

Appendix C - Annual Governance Statement

1. Scope of Responsibility

Dudley Metropolitan Borough 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, and which includes arrangements for the management of risk.

The Council is in the process of approving and adopting a Code of Corporate Governance, which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework Delivering Good Governance in Local Government. A copy of the Code will be placed on the website. This statement explains how the Council 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. This refers to the publication of a statement on internal control, which has now been superseded by the annual governance statement.

2. 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 achievements 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 systems 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.

A governance framework has been in place at the Council for the year ended 31 March 2008 and up to the date of approval of the statement of accounts.

3. The Governance Framework

The cornerstone of the governance framework is the Council's Constitution, which sets out how the Council operates, how decisions are made and the procedures that are followed to ensure that these are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people. Some of these processes are required by the law, while others are a matter for the Council to determine. The Council's Constitution also contains detailed codes and protocols, such as Standing Orders (defining how contracts must be let) and Financial Regulations (setting out procedures and principles for proper financial management).

In identifying and communicating the authority's vision of its purpose and intended outcomes for citizens and services users, the Council engages with all parts of the community and has developed a Community Engagement Strategy and Council Plan, which are published to all residents of the Borough via the Internet. The Council's most important objectives are consolidated in the Council Plan, which now incorporates an assurance framework whereby the key objectives of the Council now include formal consideration and documentation of any risks which might prevent objectives being achieved.

In reviewing the authority's vision and its implications for the authority's governance arrangements, the Council carries out an annual review of the Council Plan to ensure it remains focused on current and long term issues. The Constitution is reviewed at least annually to ensure the governance framework is fit for purpose.

In measuring the quality of services for users, ensuring they are delivered in accordance with the authority's objectives and ensuring that they represent the best use of resources the Council uses a Corporate Performance Management system. This is monitored by Corporate Board and Cabinet each quarter. Each Directorate will also set, and monitor, quality of service measures for each service as part of the Corporate Strategic Planning framework.

The Council recognises it has a legal duty to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources and continuous improvement in its services. This duty is recognised in establishing the Council's policy agenda. The Council has also entered into a Local Area Agreement with the Government that covers priority targets where the Council aims to improve services faster than normal

Effective financial management is an essential aspect of the Council's governance framework. This is achieved in particular through :-

- a. Comprehensive revenue and capital budgeting and reporting systems
- b. A medium term financial planning process
- c. Regular reporting and monitoring of actual performance against forecast;

The Constitution defines and documents the roles and responsibilities of the Cabinet, other Member Committees and senior officer functions, with clear delegation arrangements. The key senior officers identified in the Constitution include statutory positions :-

- a. Head of the Paid Service (Chief Executive) must ensure that the Council is properly organised and staffed
- b. Monitoring Officer (Director of Law and Property) must ensure the lawfulness and fairness of decision-making
- c. Chief Finance Officer (Director of Finance) must ensure the lawfulness and financial prudence of decision-making. The Director of Finance is also responsible for the proper administration of the Council's financial affairs.

Responsibility for developing, communicating and embedding codes of conduct, which define the standards of behaviour for members and staff has been delegated to the Standards Committee.

Responsibility for reviewing and updating all elements of the Constitution have been delegated to senior officers e.g. the Monitoring Officer has responsibility for operating the Scheme of Delegation.

The Audit Committee annually endorses the Risk Management Strategy which now incorporates a Risk Assurance Protocol which will require Senior Officers to regularly certify that the assurance framework has been reviewed and mitigating controls are operating as intended. The results are reported in the Quarterly Performance Management report.

The Council has an Audit Committee with a remit to oversee the effective operation of both the internal and external audit function, and to ensure that appropriate action is taken in relation to audit recommendations. There are also Select Committees that carry out a programme of reviews of Council services and decisions.

External Audit conduct annual audits of the Council and external inspectorates perform a number of reviews of Council services. All of these bodies contribute to the Council's governance framework.

