enable the Chief Executive to make a decision, based on the levels of democratic support. A Contentious Business Committee, the Party Group Leaders, allowed for discussion of any contentious matters. Committee decision-registers, which continued to be subject to the normal call-in process were published on modern.gov as normal. A 'Procedure for the transaction of business under delegated authority' was agreed with Party Group Leaders.

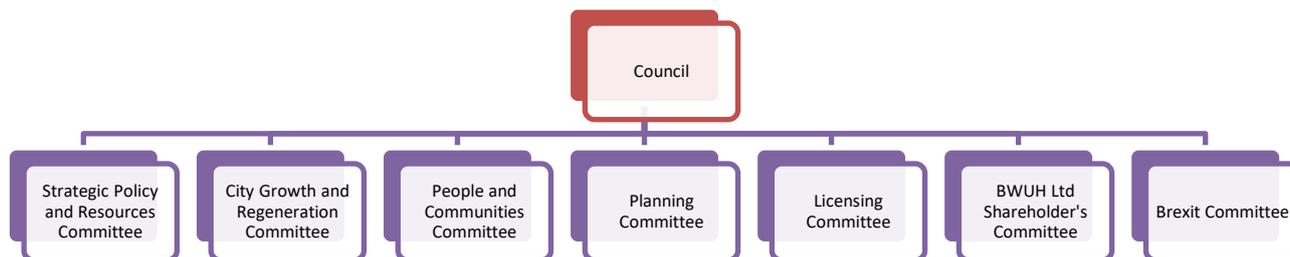
This process was a temporary process with a phased approach being taken to reintroduce committees and Council meetings with a physical annual Council meeting held on Monday 1 June, the first remote Special Council meeting on Monday 8 June, the first remote Strategic Policy & Resources Committee held on Friday 19 June with another remote Council meeting to be held on 1 July. Council and committee meetings resumed in August 2020 (some special meetings were held in July) and all were held remotely with the chairman and lead officers only located in the City Hall committee room and all other participants on Microsoft Teams.

The process for committee decision making under delegated authority was reintroduced on 4th May 2021 following the expiry of the legislation permitting the hosting of remote meetings from 6th May 2021. This process involves continuing to hold remote committee meeting, with the committee making recommendations to the Chief Executive or appropriate Chief Officer to exercise delegated authority to implement the recommendations.

Planning and Licensing Committee: a separate process was established for the Planning and Licensing Committees where it is considered inappropriate to have party positions on particular applications. Therefore the views of each of the individual committee members was collated by Democratic Services before a decision was taken by the Chief Executive under delegated authority.

Following the amendment to Standing Orders in March 2020, the Council also contacted DfI to seek approval of those delegated arrangements as required by planning legislation. However DfI confirmed that since the changes were to Standing Orders as opposed to the Scheme of Delegation there was no requirement for Departmental approval.

Our committee structure, which is based on the full council and seven standing committees is illustrated and described on the next page.



On 4 May 2021, council agreed to establish a new Standards and Business Committee (pending) which will: promote, sustain and safeguard the conduct of Councillors within the Council; promote a collaborative working relationship between senior officers and Members; ensure the probity of all the council’s proceedings; and review and improve processes in relation to bringing business before the Council, including any review of Standing Orders. Note: The decision to establish the Standards and Business Committee was called in for reconsideration under Section 41(1)a of the 2014 Act. The establishment of the Committee will take place in August 2021 pending consideration of the call-in by an ad-hoc committee and reconsideration of the decision by full council.

Through the work of committees, our Members oversee the work of the council. All committee decisions need to be ratified by the full council except where committees have been granted delegated authority to make decisions.

The full council, which consists of all 60 elected representatives, is the overarching decision-making body.

The Strategic Policy and Resources Committee is responsible for setting the strategic direction of the Council through the development of its corporate plan and other key corporate and cross cutting strategies and policies. It will also ensure effective use of resources and value for money for ratepayers, and oversee the Council’s relationship with a number of key agencies and partners.

The City Growth and Regeneration Committee is responsible for the development and implementation of strategies, policies, programmes and projects directed to the regeneration and growth of the city in the context of the outcomes agreed in the community and corporate plans and other corporate strategy.

