

South Oxfordshire District Council

ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2008/2009

1.0 Scope of responsibility

South Oxfordshire District Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently and effectively.

The council also has a duty under the Local Government Act 1999 to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

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

The council approved and adopted its first local code of corporate governance in 2003. The council adopted a revised local code of governance with effect from 1 April 2008. This local code of governance is consistent with the “*Delivering Good Governance in Local Government*” publication produced by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), which was published in July 2007.

This statement explains how South Oxfordshire District Council has complied with the code and also meets the requirements of regulation 4(2) of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003 as amended by the Accounts and Audit (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2006 in relation to the publication of a statement on internal control.

Our website at www.southoxon.gov.uk/ has a copy of the local code of corporate governance within its Constitution or it can be obtained from:

Democratic Services
South Oxfordshire District Council
Benson Lane
Crowmarsh Gifford
Oxon
OX10 8QS

2.0 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 its activities through which it accounts to, engages with and leads the community. 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, cost-effective services.

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 council has had the governance framework described below in place for the year ended 31 March 2009 and up to the date of approval of the statement of accounts.

3.0 The governance framework

The purpose of the governance framework is to do the right things, in the right way, for the right people, in a timely, inclusive, open, honest and accountable manner. Full council is responsible for directing and controlling the organisation in this manner. Full council's responsibilities include agreeing the Constitution and key governance documents, the policy framework and key strategies including the community strategy and agreeing the budget.

South Oxfordshire District Council has executive arrangements in place consisting of a Cabinet and two scrutiny committees. Cabinet is responsible for proposing the policy framework and key strategies, proposing the budget and implementing the policy framework and key strategies. The scrutiny committees can question and challenge the policy and performance of the executive and promote public debate.

The chief executive, who was appointed joint chief executive of this council and Vale of White Horse District Council in September 2008, advises councillors on policy and procedures to drive the aims and objectives of the authority. As head of the officer staff, the chief executive oversees the employment and conditions of staff. The chief executive leads a management team that is shared with Vale of White Horse District Council. The head of finance, the monitoring officer and heads of service are responsible for advising the executive and scrutiny committees on legislative, financial and other policy considerations to achieve South Oxfordshire District Council's objectives and are responsible for implementing councillors' decisions.

Our governance framework for 2008/09 was based on our local code of governance, which was adopted in 2008. Within the framework we aim to meet the principles of good governance in all aspects of the council's work giving particular attention to the main principles, which are:

- Focusing on the purpose of the authority and on outcomes for the community and creating and implementing a vision for the local area
- Councillors and officers working together to achieve a common purpose with clearly defined functions and roles
- Promoting values for the authority and demonstrating the values of good governance through upholding high standards of conduct and behaviour
- Taking informed and transparent decisions which are subject to effective scrutiny and managing risk
- Developing the capacity and capability of councillors and officers to be effective
- Engaging with local people and other stakeholders to ensure robust public accountability

The strategic planning framework

To ensure we do the right things, in the right way, for the right people, in a timely, inclusive, open, honest and accountable manner, our strategic planning framework incorporates residents' and service-providers' views as well as national and local priorities. Our strategic planning framework incorporates the Local Strategic Partnership's sustainable communities strategy for the area. It also takes account of the priority indicators within the Local Area Agreement for Oxfordshire. In addition, we have responsibility for the local development framework – a set of planning policy documents that set out how we will use land in the district to achieve both our partners' and our wider objectives. We also carry out regular consultation with residents and service-users to identify their priorities for service improvement and how satisfied they are with our services.

Our overall vision is set out in our Statement of Strategic Intent. It complements that of the South Oxfordshire Partnership (SOP) and reflects our desire to work in partnership to achieve the best services possible for South Oxfordshire. Our Corporate Plan sets out the council's strategic objectives and corporate priorities. This plan along with Oxfordshire-wide plans, guides our decisions on how we invest our financial and staffing resources. They determine the types of projects we support through grant funding.

Our four year Corporate Plan sets out our strategic objectives and corporate priorities. Arising from the Corporate Plan each service team has a detailed service plan and workplan which identifies how they will undertake specific activities, which will deliver our priorities.