There is also a statutory requirement for the Council to have an adequate and effective internal audit function, a responsibility delegated to the Director of Finance. Internal Audit operates in accordance with the Code of Practice for Internal Audit in Local Government and is under the day-to-day control of the Head of Audit Services who acts independently. Internal Audit's primary role is to independently review and report on whether risks facing the Council are effectively managed and controlled. It has a rolling programme of audits that, over a period of years, is intended to review all areas of major risk within the Council. The priority of different areas of the programme is determined by

Internal Audit's own assessment of risks [including the Corporate Risk Register] and controls. Audit Plans are approved by the Audit Committee.

The Account and Audit Regulations 2006 introduced a new requirement for the Council to conduct a review at least once a year of the effectiveness of its system of internal audit and that the findings of the review shall be considered by a committee of the relevant body. The Head of Audit Services has carried out the review and it has been subject to review by the Director of Finance, Corporate Control Group and Audit Committee. The review determined that Audit Services is operating effectively. The Audit Committee has also undertaken an exercise to judge its own effectiveness using a toolkit supplied by CIPFA. It concluded that it was operating effectively.

The Council operates a Confidential Reporting Policy for use by staff and contractors, and the Standards Committee monitors the use of the Policy. The Council also operates a complaints system for the public and the use of the system is monitored by Senior Officers and Members.

The Council has a comprehensive performance review system for identifying the development needs of senior officers and action plans are produced as appropriate.

The new Code of Conduct also requires all political groups to identify any development needs of Members and a comprehensive training programme is available to meet their needs.

The Partnership Working & Consultation Group is working to ensure there are good governance arrangements in respect of partnerships.

4. Review of Effectiveness

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 Members and Senior Officers within the Council who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, the Head of Audit Services Annual Report, and also by comments made by the external auditors and other review agencies and inspectorates

During 2007/08 Audit Services carried out approximately 212 planned audit reviews as part of their four-year strategic plan. The findings were reported to relevant line managers and senior management, and appropriate action agreed.

The Audit Committee receives an annual report summarising the performance of Audit Services in the previous financial year, and plans for future years. The Committee also receives a series of reports setting out the results of Audit Services work in each of the Council's Directorates. These reports detail the higher importance findings, any unimplemented recommendations, and

management feedback about the action they have taken. The Committee also receives more detailed reports on other areas where they consider it necessary. The Director of Finance will, under the Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy, report major losses, resulting from fraud and corruption, to the Audit Committee. No such reports were made during 2007/2008.

When the Audit Commission have completed their external audit for 2007/08, their Annual Audit and Inspection Letter will be presented to the Audit Committee and the Cabinet. The Annual Audit and Inspection Letter for the 2006/07 accounts included a number of key messages :-

- a. The Council has achieved a four star rating in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment
- b. The Council continues to manage its resources effectively
- c. Presented an unqualified opinion on the accounts
- d. There is a sound performance management framework

The four star rating on the Comprehensive Performance Assessment included a review of the Council's "Use of Resources" which covers the following areas :-

- a. Financial reporting
- b. Financial management
- c. Financial standing
- d. Internal control
- e. Value for money

The Audit Commission assessment was that we had achieved a 3 star rating.

A number of other external bodies carried out reviews during the year, including the Adult Learning Inspectorate, Ofsted and the Commission for Social Care Inspection. The findings of their reports were also considered.

The Council's five Select Committees also carried out an extensive programme of reviews of the Council's activities and decisions, and they report their work and findings to the Council.

The Partnership Working & Consultation Group has committed to developing tools and guides for partnerships to enhance the provision of governance information and assessments.

In carrying out its review of the governance framework, the Council has considered the evidence provided by all of the sources referred to above and has not identified any serious deficiencies that would warrant mention in Section 5 of this report. We aim to ensure continuous improvement of the framework is in place.

5. Significant Governance Issues

Whilst the review of evidence has not identified any significant issues it is considered appropriate to provide an update on some issues.

The revised Code of Corporate Governance will require action on the part of Members and Senior Officers to ensure all commitments are achieved. We will also launch the Code on the Internet for the first time to allow the community to see our commitment to good corporate governance.

We are also committed to reviewing a number of the key governance documents including Standing Orders and Financial Regulations. There are plans to also cover the School versions of these documents.

We propose over the coming years to take steps to address the above matters 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

Councillor D.Caunt
Leader of the Council

A.Sparke
Chief Executive