

2019/20

HALTON BOROUGH COUNCIL - ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT



What is Governance?

Governance is about how we ensure that we are doing the right things, in the right way, for the right people, in a timely, inclusive, open, honest and accountable manner. Good governance leads to:

- Effective leadership
- Good management
- Good performance
- Good stewardship of public money
- Good public engagement, and
- Good outcomes for our citizens and service users.

The governance framework comprises the culture, values, systems and processes by which an organisation is directed and controlled. The framework brings together an underlying set of legislative requirements, good practice principles and management processes.

Halton Borough Council acknowledges its responsibility for ensuring that there is a sound system of governance. The Council has developed a Local Code of Corporate Governance that defines the principles that underpin the governance of the organisation. The Local Code forms part of the Council Constitution and can be accessed on the Council's website.

The Council's governance framework aims to ensure that in conducting its business it:

- Operates in a lawful, open, inclusive and honest manner;
- Makes sure that public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for and used economically, efficiently and effectively;
- Has effective arrangements for the management of risk;
- Secures continuous improvements in the way that it operates.

What is the Annual Governance Statement?

The Council is required by the Accounts & Audit (England) Regulations 2015 to prepare and publish an annual governance statement. This is a public document that reports on the extent to which the Council complies with its own code of governance.

In this document the Council:

- Acknowledges its responsibility for ensuring that there is a sound system of governance;
- Summarises the key elements of the governance framework and the roles of those responsible for the development and maintenance of the governance environment;
- Describes how the Council has monitored and evaluated the effectiveness of its governance arrangements in the year, and on any planned changes in the coming period;
- Provides details of how the Council has responded to any issue(s) identified in last year's governance statement;
- Reports on any significant governance issues identified from this review and provides a commitment to addressing them.

The annual governance statement reports on the governance framework that has been in place at Halton Borough Council for the year ended 31 March 2020 and up to the date of approval of the statement of accounts.

It is important to note that during March 2020, the Council was required to initiate an emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic. By necessity this has involved significant changes and disruption to the manner in which Council services are normally delivered. As a result of this, changes to the Council's governance arrangements have been implemented as part of the COVID-19 response. This has included implementing robust measures to support proper decision making and continued transparency and accountability. Details of the changes introduced are described in this document.

How has the Annual Governance Statement been prepared?

The initial review of the Council's governance framework was carried out by a group of officers. This group comprised:

- **The Strategic Director – Enterprise, Community & Resources**

This post is designated as the Council's Statutory Scrutiny Officer as required under Section 31 of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009.

This role involves promoting and supporting the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

- **The Operational Director – Legal and Democratic Services**

This post is designated as the Council's Monitoring Officer under section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, as amended by paragraph 24 of schedule 5 Local Government Act 2000.

The Monitoring Officer is responsible for ensuring that that the Council acts and operates within the law.

- **The Operational Director – Finance**

This post is designated as the s151 Officer appointed under the 1972 Local Government Act.

The Operational Director – Finance is the Council's Chief Financial Officer and carries overall responsibility for the financial administration of the Council.

- **The Divisional Manager – Audit, Procurement & Operational Finance**

This post is responsible for the Council's internal audit arrangements, including the development of the internal audit strategy and annual plan and providing an annual audit opinion on the Council's governance, risk management and control processes.

In preparing the annual governance statement the Council has:

- Reviewed the Council's existing governance arrangements against its Local Code of Corporate Governance;
- Considered any areas where the Local Code of Corporate Governance needs to be updated to reflect changes in the Council's governance arrangements and best practice guidance;
- Assessed the effectiveness of the Council's governance arrangements and highlighted any planned changes in the coming period;
- Considered the impact of COVID-19 in terms of changes made to the Council's governance arrangements.

Management Team, which is chaired by the Chief Executive, has also reviewed the annual governance statement and considered the significant governance issues facing the Council.

The Business Efficiency Board, which is designated as the Council's Audit Committee, provides assurance to the Council on the effectiveness of its governance arrangements, risk management framework and internal control environment. As part of this role the Board reviews and approves the annual governance statement.

What are the key elements of the Council's Governance Framework?

The Council aims to achieve good standards of governance by adhering to the following key principles set out in the best practice guidance 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework 2016':

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

The following pages provide a summary of key elements of the Council's governance framework and how they relate to these principles.

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

SUPPORTING PRINCIPLES

- Behaving with integrity
- Demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values
- Respecting the rule of law

EXAMPLES OF HOW WE DID THIS IN 2019/20:

- The Council has a Constitution that sets out how the Council operates, how decisions are made and the procedures that are followed to ensure that these are efficient, proportionate, transparent and accountable. The Constitution was reviewed and updated in May 2020.
- The Council has a Standards Committee with co-opted independent members. The role of the Committee is to promote high standards of member conduct. No matters were brought to the attention of the Monitoring Officer during the year which required formal investigation.
- Elected members follow a Code of Conduct to ensure high standards in the way they undertake their duties. The Monitoring Officer provides training to new elected members on the Code of Conduct.
- Officer behaviour is governed by the Employees' Code of Conduct. All new employees attending the corporate induction process were made aware of the Code.
- Roles and responsibilities relating to the Council's executive and non-executive functions are defined in the Council's Constitution. Decisions and actions taken during the year were made in accordance with these arrangements providing clear accountability.
- The Council takes fraud, corruption and maladministration seriously and has established a suite of policies and processes which aim to prevent or deal with such occurrences. On 24 July 2019 the Business Efficiency Board received an annual report summarising the operation of the Council's counter fraud and corruption arrangements.
- A corporate complaints procedure operated throughout the year to receive and respond to any complaints received.
- Arrangements exist to ensure that members and officers are not influenced by prejudice, bias or conflicts of interest in dealing with different stakeholders. These include:
 - Registers of disclosable pecuniary interests were maintained
 - Registers of gifts and hospitality were maintained
 - Opportunities to declare disclosable pecuniary interests and disclosable other interests were provided at the start of meetings
- The Operational Director – Legal and Democratic Services provided legal advice to the Council as the Council's Monitoring Officer. One of the key functions of that role is to ensure the lawfulness and fairness of decision-making.

Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

SUPPORTING PRINCIPLES

- Openness
- Engaging comprehensively with institutional stakeholders
- Engaging with individual citizens and service users effectively

EXAMPLES OF HOW WE DID THIS IN 2019/20:

- Information on the Council's performance, finances and the democratic running of the Council is routinely published on the Council's website. The Council also fully complies with the reporting requirements of the Local Government Transparency Code 2015.
- The Council engages with key partners and institutional stakeholders in various ways. Formal partnerships include the Health and Wellbeing Board, the Safer Halton Partnership and the Halton Children's Trust. The Council's Management Team also holds a joint monthly meeting with the management team of Halton Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).
- The Health and Wellbeing Board provides a key forum for public accountability of the NHS, Adult Social Care, Children's Services, Public Health and other commissioned services relating to the wider determinants of health in Halton.
- During 2019/20 the Council and Halton CCG entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) as a transitional arrangement pending the update of the Joint Working Agreement. The MOU provides the basis for collaboration and sets out a shared ambition, agreed principles for engagement and governance arrangements in regard to the activities covered by the pooled budget.
- Engagement with citizens and service users is carried out using a variety of methods, including a range of survey techniques (online, paper, face to face) and sampling techniques. The Council also uses qualitative techniques, such as focus and discussion groups. During 2019/20 the Council consulted on a range of issues, which included:
 - Electric Car Charging Stations
 - Community Centre satisfaction
 - Crucial Crew (child safety events)
 - Library user's satisfaction
 - Local Plan
 - Reading in Children
- In setting its budget the Council listens to the views of the public and the experience of elected members through their ward work. Individual consultations took place in respect of specific budget proposals and equality impact assessments were completed where necessary.

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

SUPPORTING PRINCIPLES

- Defining outcomes
- Sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits

EXAMPLES OF HOW WE DID THIS IN 2019/20:

- The long-term vision for Halton is set out in the Council's Corporate Plan, which defines the Council's priorities and how it hopes to achieve them. It also explains the Council's values and principles.
- The Council's Corporate Planning Framework provides the means by which the Council's activities are developed and monitored. Quarterly performance monitoring reports were produced during the year recording progress against key business plan objectives and targets. These were reported to the Council's Management Team, to the Executive Board and to the Policy and Performance Boards.
- Directorate Business Plans were produced for 2019/20 that described key developments and emerging issues relating to each department of the Council. The plans formally set out key objectives, milestones and measures for each business area.
- The Executive Board approved the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) at its meeting on 14 November 2019. The MTFS represents the "finance guidelines" that form part of the medium term corporate planning process. These guidelines identify the financial constraints which the Council will face in delivering its key objectives, and are an important influence on the development of the Corporate Plan, Service Plans and Strategies.
- The Council routinely publishes information on the Council's vision, strategy, plans, finances and performance on its website and in the Council newspaper that is distributed to all households in the borough.

Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes

SUPPORTING PRINCIPLES

- Determining interventions
- Planning interventions
- Optimising achievement of intended outcomes

EXAMPLES OF HOW WE DID THIS IN 2019/20:

- The Council's Corporate Planning Framework in operation during the year provided the means by which the Council's activities were developed and monitored.
- There is a well-established overview and scrutiny framework with six Policy and Performance Boards (PPBs) aligned to the Council's six corporate plan priorities. Throughout the year they held the Executive to account, scrutinised performance and developed policy proposals for consideration by the Executive.
- Quarterly performance monitoring reports were produced throughout the year recording progress against key business plan objectives and targets. These reports were presented to the Council's Management Team, to the Executive Board and to the Policy and Performance Boards.
- The Council operates a corporate complaints procedure and specific complaints procedures for Adult Social Care, Children's Social Care, schools and complaints relating to elected members. These procedures allow the Council to identify areas where things may have gone wrong and to put them right and prevent them from happening again.
- The Council aims to ensure that the purchase or commissioning of goods, services or works required to deliver services is acquired under Best Value terms. The Council's procurement activity is undertaken in line with the Council's Procurement Strategy, which was updated in 2019/20, and within clearly defined rules set out in Procurement Standing Orders.
- The Council's internal audit team carries out a comprehensive programme of audits each year reviewing the Council's front line and support services. The implementation of recommendations arising from this work assists the Council in identifying and managing risks that may impact on the achievement of outcomes.

Developing the Council's capacity, including capability of its leadership and the individuals within it

SUPPORTING PRINCIPLES

- Developing capacity
- Developing leadership
- Developing the capability of individuals

EXAMPLES OF HOW WE DID THIS IN 2019/20:

- The Council retained the NW Charter for Elected Member Development Exemplar Level status. Newly elected members attend a two-day induction programme with follow-up mentoring. Elected members were also provided with the opportunity for an annual review to identify their development requirements, which are set out in a Member Action Plan.
- A comprehensive elected member development programme provided a wide range of learning and development opportunities.
- Members of the Business Efficiency Board received regular training throughout the year to assist them in their role as the Council's Audit Committee.
- The Council's Organisational Development Strategy (2016 – 2020), includes an Organisational Development Charter. The Strategy confirms the Council's commitment to the ethos that its workforce will be part of the solution to providing excellent services.
- The Council operates ongoing processes to identify the personal development needs of employees. The information gained from these processes is used to inform the design of the corporate training programme and to source specialised professional training.
- The Council's Organisational Development Team offers continuous leadership development through its accreditation with ILM (City & Guilds). Specific qualifications have been delivered during 2019/20, such as Level 3 and Level 5 in Leadership and Management. As a result, 24 employees continue to develop skills and knowledge regarding leadership and gain recognised qualifications.
- The Council has introduced Leadership and Management Framework during 2019/20 to ensure continuous development of the senior leadership team, and have identified specific learning needs to ensure contemporary approaches are utilised.
- The Council offer its employees the opportunity to apply for funding to support their academic development that is linked to the Council's priorities thereby increasing individual capacity and supporting succession planning. During 2019/20, the Council supported 18 employees to gain a variety of academic qualifications, such as Masters Degrees, BA Degrees and Diplomas.
- The Council is maximising the Apprenticeship Levy by commissioning 10 MSc in Leadership & Management qualifications to employees that will support leadership succession planning as identified in the Organisational Development Strategy.

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

SUPPORTING PRINCIPLES

- Managing risk
- Managing performance
- Robust Internal Control
- Managing data
- Strong Public Financial Management

EXAMPLES OF HOW WE DID THIS IN 2019/20:

- The Council provides decision-makers with full and timely access to relevant information. The executive report template requires information to be provided explaining the policy, financial and risk implications of decisions, as well as implications for each of the corporate priorities and any equality and diversity implications.
- The Council has a well-established Audit Committee (the Business Efficiency Board), which met regularly during 2019/20. The Board has clearly defined responsibilities and provides oversight and challenge in regard to the Council's governance, risk management, audit, procurement and counter fraud and corruption arrangements.
- The Council has embedded risk management arrangements. Directorate and corporate risk registers outline the key risks faced by the Council, including their impact and likelihood, along with the relevant mitigating controls and actions. The annual review and update of the Corporate Risk Register was approved by the Business Efficiency Board on 24 July 2019. The Council's risk management processes are also used to inform the work of internal audit.
- The Council has a Head of Internal Audit and a continuous internal audit service, which was assessed during the year as conforming to the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards. Internal audit plays a key role in reviewing and improving the effectiveness of the Council's risk management, governance and control arrangements.
- Despite significant funding reductions and increasing demand for services the Council managed to set a balanced budget for 2020/21 via a robust process led by the Members' Budget Working Group. Outturn spending was higher than the 2019/20 revenue budget, primarily due to continuing pressures within Adults and Children's Social Care and shortfalls in income across a range of service areas. The position was monitored throughout the year through reports to Management Team, the relevant Policy and Performance Boards and Executive Board. Effective action was taken to mitigate the level of overspend.

Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit to deliver effective accountability

SUPPORTING PRINCIPLES

- Implementing good practice in transparency
- Implementing good practice in reporting
- Assurance and effective accountability

EXAMPLES OF HOW WE DID THIS IN 2019/20:

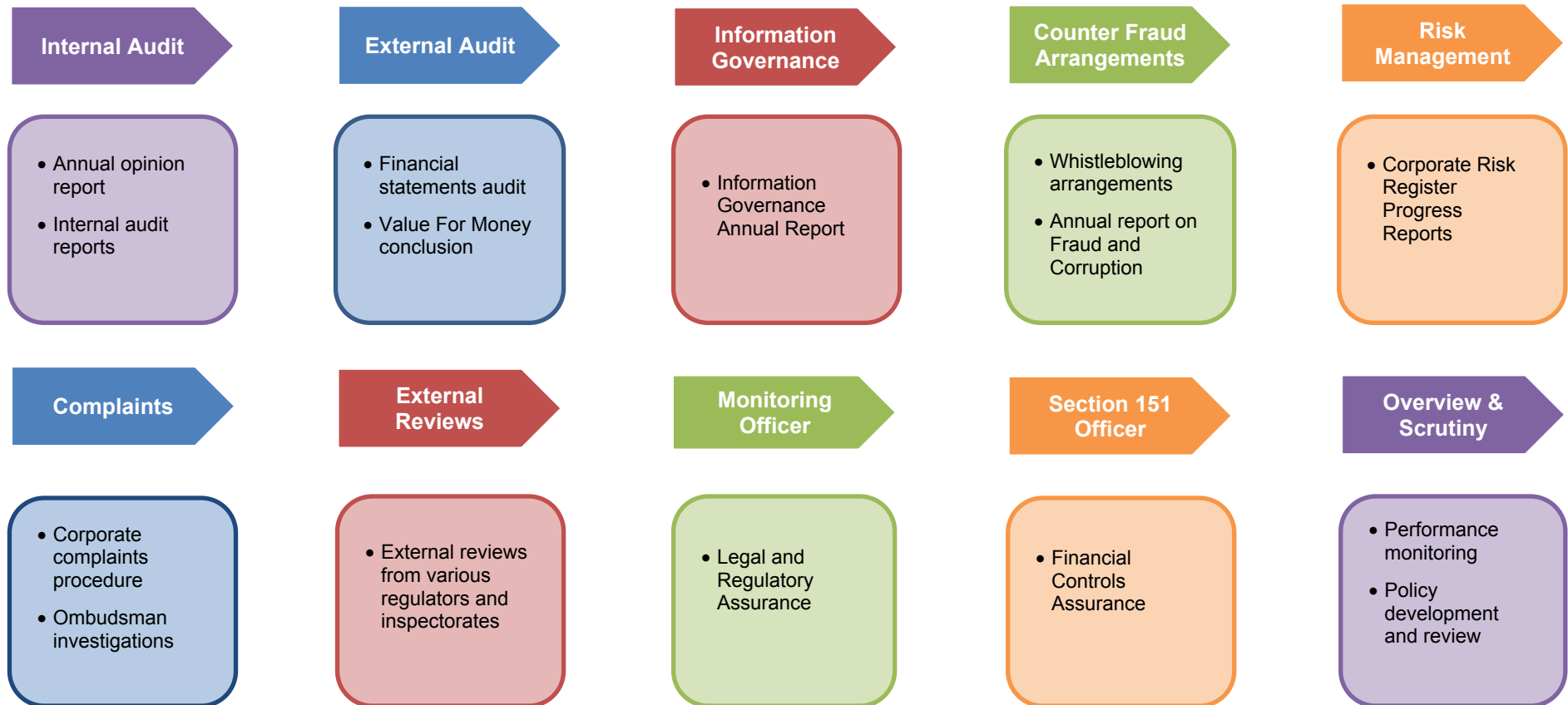
- The Council fully complies with the Local Government Transparency Code 2015 and publishes a wide range of information on its website. This includes details of meetings, minutes and agendas, policies and plans, the Council Constitution, the Statement of Accounts, details of members' allowances and expenses (including the outcome of the independent triennial review of the Members' Allowance Scheme which took place during the year), details of senior staff pay, contract awards, and details of land and building assets.
- The Council operates clear and effective processes for dealing with Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and Subject Access Requests (SAR).
- All Council meetings are open and can be attended by members of the public with the exception of those where confidential or personal matters may be disclosed. Arrangements have also been put in place for members of the public to attend virtual meetings in 2020/21.
- The Council's external auditor provides an annual assessment on how well the Council is managing and using its resources to deliver value for money and better and sustainable outcomes for local people.
- The Council has developed robust procedures to respond positively to the findings and recommendations of external auditors and statutory inspectors. Action plans are developed in response to external inspections and their implementation monitored.
- The Council has established various ongoing arrangements that provide effective assurance. These include the work of internal audit, the Council's risk and performance management arrangements, the work of the Information Governance Group, the work of the Policy and Performance Boards and the work of the Standards Committee.
- The Council operates a whistleblowing procedure and has well-publicised arrangements for employees and the wider community to raise any concerns.

What are the roles of those responsible for developing and maintaining the Governance Framework?

<p>Council</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Approves the Corporate Plan - Approves the Constitution - Approves the policy and budgetary framework
<p>Executive Board</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The main decision-making body of the Council - Comprises ten members who have responsibility for particular portfolios
<p>Business Efficiency Board</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Designated as the Council's Audit Committee - Provides assurance to the Council on the effectiveness of its governance arrangements, risk management framework, procurement strategy and internal control environment.
<p>Standards Committee</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promotes high standards of member conduct - Assists members and co-opted members to observe the Council's Member Code of Conduct
<p>Policy & Performance Boards</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are six Policy & Performance Boards aligned to the Council's six Corporate Plan priorities - They hold the Executive to account, scrutinise performance and develop policy proposals for consideration by the Executive
<p>Management Team</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implements the policy and budgetary framework set by the Council and provides advice to the Executive Board and the Council on the development of future policy and budgetary issues - A wider management group has been meeting since March to manage the Council's response to the Covid-19.
<p>Internal Audit</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provides assurance over the Council's governance, risk management and control framework - Delivers an annual programme of audits - Makes recommendations for improvements in the management of risk and value for money
<p>Managers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Responsible for maintaining and developing the Council's governance and control framework - Contribute to the effective corporate management and governance of the Council

How does the Council monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of its governance arrangements?

The Council annually reviews the effectiveness of its governance framework including the system of internal control. The key sources of assurance that inform this review are outlined below:



How has the Council addressed the governance issues from 2018/19?

The 2018/19 annual governance statement contained three key governance issues. Details of these issues and how they were addressed are provided below:

What the issue was:

Funding

The Council continued to face significant funding reductions whilst demand for Council services is increasing, which had resulted in a 2020/21 budget gap of approximately £4.4m.

A key challenge for the Council was therefore to maintain both sufficient front-line and support service capacity and robust governance arrangements in order to continue to deliver its corporate objectives and strategic priorities for 2020/21 and beyond.

What we did:

The Member's Budget Working Group met regularly during 2019/20 to consider budget saving proposals in the context of the Council's corporate objectives and strategic priorities. Fundamental to the Budget Working Group's assessment was a desire to protect the Borough's most vulnerable residents and the services provided to them.

Despite significant funding constraints and increasing demand for services, resulting in the need to make significant budget savings, the Council was able to set a balanced budget for 2020/21.

What the issue was:

Peer Review

The Council invited the Local Government Association to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge of the Council in September 2019. The focus of the Peer Challenge was on improvement.

The feedback report issued following the Peer Review was positive and noted that the Council's achievements have been and continue to be significant. However, the report also recognised the challenges faced by the Council in terms of increasing service demand and the difficult financial context. The report contained eleven recommendations aimed to help the Council develop so that it can continue to operate and deliver in a sustainable way.

What we did:

An action plan in response to the Peer Review was submitted to the Council's Executive Board on 19 March 2020 and approved at that meeting. Some of the actions were to be undertaken in the short-term, whilst others were deemed matters for the "new Council" scheduled to be elected in all-out elections in May 2020. The global pandemic has seen the May 2020 all-out elections postponed and the Council direct all its efforts and protecting Halton's Community. The action plan and its delivery has therefore also been postponed but will be reviewed in 2020-21 in the light of the new circumstances at the time.

What the issue was:

Corporate Priorities

The Council is reviewing both its Corporate Plan and priorities with support and challenge from the Local Government Association. It is doing this in the light of the financial challenges it continues to face. It will test whether its existing Corporate Plan is still fit for purpose and whether it still reflects the political priorities of the Council.

What we did:

The members completed initial work in this area, facilitated by the Local Government Association, which concluded that the existing priorities of the Council were still relevant and reflective of the challenges facing the Borough. The further development of this work has however been delayed as a result of the COVID pandemic.

What the issue was:

Ward Boundary Review

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England completed an Electoral Review of the Council, which resulted in a recommendation the Council should consist of 54 councillors - a reduction from the current 56.

The Commission also recommended that the 54 councillors should represent 18 wards rather than the current 21. It was therefore proposed that there would be nine wards in Runcorn and nine wards in Widnes with each ward having three members representing it.

What we did:

These new ward boundary arrangements were subsequently approved by Parliament. The intention was that all 54 Council seats would be contested in the election that was due to take place on 7 May 2020 based on the new boundaries.

However, Section 60 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 postponed various local government elections in England that were due to be held on 7 May 2020 until 6 May 2021.

What are the governance issues for 2020/21?

The Council is satisfied that its corporate governance arrangements are adequate and operating effectively and there are no significant issues that need to be addressed. However, the Council's governance arrangements are kept under constant review and the following Action Plan sets out key areas of focus for the Council in maintaining and developing its governance arrangements in 2020/21.

Issue	Lead Officer	Timescale
<p><u>Funding</u></p> <p>The Council continues to face significant funding reductions whilst demand for Council services, particularly within Social Care is rising and there are income shortfalls across many service areas. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation, along with huge uncertainty regarding the Government's plans for the future funding of local government.</p> <p>This makes financial planning extremely difficult at the current time. However, the Medium Term Financial Strategy forecasts that the Council may need to identify £13m of budget savings in order to set a balanced budget for 2021/22. In light of these financial pressures, a key challenge for the Council is to maintain sufficient service capacity and robust governance arrangements in order to continue to deliver its corporate objectives and strategic priorities for 2021/22 and beyond.</p>	<p>Strategic Director – Enterprise, Community & Resources</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>

Issue	Lead Officer	Timescale
<p><u>Decision-making</u></p> <p>The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to unforeseen challenges in terms of the Council’s decision-making processes and its traditional meeting structure, with elements of normal decision-making processes of the Council being suspended.</p> <p>Arrangements were already in place providing the Chief Executive with emergency delegated powers in consultation with the Leader of the Council, Monitoring Officer and s151 Officer as appropriate. In accordance with the Local Government Transparency Code 2014, a formal notification record of officer decisions has been maintained to record decisions taken and ensure transparency.</p>	Chief Executive	Already implemented
<p><u>Elected Member meetings</u></p> <p>The Coronavirus Act 2020 enables all local authority meetings before 7 May 2021 to be held remotely and removed the requirement for the annual Council meeting in 2020. The Council has made arrangements for all its Boards and Committees to meet on a virtual basis for the foreseeable future.</p> <p>From September 2020, the Council is to revert to the usual cycle of meetings. This will ensure that key executive decisions will be made by Elected Members, and that they will be subject to the formal scrutiny arrangements of the Council. This will replace the emergency arrangements that have been in place and restore the usual governance arrangements of the Council.</p> <p>To support this process, Microsoft Teams is to be made available for Members and those officers who support the Boards and Committees from September.</p>	Ian Leivesley – Strategic Director, Enterprise, Community & Resources	September 2020

Issue	Lead Officer	Timescale
<p><u>COVID-19 Response</u></p> <p>The Council has experienced significant organisational disruption as a result of COVID-19 with all Council services being affected. Business continuity arrangements have seen much of the workforce working from home and resources being redeployed to support essential frontline services.</p> <p>Throughout the response period the Council has given priority to maintaining effective governance arrangements. Major incident response practices, developed for such situations, have been implemented and helped the Council to adapt, at pace, to new challenges and new responsibilities.</p> <p>Through the Council’s partnerships across Cheshire and the Liverpool City Region, and as part of the Cheshire Resilience Forum, the Council has worked to deliver a co-ordinated regional response. Working with local health partners, emergency services and the military, the Council has put in place robust local testing arrangements and established arrangements to prevent and manage local outbreaks.</p> <p>The Council has prioritised supporting the most vulnerable in the community. Critical services have been maintained. Through the ‘shielded hub’ the Council has provided food, medicine and support. Accommodation has been secured for homeless individuals and families. The Council has worked with social care providers to look after people living in residential and nursing homes or in receipt of domiciliary care. Waste collection services have continued to run to normal timetables.</p> <p>The Council has also been the conduit to deliver various Government schemes and provided advice to local businesses to help them survive and protect local jobs.</p> <p>Recovery planning is now underway which will help to strengthen the Council’s resilience and business continuity arrangements, and also inform and shape the way that services are delivered in the future.</p>	<p>Chief Executive</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>

Issue	Lead Officer	Timescale
<p><u>2018-19 Audit of Accounts</u></p> <p>There has been a significant delay in the finalisation and external audit of the Council's 2018/19 statement of accounts. A number of issues have arisen during the audit process. In the main these centred on the valuation and accounting treatment for the Mersey Gateway bridge project, which is highly complex and unique in nature. Other issues arose regarding the accounting treatment of items which had been agreed for previous accounting periods but have been reconsidered.</p> <p>The recommendations set out in the 2018/19 Audit Findings report will be fully implemented. The Council will continue to work closely with the External Auditors to improve processes, communications and arrangements for preparing the financial statements for 2019/20 and beyond, to ensure they are prepared in accordance with the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting.</p>	Operational Director, Finance	Ongoing

Certification

We have been advised on the implications of the review of the effectiveness of the governance framework by the Business Efficiency Board. The review provides good overall assurance that the Council's arrangements continue to be regarded as fit for purpose in accordance with the governance framework.

Specific opportunities to maintain or develop the Council's governance arrangements have been identified through this review. We pledge our commitment to addressing these issues over the coming year and we will monitor their implementation and operation as part of our next annual review.

Signed on behalf of Halton Borough Council:

David Parr - Chief Executive

Rob Polhill - Leader of the Council