

# Annual Governance Statement 2024/25

Wealden District Council

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# Executive Summary and Assurance Statement

We at Wealden District Council are committed to the effective and efficient delivery of the priorities set out in our Council Strategy to make a better Wealden for all.

The Annual Governance Statement provides an overview of our governance framework. It seeks to provide assurance on the effectiveness of these arrangements. and identifies areas for future improvement. This Statement is formally approved by the Council's Audit and Governance Committee on an annual basis.

As set out in this Statement, we have made significant progress in strengthening our governance arrangements during 2024/25. To the best of our knowledge, the governance arrangements in 2024/25 were robust and effective in identifying strengths, risks and opportunities. The details of priority areas for improvement in 2025/26 are included in this Statement. We are committed to delivering the actions identified and will monitor their implementation and report progress in the next Annual Governance Statement.



**Councillor James Partridge**
**Leader of the Council**

**Signed:**

**Date**: 23rd July 2025



**Trevor Scott**
**Chief Executive**

**Signed:**

**Date**: 23rd July 2025

# Purpose

- To fulfil the statutory requirement for each local authority to conduct a review of the effectiveness of the system of internal control and prepare an AGS each financial year.
- To ensure the AGS is consistent with our Local Code of Corporate Governance and the 7 Principles of Good Governance.
- To assess our governance arrangements, to identify areas of strength and weaknesses in internal controls
- To ensure our governance is fit for purpose and to demonstrate that there is a sound system of governance
- To outline our progress in 2024-25 and help us take further actions to improve governance for delivery in 2025-26

# What is Good Governance?

**Good governance in local authorities is key to ensuring the council does the right things in the right way for the right people**

**ETHICS**
It creates a culture based on openness, inclusivity and honesty

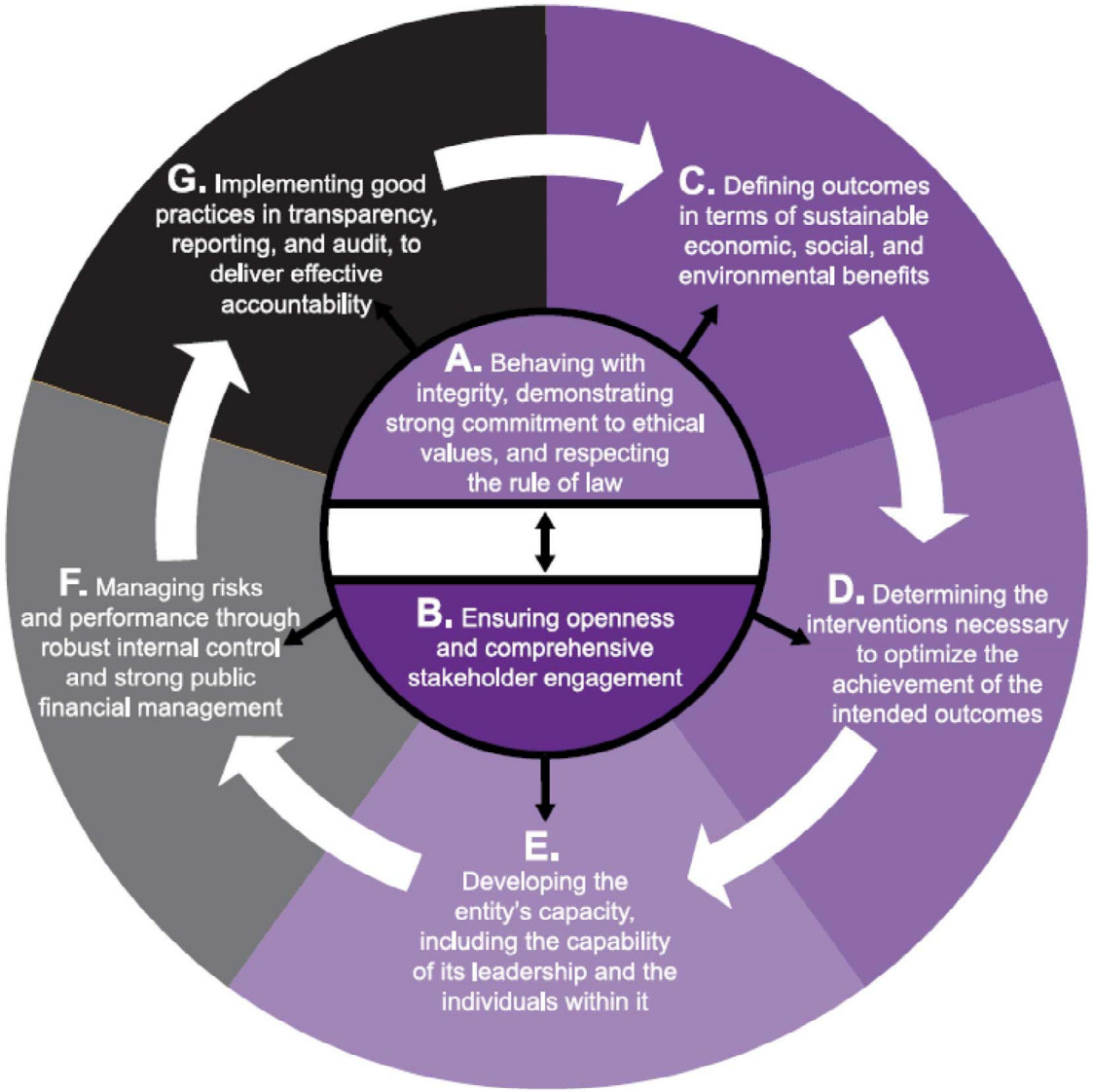
**ACCOUNTABILITY**
It puts the arrangements in place to ensure that the intended outcomes for stakeholders are defined and achieved