The People and Communities Committee is responsible for the development and implementation of strategies, policies, programmes and projects aimed at improving life at a local level in the context of the outcomes agreed in the community and corporate plans and other corporate strategy.

The Planning Committee is responsible for all of the Council’s planning functions, except those matters, which are delegated to officers or reserved to full Council.

The Licensing Committee is responsible for the consideration of all matters pertaining to policy and legislation in relation to licensing issues.

The Belfast Waterfront and Ulster Hall Ltd Shareholders' Committee is responsible for making the decisions required by the Shareholders' Agreement and ensure that the company complies with the contract for the operation of the venues.

The Brexit Committee is responsible for researching, monitoring, and reviewing the financial, resource or operational impact upon the council and the district as a result of the UK leaving the European Union and for making recommendations to council on such issues (or the relevant standing committee where appropriate).

In addition to the Committees listed in the diagrams above there are ten Working Groups established which include the Audit & Risk Panel and four Area Working Groups. In addition there is a Party Leaders' Consultative Forum,

The Audit & Risk Panel provides an independent assurance on the adequacy of the Council's risk management framework and associated control environment. It provides an independent scrutiny of the Council's financial and non-financial performance, which is relied upon by the Council, to the extent that it exposes it to risk and weakens the control environment. The Panel reports to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee. The Audit & Risk Panel met three times during 2020/21. The Panel did not meet in June 2020 as all meetings of working groups were cancelled from mid-March 2020 to August 2020 as part of our organisational response to the impact of Covid-19.

The Council's Code of Governance is based on the seven core principles set out in the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework (2016 edition). How we meet these seven core principles is reviewed and updated annually, and in particular for this year, ensuring that our update reflects Covid-19 related changes to our governance arrangements. A summary of the key elements of our governance framework are set out in the following table:

Our seven principles of good governance

A: Behaving with integrity

- Shared values communicated via corporate plan, community plan and key strategies
- Codes of conduct for Members & staff
- PDP / appraisal process for Members & staff
- Gifts and hospitality and conflicts of interest policies & registers in place
- Fraud & whistleblowing policies and investigations
- Good Relations Unit
- Equality & Diversity Framework
- Council constitution, standing orders & scheme of delegation
- Expert professional advice
- Partners and contractors required to comply with relevant policies
- Achieving Through People Framework and development of organisational values and behaviours
- Agreement to establish a Standards and Business Committee (pending)
- Accessibility Statement for the updated website

B: Ensuring openness

- New process for committee decision making under delegated authority during the pandemic
- Council / committee meetings open to the public and agendas / minutes on website
- Belfast Agenda developed via extensive consultation and engagement.
- Corporate plan and annual improvement plan are subject to consultation before agreement
- Statement of Community Involvement for production of the Local Development Plan
- Ongoing consultation and engagement with staff & trade unions
- Corporate communications
- Annual financial report and annual report to Equality Commission published on BCC website
- Partnership / legal agreements with GLL, Active Belfast, arc21, BWUH Ltd, Visit Belfast
- “Your Say” consultation hub
- Working with Belfast Region City Deal partners

C: Defining outcomes

- Belfast: Our Recovery plan
- Belfast Agenda outlines long term economic, social and environmental benefits and is refreshed every 4 years
- Development of a Belfast Region City Deal Investment Plan
- Cultural Strategy
- Corporate plan outlines the annual contribution to the Belfast Agenda
- City centre regeneration & investment strategy
- Physical Investment Programme
- Leisure transformation programme
- Grant funding processes
- Equality Impact Assessments
- Belfast Resilience Strategy – the city’s first climate plan

D: Optimising the achievement of outcomes

- Corporate plan aligned to delivery of Belfast Agenda and Belfast: Our Recovery
- Consultation and engagement processes
- Strategic financial management framework in place, including quarterly challenge process.
- Performance management framework
- Regular reports on progress of our performance improvement plan to CMT and SP&R
- Risk management strategy & framework

E: Developing capacity & capability

- Achieving Through People Framework and development of organisational values and behaviours
- Benchmarking activity
- Efficiency programme
- Regular performance monitoring of the delivery of improvement objectives
- Learning and development policy
- Health and wellbeing strategy
- Appraisal scheme in place for Senior Managers
- PDPs for officers and Members
- Member capacity building plan delivered in 2019/20
- Continuing Development Programme in place for the Planning Committee
- Party group briefings