Performance management framework

In order to know that we are achieving the strategic objectives and corporate priorities in the corporate plan, we set national indicators and local performance

targets. To ensure we meet these targets and objectives, we have one-year service plans and workplans, thus ensuring that the work of all individuals is aligned to the council's top level objectives through a golden thread.

The council's targets and actions are monitored via its performance management system. In the process of monitoring performance, we forecast year-end outcomes and undertake action planning to get measures back on track if they are below target. In addition, we review performance at the end of the year and use this to help set targets for the coming year. Where targets are not being met, heads of service discuss these on a monthly basis with their strategic director. Quarterly performance monitoring reports are presented to the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee at which time Cabinet members and officers are expected to attend the committee to account for under-performing targets. Thereafter Cabinet receives the quarterly monitoring reports.

Our individual performance review scheme focuses on agreement of targets linked to service plans between managers and individuals. Throughout the year, staff have meetings with their managers to review progress and discuss and plan personal development in line with the council's objectives.

As the council outsources a significant number of services, we have operated since 2002 a formal framework for monitoring the performance of contractors, and reporting these to a scrutiny committee.

Legal framework

Our Constitution sets out how South Oxfordshire District Council is managed and guides decision-making towards objectives. The head of legal and democratic services is responsible for ensuring the lawfulness of decision-making and maintaining the Constitution. Our Constitution includes a set of procedure rules that govern how we conduct our business. It also includes protocols covering, for example, the disclosure of interests in contracts and the relationship between officers and councillors. In addition the Constitution contains a Planning Code of Conduct for councillors and a Code of Conduct for officers.

All decisions are made in accordance with the requirements of the Constitution and the scheme of delegation which forms part of the Constitution. The head of legal and democratic services will report to full council or to Cabinet if she considers that any proposal, decision or omission would give rise to unlawfulness or if any decision or omission has given rise to maladministration.

In the role of monitoring officer, the head of legal and democratic services contributes to the promotion and maintenance of high standards of conduct through support to the Standards Committee.

The Constitution includes our Code of Conduct for councillors which came into effect from 1 July 2007. It incorporates the mandatory requirements of the Model Code of Conduct.

Financial framework

The section 151 officer is responsible for the overall management of the financial affairs of the council. The section 151 officer determines all financial systems, procedures and supporting records of the council, after consultation with heads of service. Any new or amended financial systems, procedures or practices are agreed with the section 151 officer before implementation.

The full council is responsible for approving the following:

- MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

The medium term financial strategy sets a stable financial framework within which the council operates, and it is reviewed annually. It is linked to a medium term financial plan that is reported to councillors during the budget setting process.

- TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

The treasury management strategy governs the operation of the council's treasury function, and is reviewed annually. This includes parameters for lending and borrowing, and identifies the risks of treasury activity.

- CAPITAL STRATEGY

The capital strategy governs the council's capital programme.

- REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET SETTING

Both revenue and capital budgets are set by full council. Revenue budget setting includes both the calculation of the council tax base and the surplus or deficit arising from the collection fund.

Cabinet has overall responsibility for the implementation of the council's financial strategies and spending plans, and is authorised to make financial decisions subject to these being consistent with the budget and policy framework and the Constitution.

Heads of service are responsible for ensuring the proper maintenance of financial procedures and records, and the security of assets, property, records and data within their service area.

The chief executive, strategic directors and heads of service consult with the head of finance and the head of legal and democratic services on the financial and legal implications respectively, of any report that they are proposing to submit to the full council, a committee (or sub-committee), or Cabinet.

Risk management framework

Risk management is important to the successful delivery of our objectives. An effective risk management system identifies and assesses risks, decides on appropriate responses and provides assurance that the chosen responses are

effective. Our risk management approach has been in effect since 2003. The overall responsibility for effective risk management in the council lies with the chief executive supported by the management team. We use a standard risk management methodology which encompasses the identification, analysis, prioritisation, management and monitoring of risks.

Councillors have a responsibility to understand the strategic risks that the council faces, and will be made aware of how these risks are being managed through regular reports to the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee.

Management team are responsible for the identification, analysis and management of strategic risks and undertake a quarterly review of those risks.