**BEST VALUE**
It ensures ongoing continuous improvement to further strengthen the way the council operates

**TRANSPARENCY**
It demonstrates effective leadership, including accountability and transparency in actions and decisions

**ASSURANCE**
It ensures robust systems and processes are established and followed

# The Seven Principles of Good Governance




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

B. Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

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

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

E. Developing the entity's capacity, including the capacity of its leadership and the individuals within it

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

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

'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework 2014' published by CIPFA/IFAC

## Local Code

Underpinning the Council's Governance and Assurance Framework is its Local Code of Corporate Governance ("Local Code"). The Local Code is consistent with the 7 Principles of Corporate Governance. This AGS should be read in conjunction with the Local Code.

Schedule 1 contains a self-assessment against the 7 Principles of Corporate Governance.

## Review of Effectiveness

The Governance and Assurance Framework has been in place for the year ended 31 March 2025 and up to the date of approval of the Statement of Accounts.

The Audit Manager's overall opinion on the framework of governance, risk management and control in operation during 2024/25 is that it was adequate and effective.

# Information considered when developing the AGS

- Local Code of Corporate Governance (based on 7 Principles of Good Governance)
- The Council's Constitution
- Council Corporate Risk Register
- Internal Audit Activity
- Internal Assurance Operating Framework (see Figure 1)
- External auditor's Findings and Recommendations
- Council Strategy
- Manager (SLT) Assurance feedback
- External Operating Assurance Framework (see Figure 2)

# Information considered when developing the AGS Continued

- Annual Complaints Performance and Service Improvement Report including Ombudsman Reports
- Corporate Governance Group Feedback
- Scrutiny and CAG Work Programmes
- English Devolution White Paper and MHCLG updates and feedback
- Performance Reporting
- Staff Survey and Briefings
- Annual Report on Counter Fraud Activity
- Outside Body Feedback
- External inspection outcomes

# Governance Framework – Internal Assurance

**Figure 1** - this figure sets out the key sources of internal assurance

**Corporate Management Team / Senior Leadership Team**

- Operational and strategic delivery
- Review of corporate performance, finance, risk reporting.
- Medium term financial strategy delivery
- Oversight of complaints
- Contributes to annual governance statement
- Contributes to internal / external audits
- Oversight of reports / decisions of Ombudsman / regulators and peer reviews
- Compliance with constitution

**Head of Paid Service**

- Oversight of corporate performance
- Overall management of staff for discharge of council functions
- Ensures all the council's functions are properly coordinated

**Monitoring Officer**

- Statutory reporting duty under section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989
- Oversight of arrangements for member decision making
- Principle advisor to Standards Committee
- Oversight of member conduct / standards arrangements
- Oversight of Constitution

**Section 151 Officer**

- Statutory reporting duty under section 114 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988
- Oversight of financial affairs to ensure proper administration

**Corporate Governance Group**

- Regular meetings of the "golden triangle" (comprising the three statutory officers)

**Head of Internal Audit**

- Prepare / implement annual internal audit plan
- Audit governance / risk / controls / policies / processes / reporting
- Internal audit quality assurance and improvement

**Performance reports to the Executive**

- Measure of delivery against performance indicators
- Considers applicable statutory reports

**Scrutiny and Performance**

- Acts as a critical friend and holds the Executive to account for decisions

**Audit and Governance**

- Provides an independent and high-level focus on the adequacy of governance, risk and control arrangements. This includes receiving internal and external audit reports.