F: Finance, performance and risk management

- Five Step Financial Strategy to address impact of the pandemic
- Strategic financial management framework in place
- Assessment of compliance with the CIPFA Financial Management Code
- Efficiency programme
- Performance management framework
- Financial resilience review
- Risk management strategy
- Corporate risk management framework
- Regular reporting of finance, risk & performance
- Audit and Risk Panel
- Internal audit function / annual internal audit strategy & plan in place
- Recommendations Monitor process
- Data protection policy and procedures
- Corporate Fraud Risk Assessment
- Increased data security controls

G: Transparency, reporting & effective accountability

- BCC website regularly updated
- Publication of key reports including the annual financial report; annual governance statement; performance improvement report and annual report to Equality Commission
- Committee support framework to approve papers prior to submission to Members
- AGRS (internal audit) annual assurance statement within the annual governance statement
- Internal Audit effectiveness annually reviewed against public sector internal audit standards, with an independent external review every five years
- Internal / external audit recommendations followed up as part of regular recommendations monitoring process

The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance and Resources is the Council's designated Chief Financial Officer under the Local Government Finance Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, responsible for the proper administration of the Council's financial affairs.

The 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).

We have assessed our compliance with the principles of the CIPFA Financial Management Code and have reached the overall conclusion that we are compliant, with improvement identified over better integration of strategic plans and resources and more robust option appraisal. The preparatory work for the 2022/23 revenue estimates and medium term financial plan will include the integration of strategic plans and resources. In addition CIPFA have completed a report on whole life costing and it is anticipated that the recommended training will be rolled out to departments in the 2021/22 financial year.

Having considered all the principles of the CIPFA Code of Practice on Managing the Risk of Fraud and Corruption (2014), subject to the implementation of the Corporate Fraud Risk Action Plan, the Council has adopted a response that is appropriate for its fraud and corruption risks and commits to maintain its vigilance to tackle fraud.

The CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Head of Internal Audit (2019) outlines the five principles that set out the organisation's responsibilities to ensure the Head of Internal Audit (HIA) is able to operate effectively and perform their core duties. The Statement also sets out the core responsibilities of the HIA along with the personal skills and professional standards expected of the HIA. The Head of Audit, Governance and Risk Services (AGRS), and the supporting operational arrangements in place, conform to the five principles set out in the CIPFA Statement. This is demonstrated through a self-assessment exercise undertaken by the Head of AGRS. While the principles state that the HIA should not be responsible for preparing the annual governance report, the arrangements within the council, involve AGRS co-coordinating the preparation of the Annual Governance Statement which is then reviewed and agreed by the Corporate Management Team, Audit Assurance Board and Audit and Risk Panel, before being reviewed by Strategic Policy and Resources committee and signed by the Chair of Strategic Policy & Resources, the Chief Executive and the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance and Resources.

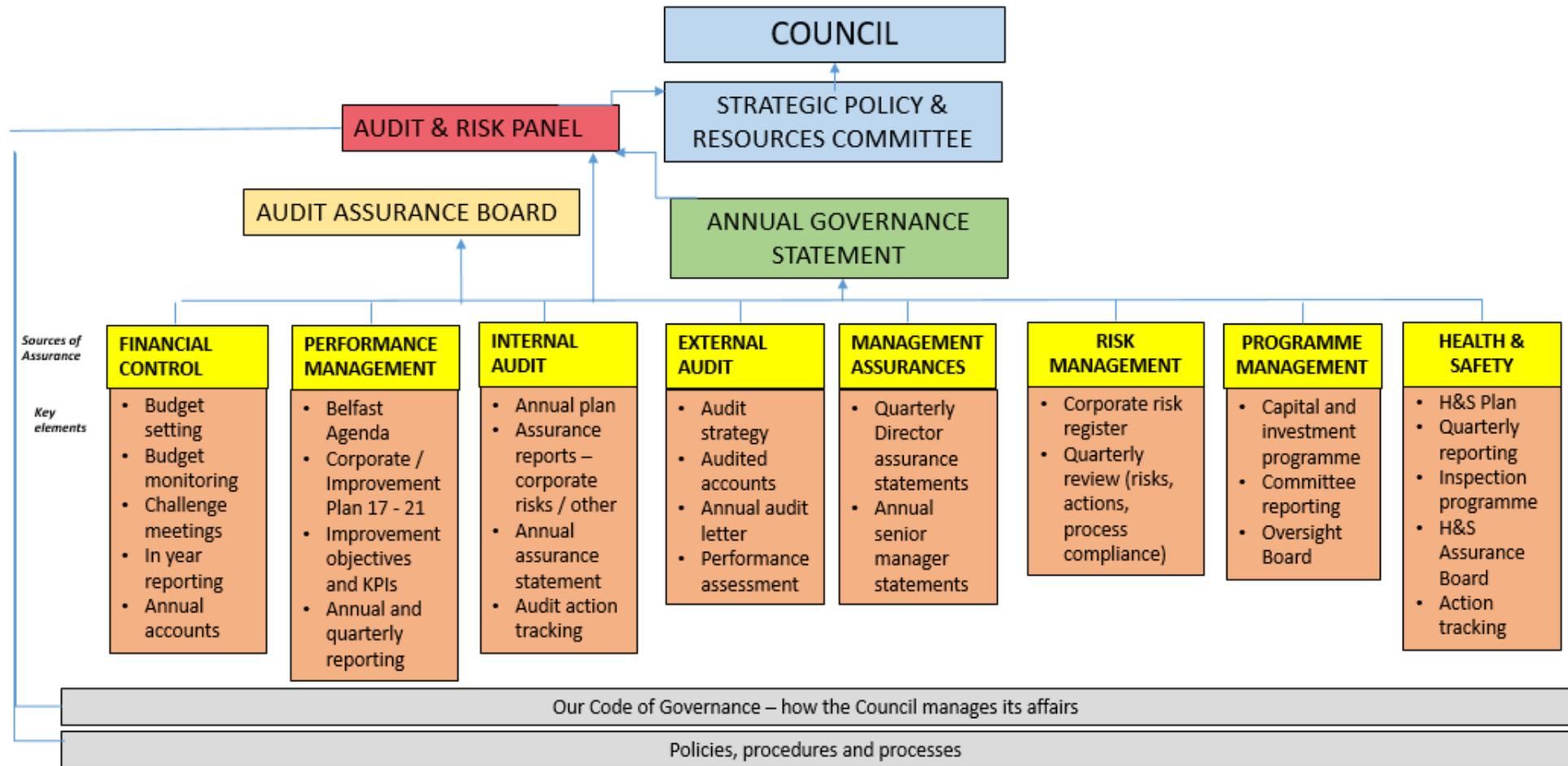
There were no breaches of personal data reported to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) during 2020/21.

Corporate Management Team (CMT) endorsed the guidance set out in Public Procurement Note (PPN) 02/20 on 8th April 2020. In total, three supplier relief applications were received. One application was approved by CMT on 8th May 2020. The other two applications received were rejected as they failed to comply with the requirements of the PPN.

Review of Effectiveness

The following diagram illustrates the Assurance Framework in place that provides information on compliance with the various elements of the Council's Governance Framework, including performance reports, health and safety reports, finance reports, internal audit reports and risk management reports.

Key Components of the Council's Assurance Framework



The various in year and year-end reports arising from the Assurance Framework are reviewed and approved by the Audit and Risk Panel and Strategic Policy and Resources Committee annually.

In addition, the review of the effectiveness of the Governance Framework is also informed by:

- the annual review and update of the Code of Governance;
- comments or recommendations made by the external auditors during their annual audit; and
- the Head of Audit Governance and Risk Services (AGRS) annual assurance statement for the period ending 2020/21, which gives an opinion on the Council's risk and control environment.

Head of Internal Audit Opinion

An extract from the Head of AGRS Annual Assurance Statement for the period ending 2020/21 is given below:

As Head of Audit, Governance and Risk Services (AGRS), on the basis of work carried out, I can provide a reasonable assurance regarding the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's framework of governance, risk management and control.

We revised our audit plan in consultation with management during the first few months of the pandemic to ensure that our audit work was focussed on the areas where assurance was most valuable and was timed and conducted in a way that minimised interruption, while complying with government guidelines. Member and management agreement of this revised plan combined with delivery of the majority of this plan, during a time when the organisation was going through a period of unprecedented change, signifies members and managers recognition of the importance of receiving independent assurance over the councils "new normal" risk, control and governance frameworks and provided me with sufficient evidence to support my assurance statement. As such there is no limitation of scope on my assurance statement.

My opinion is based on completion of audits in the revised audit plan for 20/21; project, programme and other advisory work undertaken; our role in reviewing changes to financial governance arrangements and; quarterly assurance statements from senior management on compliance with risk management and internal control systems.

Specifically my opinion is based on the following:

- evidence from areas subject to detailed internal audit during 2020/2021, in that AGRS has been able to provide positive statements of assurance with the majority of audits falling into the 'some improvement needed' category - the 2nd tier of assurance in the 4-tier model
- 'Real-time' assurance and advisory work including the facilitation of readiness workshops for major programmes and projects and project advice and assurance on the implementation of new IT systems.
- AGRS review of the financial procedures that were amended by management since 18th March 2020 in order to take account of new working practices, policies and risks due to the impact of Covid-19 helped ensure that management were maintaining systems of internal control during the pandemic
- The work that was undertaken to fundamentally review the corporate risk profile if the council taking account of the impact of the pandemic, and the associated processes to assign ownership of these risks, develop the risk mitigation plans and for these risks to be reviewed and reported quarterly.

- The work that was undertaken to review the Corporate Fraud Risk Assessments in the light of Covid-19.
- Quarterly assurances from senior management on the management of key risks and maintenance of internal control systems during the pandemic response and recovery efforts
- the evidence set out in the review of the Council's Code of Governance and Annual Governance Statement regarding the range of key assurance and governance arrangements that the Council has in place to direct / oversee its activities.

However, some weaknesses and areas for improvement have been identified through audit work. These have been reported in detail to the Council's Audit Assurance Board and Audit and Risk Panel during 2020/21 through quarterly progress reports. In addition, I have highlighted, where appropriate, where further action is required to implement agreed audit actions. The key issues I would highlight in this statement are as follows

- While AGRS was able to provide positive statements of assurance in the majority of audits completed in 2020/21, five areas resulted in 'major improvement' assurance levels:
 - Performance Management audit area 2: Performance Management Framework
 - Pitches Strategy 2011 - 2021
 - Property maintenance
 - Government Procurement Cards
 - Gifts and hospitality / conflicts of interest

It is important that the action plans to address these are implemented in as timely a manner as possible.

Looking ahead, the ongoing response to and recovery from the pandemic continues to present risks and affect corporate priorities and organisational capacity and has the potential to also affect the adequacy and effectiveness of risk control and governance arrangements. It is important that; management continue to place importance on maintenance of these risk, control and governance arrangements; that audit recommendations to address control weakness are implemented timely; and that AGRS continue to receive cooperation on delivery of the audit plan throughout 21/22.

Public Sector Internal Audit Standards

I can confirm that the AGRS Service has conformed to Public Sector Internal Audit Standards during 2020/21. A quality assurance and improvement programme is in place including internal review of work, annual assessment against professional standards, quarterly progress and performance reporting to the Assurance Board and Audit & Risk Panel. An external review of AGRS took place in 2017/18 and this confirmed the Service's compliance with professional standards. We are currently preparing for our next external review due to take place in 2022/23.

Continued effort has been put into developing and implementing the key elements of an assurance framework within the Council with the key elements being:

- a process whereby senior managers are required to sign annual assurance statements;
- a process whereby Directors are required to sign quarterly assurance statements;
- embedding risk management and developing the arrangements for oversight of the management of these risks;
- business planning and related performance reporting arrangements;
- an Audit and Risk Panel;
- a professional internal audit function, which has been reviewed for effectiveness against the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards; and
- a Health & Safety Assurance Board.

Update on the Significant Governance Issues that were declared last year

Five issues were declared last year and all of these continue to be declared as issues in this year's statement.

Significant Governance Issues for the year-end 2021

The significant governance issues for the year-end 2021 were identified through a fundamental review of the risks in the Corporate Risk Register and review of the Directors' Annual Assurance Statements.

The most significant issues for the Council are listed below and include five issues carried over from last year (issues 1 – 5) and two new issues:

1. Financial position
2. Organisational Recovery
3. City and Community Recovery
4. Digital information security
5. The relationship between Elected Members and officers
6. Brexit implementation programme for Port Health
7. Succession planning

More information on these significant governance issues is provided on the following pages.

1. Financial position

The Covid-19 pandemic had a major impact on the 20/21 budget, with key financial risks around; loss of income; cash flow; rates income; debt; job retention scheme and; Covid-19 support. A 5-step Finance Strategy was agreed with Member on an approach to securing the finances of the Council with general reserves only to be used as a last resort. The five-step Finance Strategy comprised:

1. Secure financial support from central government through:
2. Balance the deficit as far as possible through savings in the 2020/21 budget by:
3. Use of balance sheet funds
4. Use of specified reserves
5. Use of general reserves

As a result of stringent financial management controls put in place during 20/21 the council was able to balance its budget without the use of steps 3-5 above.

Due to the pandemic the financial position of the Council continues to be a significant governance issue and the five-step Finance Strategy applied in 20/21 has been extended into 21/22 and will be reviewed quarterly.

In addition to this, members have agreed to the creation of two additional specified reserves to deal with 21/22 Covid costs / income losses and also rate base losses. These reserves are to be financed through a combination of 20/21 year end savings, in-year savings for 21/22 and general reserves, if required.

2. Organisational Recovery

Organisational recovery has presented challenges across the organization and in particular for the City & Neighbourhood Services Department.

City & Neighbourhood Services (C&NS) Department

The C&NS department has experienced a turbulent and challenging year, which has impacted significantly on their Transition and Improvement programme and has meant that the implementation of structural and accountability alignment has been stalled. Resource issues and fatigue within C&NS may also impact on the level and pace of service recovery.

To address this issue, C&NS along with dedicated corporate support from Continuous Improvement, intend to develop an action plan to support the department in streamlining structures and accountability, including portfolio alignments with the appointment of a third operational director and importantly deal with resource shortages and pressure points. In addition, the business planning process will be streamlined and used to agree and manage expectations in terms of deliverables within available resources.

Organisational Recovery

During 20/21 an Organisational Recovery Group was established and was responsible for ensuring that the challenges associated with organisation recovery were managed in a consistent and coordinated way. Challenges include; adherence to the six principles of internal recovery; compliance with health, safety and wellbeing requirements; management of the additional information security risks arising from large scale remote working; management of the financial impact of recovery and realignment of corporate priorities and programmes. This group ensured that there was appropriate reporting to members and fed into the emergency preparedness at NI level.

Organisational recovery continues to be a major programme of work into 2021. Work is underway to refine our overall approach to organisational recovery for this year, with revised Covid-19 Management and Recovery Principles, which will continue to be aligned to the NI Executive Roadmap to Recovery and the current Pathway out of Restrictions. Our recovery will also be shaped by wider Government direction; the roll-out of the vaccination programme; any variant developments, practicalities of managing safe return to the office; the ongoing need to respond to changing restrictions etc. Therefore, our approach will be phased and flexible.

As Covid-19 remains a global pandemic, Covid-19 management (and recovery) will become more of a managed process for the foreseeable future. On this basis, during 2021, we are streamlining our operational recovery governance, coordination and processes as set out below.

The new operational recovery governance and co-ordination involves:

- A smaller Recovery Co-ordination Group will oversee recovery and will replace the previous Operational Recovery Groups
- A Return to Office working group will inform the recovery for office based services / functions.
- Where required, Directors or Recovery Leads will escalate issues to CMT by exception
- Continuous Improvement will maintain a Master Recovery Spreadsheet to record recovery sign-off and capture any issues/ risks/ mitigations that have been escalated or identified;

The new operational recovery process involves the readiness assessment being replaced with a checklist that Departments can use as a guide to continue to operate safely or prepare to operate safely and in a viable form. This includes 'checks' relating to health and safety; cleaning; customers; digital; finance; workforce etc., and requires director sign off. Each department will have a nominated 'Departmental Recovery Link' person to help co-ordination of recovery.

3. City and Community Recovery

City Recovery

The global pandemic continues to significantly affect the Belfast economy and the plans that have been put in place to support economic regeneration in the city.

During 20/21 Council officers have been working closely with partner organisations in the public, private and statutory sectors to understand the scale of the challenge and develop collaborative solutions to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the local economy and community, supporting businesses to reopen in a safe way, providing employment opportunities and vibrancy to local communities and city centre. Significant engagement has taken place with relevant government departments involved in the regional response to the pandemic, particularly Department for Communities, Department for Infrastructure and Department for the Economy. While some commitments have been able to progress, such as delivering on the Belfast Bolder Vision, there continues to be a need re-focus some activities to take account of the impact of Covid-19.

With recovery largely being paused from November 2020 following various restrictions being introduced during the second wave and then followed by the winter lockdown the crisis continues to highlight vulnerabilities within key systems and the structures of our economy and society, however, some benefits will be felt by the city from the behavioural change brought about in response to the crisis (such as less car usage, flexible working arrangements, more community interaction, support for front line workers). It is important that we understand what these are, and how feasible it is to sustain these behaviours over time. Our overall approach to city recovery will be aligned to the NI Executive Roadmap to Recovery and the current Pathway out of Restrictions.

Given the scale, complexity and uncertainty which existed, an internal Recovery Leadership Group had been established, with resources aligned to support and principles in place to guide the development and implementation of a phased and integrated recovery programme 'Respond, Rebuild, Recovery, that adheres to the NI Executive's 5 Step Pathway to Recovery. The recovery plan is focused on four interrelated pillars – economic, social and community, environmental and digital innovation.

Council has been able to secure £4.039m in funding from DfC, DfI and DAERA via the DfC Covid-19 Town Centre Revitalisation Fund to assist with city recovery measures.

The strong commitment by Council to support communities, businesses and vulnerable people during these challenging times is set out in the document "Belfast: Our Recovery. The document seeks to mitigate the immediate and short-term impacts of the pandemic including for example job losses, the need for skilling and re-skilling to access employment opportunities, risks around vulnerable people and social isolation, and providing targeted support. Emphasis is given to how we maximise social value of our own capital investments and grants programme to support recovery, as well as the opportunities presented by our procurement, to promote inclusive growth, support local businesses and supply chains and create local jobs. The document highlights the need for a people and jobs led approach to recovery.

Community Recovery

The need for Council and other partners to work together with local communities to jointly plan and maximise the impact of interventions, services and investments, and to ensure these approaches are tailored to meet local priorities and needs, has never been greater.

During 20/21 we continued to work with our Community / voluntary partners with a focus on ensuring those communities / individuals that had been disproportionately affected by the pandemic are supported to access local community services. The Council continued to develop our area team model and overseen the delivery of an additional £3m investment into the sector. The investment sustained critical community services around issues such as food support, advice, counselling services etc.

The Council had planned to further enhance our collaborative work with the sector through the commitments made as part of Belfast: Our Recovery. Through this we had planned to engage with city partners and communities, using a co-design approach to develop area community recovery plans, whilst refreshing our area working approach to build confidence, capacity and community resilience across neighbourhoods. Unfortunately as a result of the winter lockdown this work has been significantly impacted and delayed and key outcomes were unable to be achieved. Looking ahead this work will be picked up and further developed during 21/22, subject to further easing of restrictions.

4. Digital Information Security

Will continue to be a significant governance issue and is overseen through the Council's risk management processes by the Council's Corporate Management Team.

There has been a major increase in security threats from March 2020, which will continue into the new financial year, as attackers seek to exploit the heightened anxiety of large numbers of home workers worried about the effects of the Coronavirus.

Digital Services has already implemented additional controls to deal with the growing threats that have resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic including:

- Two factor authentication across Office365 accounts
- Logons to Office365 accounts have been blocked outside UK and Ireland
- Logons to VPN accounts have been blocked outside UK and Ireland
- Two factor authentication for F5 VPN accounts for all Council staff
- Covid19 themed phishing exercise
- Initial stages of implementing a PKI infrastructure to enhance network access control

Delivering a secure infrastructure is a constantly evolving process and consideration is being given to changing threats and risks which must be aligned the delivery of the council's goals and objectives. Consequently, after the completion of a refreshed maturity assessment of our current security controls with our contracted external security specialists, a new security strategy and a revised programme of work will be presented to CMT and the Strategic Policy & Resources committee in June 2021.

Digital Services has also arranged a desk based Cyber Incident response exercise with the National Cyber Security Centre, to review our cyber security incident response processes, alongside colleagues from Audit, Governance and Risk services, Marketing and Communications and Emergency Response.

The Digital information Security programme of work will focus on priority areas from the maturity assessment that are most important to enhance the council's Cyber security controls. These areas will include:

- Cyber Security Incident Response
- Identity management
- Cloud Strategy
- Maturity Assessment Priorities

This work will enhance the security controls that are already in place which include:

- Regular vulnerability and penetration testing to determine external vulnerabilities and issues carried out by independent third parties
- Security contract with external security experts
- ICT Infrastructure designed for resilience, redundancy and security in conjunction with contracted security experts
- Business Continuity Plan in place and regularly reviewed
- Key support & maintenance contracts with key suppliers
- Robust change management controls
- Template for response to a major security incident
- Maintaining knowledge of advanced threats
- Regular staff phishing simulation exercises.

5. The relationship between Elected Members and officers

Belfast City Council is a political organisation and as such, this can often present a challenging working environment for officers, one that is particularly unique in public sector in the UK and Ireland. It is important for Elected Members to be cognisant of the organisation's duty of care to all employees while they fulfil their obligations as Elected Members. The legal rights of staff and individual officers must also be recognised. Governance is in place in order for Members and officers to follow due process. Operating outside that agreed governance could have a detrimental impact on relationships; therefore impacting on the effective delivery of the organisation's overall strategy and priorities, and damaging the image and reputation of the organisation. This could also undermine the confidence and morale of staff who, at all times, are required to carry out their duties in an impartial and balanced way, acting in the best interests of the organisation, and offering their expert advice and opinion without any political influence or bias. Staff need to have confidence that any interaction between officers and Elected Members, particularly on sensitive issues, takes place within that agreed governance, and that Members should consider this when making any comments on public forums or in the media.

A new policy incorporating a standards regime and monitoring is being developed to introduce new safeguards and strengthen those that currently exist for the member / officer interface. Senior officers and Party Group Leaders will continue to meet periodically to ensure alignment of objectives and to promote a shared understanding of the working environment.

As part of the Coll Report recommendations the council will undertake to deliver training and awareness of the appropriateness and importance of the challenge function in decision-making and in the delivery of functions. An Organisational Crisis Response Protocol is also being developed to define the roles of both Members and officers during unprecedented crisis scenarios.

A new Standards and Business Committee will be established in August 2021 (pending consideration of the call-in by an ad-hoc committee and reconsideration of the decision by full council). One of the aims of the new Committee will be to promote positive joint working across political groups and between officers and Members. This will be supported by a programme of facilitative leadership training planned to take place with the Party Group Leaders and the Council's Corporate Management Team.

6. Brexit Implementation Programme for Port Health

Whilst the Council does not operate the Port of Belfast, it is responsible for making sure the port meets environmental health standards. The Council's duties include overseeing the import of food into Belfast, including checks on High Risk Food not of Animal Origin and fish and fishery products for human consumption. The Council is also responsible for carrying out inspections on board ships and other vessels to check they comply with food safety and hygiene standards and monitoring the Port of Belfast and George Best Belfast City Airport for infectious disease.

There has been a significant impact on these duties as a result of Brexit and the additional responsibilities resulting from the NI Protocol. Clarification will be required as to the roles and responsibilities of the central Competent Authorities in relation to funding, provision of IT systems and other responsibilities relating to carrying out inspections at Belfast Port.

The Council will also need to secure permanent adequate funding and resources to ensure effective delivery of the Council's responsibilities under the NI Protocol at Belfast Port. This will include a review of the suitability of existing facilities to determine whether they are sufficient to carry out the controls required at Belfast Port pursuant to the NI Protocol.

7. Succession Planning

Bearing in mind the ambitious long-term plans and programmes that are in place for the city and the organisation, including the Belfast Agenda, Belfast: Our Recovery, the Resilience Strategy and the Belfast Region City Deal, it is imperative that there is effective succession planning in place. As we move forward there needs to be a stronger focus on attracting and recruiting a younger diverse pool of talent to the organisation and upskilling our existing talent to have adequate succession plans to fulfil vacancies at all levels including senior management. This action will be taken forward as part of the review and implementation of the People Strategy.

Signed:
Chair Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Signed:
Chief Executive Officer

Signed:
Chief Financial Officer