All heads of service are responsible for ensuring that risk assessments are undertaken in their service areas, and that risks identified are prioritised and entered onto the risk register. This annual process has been mainstreamed and integrated with the annual service planning cycle, so that risk mitigation actions can be included in service plans.

The operational risk registers are reviewed by management team on a quarterly basis.

All line managers are responsible for implementing strategies at team level by ensuring adequate communication, training and the assessment and monitoring of risks.

All officers are responsible for considering risk as part of everyday activities and provide input to the risk management process.

We also have a robust approach to business continuity to ensure that priority services can continue to be delivered to our customers in the event of an unforeseen disruption.

4.0 Review of effectiveness of the governance framework

The council has responsibility for conducting, at least annually, a review of the effectiveness of its governance framework including the system of internal control. The review of effectiveness is informed by the work of the managers within the council who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, the internal audit manager's annual report and also by comments made by the external auditors and other review agencies and inspectorates.

The following highlights our review of our strategic objectives and sets out the assurances of committees, officers and external organisations.

- **Review of objectives**

To ensure that we are doing the right things in the right way and for the right people, in 2007/08 South Oxfordshire District Council undertook a major review of the Corporate Plan. In doing this, the annual residents' survey asked customers to set

out their priorities for improvement. In addition, workshops took place across the district when people were asked what they thought the council's priorities should be. Their feedback helped to guide the development of the Corporate Plan and shape the new strategic objectives and corporate priorities. We have a set of strategic objectives and 16 corporate priorities which provide a framework for the council's work over the next three years.

- **Legal framework**

At its meeting on 16 July 2008, Council approved the creation of a shared senior management team with Vale of White Horse District Council. In September 2008, South Oxfordshire District Council's chief executive was appointed to the post of shared chief executive. In December 2008, strategic directors were appointed to the shared management team and in February 2009 Heads of Service were appointed. At the outset, the council's monitoring officer was satisfied that the process adopted in the recruitment process complied with all relevant legislation.

Section 113 of the Local Government Act 1972 allows a local authority to enter into an agreement with another local authority to place its officers at the disposal of another authority. Staff who are made available under such an arrangement are able to take binding decisions on behalf of the council at whose disposal they are placed, although they remain an employee of their original authority for employment and superannuation purposes. This legislation therefore allows the chief executive, strategic directors and heads of service to be shared between the two councils. Council authorised the head of legal and democratic services to enter into an agreement under section 113 of the Local Government Act 1972 for this joint arrangement. The section 113 agreement was completed on 26 September 2008.

In September 2008, Council was asked to agree that all references to the chief executive, head of paid service, electoral registration officer and returning officer contained in the Constitution should apply to the shared chief executive when acting in those roles for each council with effect from 17 September 2008. Following the appointment of the strategic directors and heads of service in 2008 and 2009 respectively, the Constitution will be subject to extensive review to meet the requirements of joint working with Vale of White Horse District Council.

Otherwise, the Constitution was reviewed twice during the year to ensure it is up to date. During the year, a review of the scheme of delegation was undertaken. In order to enhance the efficiency of decision-making within the budget and policy framework agreed by full council, more decision-making has been delegated to Cabinet members and officers.

The head of legal and democratic services did not need to use her statutory powers during the year.

In 2008 the Legal Services team was again awarded Lexcel. This accreditation is a quality mark which the Law Society has developed and which is only awarded to legal practices that undergo rigorous independent assessment each year to ensure they meet the required standards of excellence in areas such as customer care, case management and risk management.

Action: review Constitution to meet the requirements of joint working with Vale of White Horse District Council.

- **Standards Committee**

The council adopted a new code of conduct in 2007. Standards Committee members have actively participated in delivering training on the code of conduct to district and parish and town councillors as well as parish and town clerks.

In April 2008 the Standards Committee considered an investigation into an allegation of a breach of the code of conduct against a parish councillor. The committee agreed with the investigator's findings that the parish councillor had not failed to comply with the code of conduct.

In anticipation of the introduction of the local assessment of code of conduct in May 2008, the committee prepared for its enhanced role. In preparing for this role, Council agreed to increase the number of independent representatives and parish representatives on the committee to enable it to have sufficient membership to undertake the assessment and review of complaints. After successful exercises to recruit independent and parish representatives, the committee now consists of 10 members. The committee is made up of four district councillors, three parish representatives and three independent representatives.