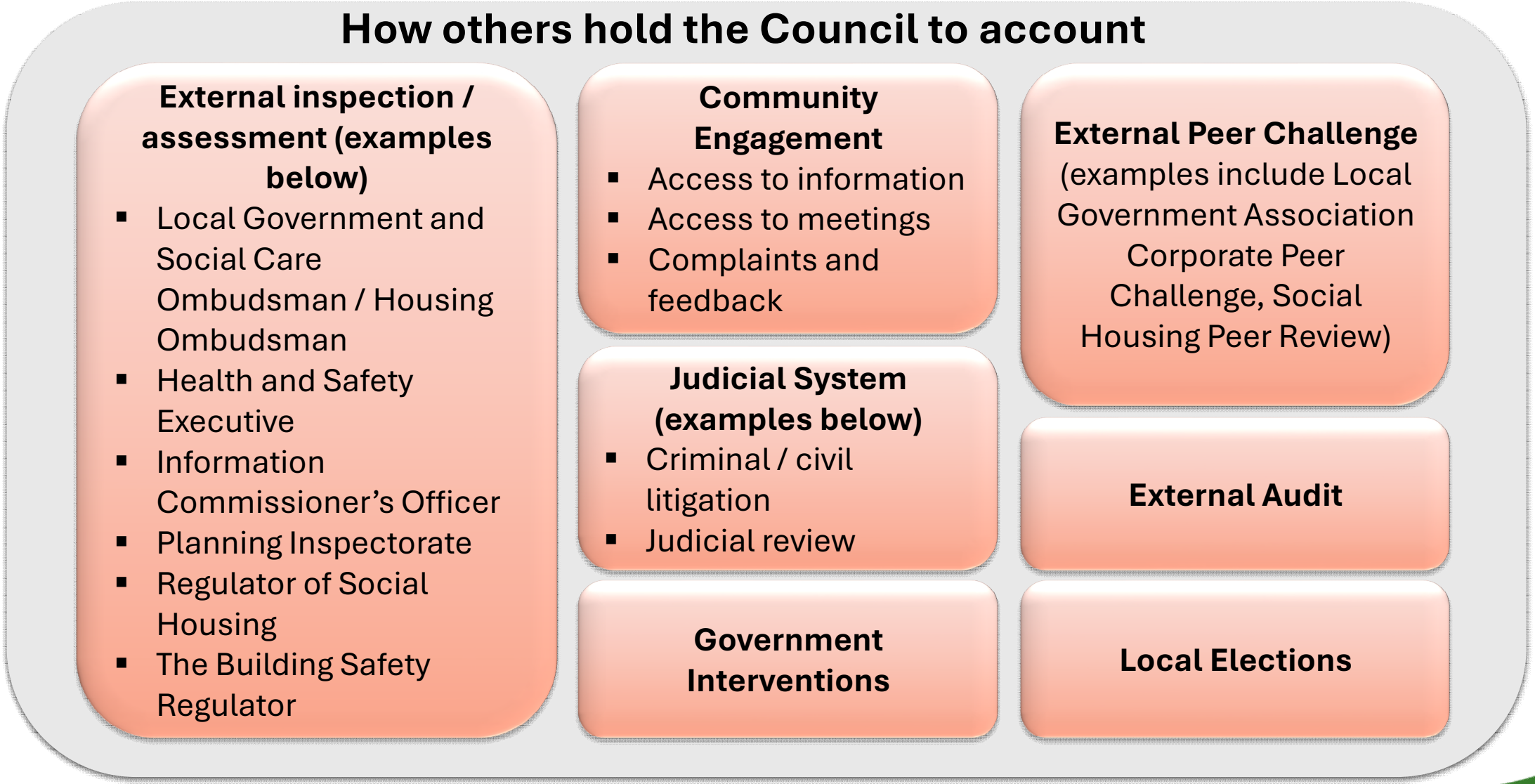
**Standards Committee**

- Promotes and maintains high standards of conduct by councillors

**Full Council**

- Accountability for governance and non-executive functions
- Approves the budget and policy framework.
- Considers applicable statutory and public interest reports.

**Figure 2** - this figure sets out the key sources of external assurance



# Key Areas Identified in the 2023/24 AGS to Strengthen Governance in 2024/25

## Business Continuity & Cyber and Information Security

**Update:** Significant progress – strengthening the organisation's cyber security posture and enhancing our business continuity planning. This includes ongoing work to improve resilience, ensure robust protections are in place and regularly review our preparedness to emerging threats. These efforts are part of our commitment to safeguarding the authority's operations and public services.

Establishment of Information Governance Framework and Panel.

Continues to be a key corporate risk.

## Recommendations from Corporate Peer Review (LGA 2024)

**Update:** Significant progress. Recommendations developed into Action Plan. Action Plan Update reported to Cabinet on Appendix D - LGA Peer Challenge Action Plan update.pdf

## Constitutional Review

**Update:** Completed and revised Constitution came into effect 1 June 2025.

# Governance Issues identified during 2024/25

## Local Government Pension Scheme

Issue identified with regards to the methodology for the calculation of assumed pensionable pay for employees.

Statutory Report of Monitoring Officer and Head of Organisational Development reported to Full Council on 20.11.24.

Pension Regulator notified and updated. Affected staff notified and updated. ECG consulted.

Subsequent oversight provided by the Audit, Finance and Governance Committee.

Working with Pension Administrator to produce corrected information alongside issuing of annual pension statement.

## Council Tax Collection

Issue identified with regards to the early collection of council tax and NDR direct debits in December 2024.

Investigation undertaken by Audit Manager and Reported to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 9.1.25 and Audit, Finance and Governance Committee on 22.1.25.

External Communications Review undertaken and report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 31.3.25 with recommendations supported and implementation ongoing.

# Key Actions Delivered in 2024/25 to Strengthen Governance

- New Whistleblowing & Speaking Up Policy
- Constitutional Review
- Councillor Development Strategy and Councillor Development Plan
- LGA Cyber 360 Review
- Implementation of LGA Corporate Peer Challenge recommendations
- Council Strategy Review
- Information Governance Framework and Panel
- Support for LGA Debate Not Hate Campaign
- Establishment of the Wealden Together Housing Board

# Action Plan for strengthening our governance in 2025/26

**The review process helps identify opportunities to improve the governance arrangements over the next twelve months as set out below.**

| Lead Area | Governance Matters Identified | Lead Officer |
|---|---|---|
| Corporate Governance | Review of the Transparency Code 2015 including reconciliation with the Procurement Act 2023 | Chief Financial Officer |
| Corporate Governance | Local Government Reorganisation - Work with government and local partners to ensure that transition arrangements follow good governance principles, and facilitate creation of an appropriate and well-governed new unitary authority | Chief Executive/ supported by CMT/SLT |
| Corporate Governance | Full review of Local Code of Corporate Governance against new CIPFA guidance on annual governance statements. | Monitoring Officer (MO) |
| Information Governance | Continued implementation of the Information Governance Framework. To include training and raising awareness to seek to minimise data breaches. | Information Governance Manager |

# Action Plan for 2025/26 continued.

| Lead Area | Governance Matters Identified | Lead Officer |
|---|---|---|
| Procurement | Review of Procurement Strategy | Procurement Business Partnership Manager |
| Human Resources | Review the People Strategy to reflect the emerging organisational priorities linked to devolution and local government reorganisation. Drive the workforce aspects of organisational change and development in preparation for local government reorganisation | Head of People & Organisational Development |
| Internal Audit | Reporting of outstanding internal audit recommendations to Audit and Governance Committee. | Audit Manager |
| Emergency Planning | Comprehensive review of Business Continuity Plans and implementation of the new Cyber Incident Security Response Plan | Head of Waste and Customer Services (EP lead) |
| Investigations | Complete review of the Anti-Fraud and Anti-Corruption Strategy | Investigations Manager |

# Schedule 1 – Self Assessment

Schedule 1 contains a self-assessment for 2024/25 against the 7 Core Principles of Corporate Governance.