In relation to the local assessment of complaints, the committee adopted guidance notes and a complaint form, which were subsequently made publicly available on the council's webpages. Parish and town councils were advised of changes to the procedures. During the year, Standards Committee members attended training events, facilitated by the Standards Board for England, to help them in their role on the local filter of complaints. They will continue to take up training opportunities as they become available. The committee will continue to review its procedures in order to enable the smooth-running of the complaints process. Since the local assessment of complaints regime started, the Standards Committee has considered one complaint against 29 district councillors, which was not referred for investigation. One additional complaint was referred for investigation.

In November 2008, the committee responded to a further consultation on revisions to the model code of conduct.

The Standards Committee is keen to uphold the high standards of ethical governance within the council and is embarking on a project to enter the ethics and standards award at the LGC awards in 2011. A task group has been convened and will embark on its project in March 2009.

Actions:

To adopt the provisions of the revised code of conduct, which was consulted upon in November 2008.

To develop an action plan to lead the council towards the shortlist of the LGC ethics and standards award in 2011.

- **Financial framework**

During the 2009/10 financial year, full council reviewed and approved the medium term financial strategy, and the treasury management strategy. Cabinet considered and approved a capital strategy in March 2009.

Full council approved a revenue budget for 2009/10, together with a capital programme until 2011/12. This was set following rigorous internal review by Cabinet members, the chief executive, strategic directors and heads of service, together with the section 151 officer and accountancy staff. Budget proposals were also subject to review by the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee. The council tax itself was set in accordance with parameters defined in the medium term financial strategy.

Cabinet undertook regular budget monitoring throughout the year, receiving reports on a quarterly basis.

A new financial management system – Agresso – became operational in April 2007. A number of operational issues with the system during the financial year have, as can be seen under the internal audit section below, caused many of the key financial systems reviews to come back with a limited opinion. The problems experienced with the system were reported to Audit and Corporate Governance Committee during the year, as was progress against a recovery plan which was agreed with the contractor. The recovery plan was achieved by the start of the 2008/09 year.

- **Internal audit and the internal audit manager**

Internal audit is an independent assurance function that primarily provides an objective opinion on the degree to which the internal control environment supports and promotes the achievements of the council's objectives. It assists the council by evaluating the adequacy of governance, risk management, controls and use of resources through its planned audit work, and recommending improvements where necessary.

The internal audit manager contributes to the assurance process by commenting on the effectiveness and outcome of the programme of internal audits and comments on the effectiveness of the internal control environment of the council. During the year internal audit harmonised its services with Vale of White Horse District Council.

The internal audit manager's overall opinion offers satisfactory assurance on the basis of its own work. There is basically a sound system of internal control in place, but there are some weaknesses which may put some system objectives at risk. Areas of concern in the control environment mainly centre on key financial systems. The implementation of the Agresso 5.5 financial management system, resulted in control weaknesses being identified in the majority of the key financial system audits which require remedial action.

During the year the internal audit manager also undertook a risk management audit, and a limited assurance rating was given. The council has implemented some risk management processes, but it is the internal audit manager's opinion that improvements need to be made to fully embed an adequate risk management process. This is considered further under the heading of *risk management*.

Internal Audit did not complete specific reviews of corporate governance arrangements and the Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy and Response Plan in the year and has included these in the plan for 2008/2009.

Internal audit offers assurance that it has complied with the CIPFA Code and a formal quality assurance programme was introduced during the year. Internal audit needs to complete a self-assessment against the code to identify areas for further improvement, from which an action plan will be developed and results will be presented to the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee.

Action: to undertake an internal audit self-assessment against the code to identify areas for further improvement.

- **Risk management**

The risk management process in place has been revised due to management team approving a new harmonised approach to risk management, which is being implemented at both South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council. The approach incorporates good practice at both councils, recommendations made following the recent internal audit review of risk management (at both sites) and also comments made by the Audit Commission during the 2008 use of resources review. The process has also been incorporated into the performance management handbook.

The internal audit of risk management provided a limited assurance on the adequacy of the internal control system, which puts the system objectives at risk, and/or the level of non-compliance puts some objectives at risk. The audit raised 14 recommendations; seven high, five medium and two low. In summary, the audit recommended that the council should review its strategic risks; greater emphasis should be given to the reporting of risk; risk management should be incorporated into training and induction for officers and councillors and that performance monitoring and management reporting needs to be strengthened. The agreed actions have been incorporated into the new risk management approach and tasks have been added to workplans.

A dedicated corporate risk officer (shared between South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council) was recruited and is responsible for risk management at both sites. The role also includes the maintenance of South Oxfordshire District Council's business continuity arrangements.

The risk management process is subject to annual review and is endorsed, via management team, by the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee. The next

review will consider the consequences of the recent joint management restructure with Vale of White Horse District Council.

Governance code

South Oxfordshire District Council chose to adopt this revised code from 1 April 2008. We said that during 2008/09 South Oxfordshire District Council would need to review the revised local code of governance to ensure that best practice governance is aimed for and appropriate performance measures are in place. Having noted the overlap between the governance code and the Audit Commission's use of resources assessment, the democratic services team is working with the corporate risk officer to deliver appropriate performance measures on the local code of governance that do not replicate work on the use of resources monitoring.

Action: devise performance measures against the local code of governance when the outcome of the corporate risk officer's work on use of resources has been agreed by management team.

Audit and Corporate Governance Committee

From May 2008, the committee was reduced in size to seven members to accord with good practice guidance. In the council's 2008/09 Annual Governance Statement we undertook to:

- work with councillors on the committee to develop their understanding of roles and responsibilities and how they can contribute to monitoring and improving governance, risk management and internal control
- enable the committee to deliver robust challenge on governance and internal control
- develop councillors' understanding of the sources of assurance supporting the governance statements.

In undertaking to do this the new, smaller committee undertook a self assessment in the autumn of 2007. Committee members and substitutes, eligible to sit on the committee, responded to questions on their understanding of internal and external audit, risk management and finance and also evaluated their own skills and those of the committee in carrying out its role. The outcome of the assessment has allowed officers to start a programme of development sessions targeting committee members' areas of greatest need. During this reporting period, members of the committee have attended development sessions on risk and internal/external audit. They also attended the Vale of White Horse District Council's audit committee in January 2009 to observe another committee in operation.

Action: provide ongoing development sessions for the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee, with early emphasis on governance and the financial statements.

Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee and Customer and Community Scrutiny Committee

The scrutiny committees help develop council policy and review performance in meeting council objectives. During the year, a number of new initiatives have been embarked upon by the chairmen to help improve the effectiveness of the committees.

Alongside the new initiatives, a task group of councillors on the scrutiny committees has been meeting to prepare its report on the review of the effectiveness of the two committees. Cabinet considered the review at its meeting in September 2008. The report was accompanied by an action plan, which officers will continue to deliver during 2009/10.

Action: implement the action plan to improve the effectiveness of the scrutiny committees following publication of the report on the review of scrutiny.

External sources of assurance on the governance framework

- AUDIT COMMISSION: ANNUAL AUDIT AND INSPECTION

The Audit Commission's key message was that the council continues to make good progress in delivering its main priorities and is improving outcomes for local people. The council demonstrates strong community leadership, improved customer satisfaction and is delivering better value for money.

Key improvements during 2007/08 included:

- increasing the number of affordable homes and reducing homelessness
- higher levels of recycling
- reducing fear of crime related to personal safety
- continued economic development of Didcot
- identifying opportunities for shared services.

However, there were some areas where the council needed to improve outcomes for local people and strengthen its processes for delivering improvements:

- processing of housing benefits; and
- reducing violent crime, criminal damage and common assaults further.

There were again significant difficulties in completing the audit of the financial statements. The accounts produced contained significant and multiple errors, and as a result the opinion could not be given until 12 November, considerably after the due date of 30 September. The additional work necessary to deliver the opinion resulted in an additional audit fee of £43,372.

Additional problems arising from multiple changes of system in year, and in particular the main accounting system, also led to an 'except for' conclusion on the council's value for money opinion and reduced scores for the use of resources assessment.

Action:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of community safety initiatives aimed at reducing levels of crime further;
- Monitor improvements within housing benefits and take action to address shortfalls; and
- Review the processes and staffing in place to deliver robust financial statements in 2008/09

- THE AUDIT OF THE ACCOUNTS AND VALUE FOR MONEY

The Audit Commission reported separately to the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee on the issues arising from its 2007/08 audit and issued its report on 12 November 2008, providing an unqualified opinion on the accounts and a conclusion on the value for money arrangements to say that these arrangements were adequate, except for:

- the arrangements within the system of internal control for the preparation of procedure notes and reconciliations of all key financial systems;
- the reporting arrangements to enable members to fulfil their responsibilities to match performance against budgets; and
- there was no up to date capital strategy or asset management plan for management of the asset base.

Value for Money Conclusion

There were three areas where the council was assessed as not meeting the criteria on which the value for money conclusion is based. The Audit Commission therefore issued an 'except for' conclusion on the council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources. The Audit Commission made four recommendations as a result:

- link corporate risks to strategic priorities and develop action plans to manage these risks;
- document procedures for all key financial systems and undertake regular system reconciliations;
- strengthen financial reporting to members; and
- prepare a capital strategy and asset management plan.

- USE OF RESOURCES

The findings of the auditor are an important component of the CPA framework. In particular the Use of Resources score is derived from the assessments made by the auditor in the following areas.

- financial reporting (including the preparation of the accounts of the council and the way these are presented to the public).
- financial management (including how the financial management is integrated with strategy to support council priorities).

- financial standing (including the strength of the council's financial position).
- internal control (including how effectively the council maintains proper stewardship and control of its finances).
- value for money (including an assessment of how well the council balances the costs and quality of its services).

For the purposes of the CPA the Audit Commission assessed the Council's arrangements for use of resources in five areas. The scores are lower than those in the previous year and the areas covered by the qualifications on the value for money conclusion above cover some of the reasons for this. In particular the issues around the production of the financial statements were covered in detail in the Audit Commission's Annual Governance Report.

The impact of changes in financial systems, problems with the audit of financial statements and staffing pressures resulted in reduced scores in four criteria, and an overall score of 1 for use of resources.

Action: the report to Audit and Corporate Governance Committee on 25 March 2009 will set out the actions the council intends to take.

- LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN

The Local Government Ombudsman provides summary information on complaints about South Oxfordshire District Council to enable the council to incorporate any feedback into service improvement.

The letter showed that the Ombudsman *received* 16 complaints during the year, a significant reduction on the previous year. The Ombudsman expects to see such fluctuations over time.

Seventeen complaints were *decided* during the year. Of these, three were outside the Ombudsman's jurisdiction for a variety of reasons. Four were premature and one was settled locally. Of the remaining nine, seven were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration could be seen. In a further two cases the Ombudsman exercised discretion not to pursue the complaint further mainly because no significant injustice flowed from the fault alleged.

Nine complaints related to planning and building control and two were about public finance. The remaining five were classed as 'other', two of them being about drainage.

The number of premature complaints (four) shows a reduction on the number received last year (seven). This is below the national average of 27 per cent and may reflect the clear way the council explains its complaints procedure on its website. The Ombudsman was pleased to note that the website helpfully contains a hyperlink to the Commission's website to assist complainants, and signposts the role of the Planning Inspectorate and the Standards Board for England.

The Ombudsman made enquiries to the council on six complaints during the year and the average time for responding was 29.5 days. This is a slight improvement on

last year but falls slightly short of the target time of 28 days. However, one response took 43 days and this had a significant impact on the average response time.

The Ombudsman found that the council's responses are generally comprehensive and hopes that the increased use of email and scanned documents will enable the council to continue the gradual improvement in its response times in the coming year.

5.0 Significant governance issues

We propose over the coming year to take steps to address the matters set out in the action boxes above to further enhance our governance arrangements. We are satisfied that these steps will address the need for improvements that were identified in our review of effectiveness and will monitor their implementation and operation as part of our next annual review.

Signed: Leader of the Council

Chief Executive

Date: