

AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

DATE	25th July 2024
REPORT OF	Executive Director, Place and Resources
SUBJECT	CIPFA Financial Management Code of Practice
STATUS	Open

CONTRIBUTION TO OUR AIMS

The Council has two clear strategic priorities – Stronger Economy and Stronger Communities. In order to achieve these priorities, the Council needs to have robust financial management arrangements which support long-term financial sustainability, good governance and the delivery of value for money.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy ('CIPFA') Financial Management Code (the 'Code') sets out the standards of financial management for local government bodies. The attached self-assessment (Appendix 1 & Appendix 2) outlines how the Council meets the requirements of the Code.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Audit and Governance Committee:

- 1) Note the requirement to adhere to the Code
- 2) Consider the findings within the updated self-assessment

REASONS FOR DECISION

The report is important in informing the Audit and Governance Committee of the CIPFA Financial Management Code and the Council's compliance against the expectations outlined within it.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy ('CIPFA') Financial Management Code (The 'Code') came into effect from 1st April 2021. The Code sets out the standards of financial management expected for local government bodies. The Code is designed to support good practice in financial management and to assist local authorities to demonstrate financial sustainability.

The Code was introduced in light of the exceptional financial pressures faced by local authorities in recent years and the challenges for some organisations to maintain services in the future. CIPFA's expectation is that the Code has the same standing as the Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities.

The Code outlines CIPFA's understanding of how the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) should satisfy their statutory responsibility for good financial administration. However CIPFA also considers the application of the Code to be the collective responsibility of the Council's leadership (elected members and senior officers).

Overall, the Council self-assessment indicates that the Council is compliant against the underlying six principles of the code. However areas of improvement have been

identified as part of the assessment.

The six principles and seventeen financial management standards are summarised in Appendix 1.

The self-assessment has concluded that:

- The Council has strong financial leadership and management which is underpinned by a clear financial strategy. The qualified VFM conclusion, as a result of issues within Children's services, have been acknowledged and progress on the identified improvement plan is now being demonstrated. (NB. A qualified opinion arises in all cases where an inadequate Ofsted judgement is present).
- Through the Council's system of internal control, there is a clear accountability framework in place for budgetary control with regular and clear financial reporting. A more integrated approach to finance and performance reporting was implemented during 2023/24, with continued emphasis on clear alignment between business plans and financial benefits during 2024/25.
- There is good engagement through the financial planning process which is underpinned by an integrated budget and business planning process.
- The Council complies with the CIPFA code for capital finance in local authorities and its statutory obligations in respect of budget setting. The Council has a clear and affordable capital investment strategy which is underpinned by robust business development framework. Ongoing challenging economic conditions have been acknowledged.
- Challenge and review processes are embedded through the audit and governance committee, scrutiny and the internal business case processes.
- Financial challenges linked to increasing social care demand are acknowledged and the Council's ability to deal with these challenges will be informed by the outcome of the new Local Government funding model, the conclusion of which has been further delayed by central government.

The detailed findings of the self-assessment against the 17 Financial Management Standards are detailed in Appendix 2.

2. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The key risks and opportunities are detailed within Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

3. OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

Councils are expected to demonstrate how they have complied with the Code.

4. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

The financial environment in which the Council is operating remains challenging and significant financial issues are communicated externally through a variety of media.

5. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

As set out in the report.

6. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

Strong financial management arrangements are necessary to manage the Council's resources including those allocated towards Children and Young people.

7. CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

No direct implications although climate change and environmental considerations are considered as part of all financial and resourcing decisions.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

As set out within the report

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

The Council is required by the Local Government Act 2003, and other statutory provisions, to have proper regard to accounting and other practices.

By meeting the requirements of the Financial Management Code, the Council can demonstrate that it has efficient arrangements in place for the proper administration of the Council's financial affairs.

10. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS

No direct implications although human resource decisions are considered as part of all resource decisions.

11. WARD IMPLICATIONS

All wards affected

12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Budget Finance and Commissioning Plan 2024/25 – 2026/27

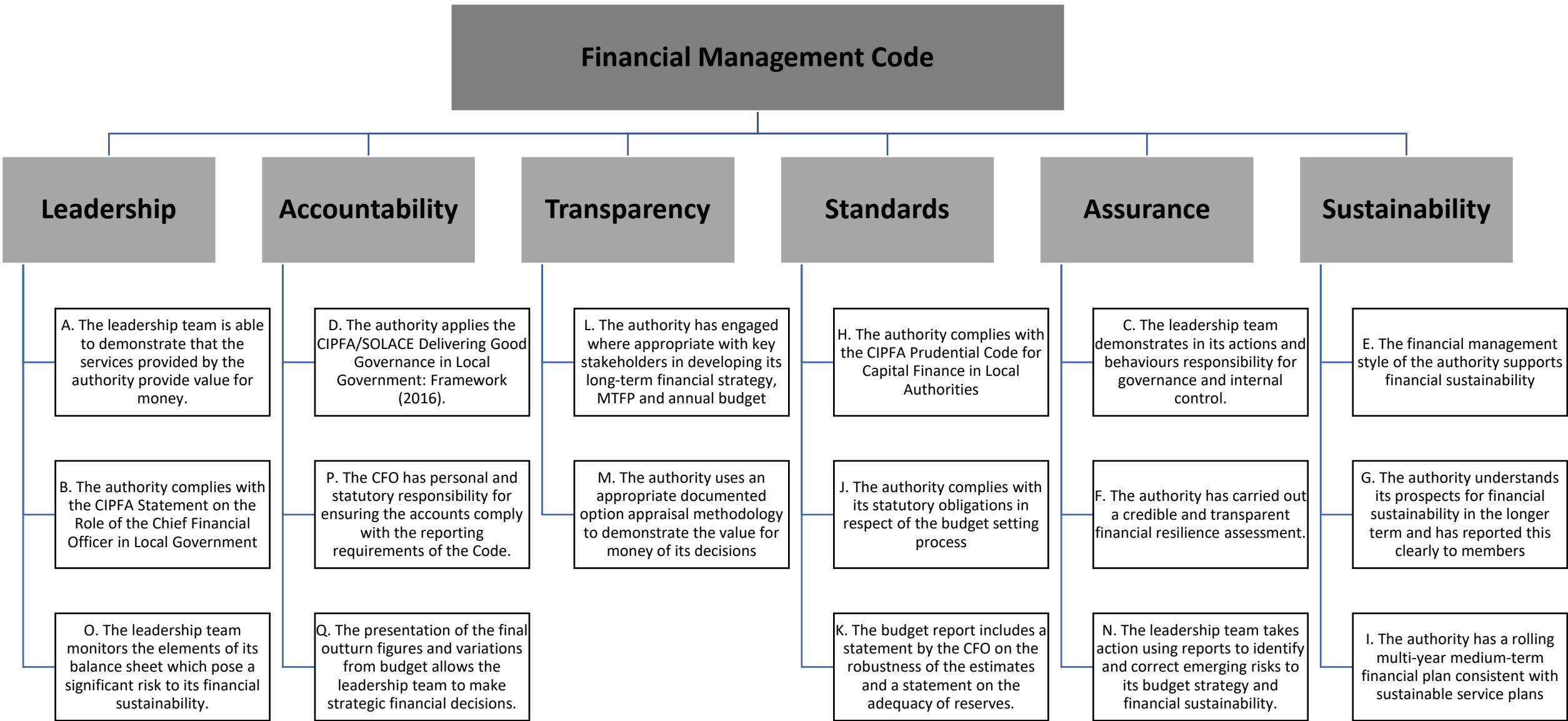
[5-Budget-Finance-and-Commissioning-PlanPDF-4592KBicon-namepaperclip-prefixfa.pdf \(nelincs.gov.uk\)](#)

13. CONTACT OFFICER(S)

Guy Lonsdale, Assistant Director of Finance (Deputy S151 Officer)

SHARON WROOT
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PLACE AND RESOURCES

Appendix 1 - Summary



APPENDIX 1 - CIPFA Financial Management Code of Practice (Self Assessment)

SECTION 1 The responsibilities of the chief finance officer and leadership team		Expected	Assessment
Standard A	The leadership team is able to demonstrate that the services provided by the authority provide value for money.	The delivery of value for money will ultimately be dependent on decisions made by elected members. It is for the leadership team to ensure that the authority’s governance arrangements and style of financial management promote financial sustainability. The leadership team must recognise that while statutory responsibility for the financial management of the authority rests with the CFO, the CFO is reliant on the actions of the leadership team, both collectively and individually as elected members and senior officers. A situation in which the CFO is forced to act in isolation is characteristic of authorities in which financial management has failed and financial sustainability is threatened. Equally, the CFO must ensure that they fulfil their personal legal and professional responsibilities in the public interest and in recognition of the other statutory service responsibilities of the authority. In the leadership team the CFO must provide timely, relevant and reliable financial advice, in accordance with the law and professional standards.	A Business Development Group comprised of managers from key disciplines and with appropriate skills, review and consider all outline and full Business Cases for revenue, external funding and capital and assess against a set of key tests covering strategic fit, financial impact, and risks. Highlight reports on key topics are received by Assistant Directors Group. Reports detailing the current years financial position in respect of Revenue & Capital is regularly shared with the Leadership team. A Major Projects Board oversees the progression of all large and complex programmes.
			Intelligence throughout budget planning including the production of service prospectus supports the challenge of value for money in advance of the production of Business Plans. Engagement sessions with cabinet as part of budget setting process ensures the administration and leadership team work together closely to discuss and challenge budget decisions and the allocation of resources. Service Area Business Plans now explicitly show the key priorities expected to deliver to Financial Benefits
			Latest VFM conclusion provided by external audit was qualified due to inadequate rating of children's services. Issues are acknowledged by the leadership team and reflected within the ongoing Children's services improvement plan. A new senior management team within Childrens & Family Services has been established from 23/24 to implement the service improvement plans, with overall restructure and review of the service ongoing.
			The Council has numerous partnership agreements. Strategic and operational governance plus monitoring arrangements are put in place to ensure that members and officers receive assurances that where risks are identified, mitigating actions are in place to address them. The Council’s key partnership arrangements are subject to regular review throughout the MTFP period. Financial risks are considered within the Council's overall risk register.
Standard B	The authority complies with the CIPFA <i>Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government</i>	The Chief Financial Officer in a public service organisation is a key member of the Leadership Team, helping it to develop and implement strategy and to resource and deliver the organisation’s strategic objectives sustainably and in the public interest. They must be able to bring influence to bear on all material business decisions to ensure immediate and longer term implications, opportunities and risks are fully considered, and alignment with the organisation’s financial strategy; they must lead the promotion and delivery by the whole organisation of good financial management so that public money is safeguarded at all times and used appropriately, economically, efficiently and effectively. To deliver these responsibilities the Chief Financial Officer must lead and direct a finance function that is resourced to be fit for purpose and must be professionally qualified and	Executive Director, Place and Resources (Section 151) is a member of Leadership Team. Governance arrangements ensure all key decisions have a appropriate S151 sign off.
			Regular updates on key aspects of financial management and administration provided to Leadership, Members and informal Scrutiny. Focus on ensuring ownership, financial sustainability and collective responsibility for delivery. Evidenced through budget timetable, informal scrutiny attendance and business plans.
			All key decisions taken by the organisation require S151 sign off and input (including cabinet reports and officer decision records).
			Section 151 professional qualified with significant experience both within local government and within private sector. Experienced and well qualified Finance function.

SECTION 2 Governance and financial management style		Expected	Assessment
Standard C	The leadership team demonstrates in its actions and behaviours responsibility for governance and internal control.	The team must ensure that there are proper arrangements in place for governance and financial management, including a proper scheme of delegation that ensures that frontline responsibility for internal and financial control starts with those who have management roles. This delegation ensures that those responsible for the delivery of services are also explicitly held responsible for the financial management of the associated expenditure and income. Nonetheless, it is for the leadership team to demonstrate that the authority always meets exacting standards of probity, accountability and demonstrable efficiency in the use of public resources. All parts of the governance structure of an organisation play an important role, but the audit committee is a key component, providing independent assurance over governance, risk and internal control arrangements. It provides a focus on financial management, financial reporting, audit and assurance that supports the leadership team and those with governance responsibilities. Good governance is evidenced by actions and behaviours as well as formal documentation and processes. The tone and action at the top are critical in this respect, and rest with the leadership team – both senior officers and elected members, as well as the CFO. A successful leadership team has a culture of constructive challenge that excludes an optimism bias in favour of a realism bias and is built on a rigorous examination of goals, underlying assumptions and implementation plans.	<p>Financial management arrangements are reviewed periodically to ensure that they remain fit for purpose. Reviews consider a range of issues including capacity, resourcing and training needs. A specific review of financial management within children's services has been undertaken to improve governance in the area. The implementation of the new Childrens Services management team is also strengthening and re-enforcing the importance of good governance and sound financial management.</p> <p>The Audit and Governance committee has an independent chair external to the Council. An appropriate Training and development programme is in place for Committee Members. Currently in the process of appointing a second independent member to further strengthen the governance process.</p> <p>There is a formal scheme of budget delegation. The financial procedure rules undergo annual review.</p> <p>There is guidance available to budget holders which includes a description of their responsibilities, an outline of the budget process, and a budget process timetable. Accountability letters issued annually and guidance available. Training is available to all budget holders and prioritised for key risk areas, including the development of budget e-learning modules and the inclusion of specific budget monitoring training as part of the induction process.</p> <p>Action plans are developed and monitored when a material variance arises or a deficit is forecast.</p> <p>There is a line of professional accountability between Service Managers and Strategic Finance Leads to ensure compliance with professional standards and objectivity of advice on financial matters.</p> <p>The Council regularly tests its financial systems to ensure that processes are secure, key systems reviewed by internal audit (e.g. ledger, debtors and creditors, budgetary control). Implementation of a new finance system in 2022 focused on improving internal control and quality of reporting. It continues to be developed to improve reporting and monitoring efficiencies.</p> <p>The Council's targets for income collection and recovery of arrears stretch performance and their achievement is monitored with appropriate corrective action taken during the year to achieve the targets.</p> <p>Leadership team has specific focus on internal control and governance through separate assurance board meeting.</p> <p>A review of the scheme of delegation within Childrens and family services is being undertaken by the new senior management team.</p> <p>Monitoring information is available that evaluates the effectiveness of recovery actions, associated costs, and the cost of not recovering debt promptly for material categories of income. Aged sundry debt analysis considered as part of quarterly financial performance report.</p>
Standard D	The authority applies the CIPFA/SOLACE Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework (2016).	This CIPFA/SOLACE framework recommends that the review of the effectiveness of the system of internal control that local authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are required to undertake by their respective accounts and audit regulations should be reported in an annual governance statement	The Annual Governance Statement provides a commentary on the effectiveness of internal controls. Supported by the Head of Internal Audit Opinion.
Standard E	The financial management style of the authority supports financial sustainability	<p>Different styles of financial management are necessary. Financial sustainability will not be achieved by continuing with the behaviours of the past since these do not meet the demands of the present – or the future, which may be even more challenging. To remain financially sustainable authorities need to develop their financial management capabilities CIPFA believes that the strength of financial management within an organisation can be assessed by a hierarchy of three 'financial management (FM) styles':</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • delivering accountability • supporting performance • enabling transformation <p>This hierarchy of financial management styles loosely maps onto the now deeply embedded recognition of the necessity for economy, efficiency and effectiveness to achieve value for money. In delivering accountability the finance team ensures that their authorities spend less and so achieve economy. In supporting performance, the finance team works with the authority to spend well by maximising the output from goods or services</p>	<p>A clear accountability framework exists. Budget holders are accountable for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Managing the performance of services - Ensuring that spend is targeted at the Council's stated outcomes - Delivering agreed service outcomes within Business Plan - Monitoring the budget (capital & revenue allocations) and performance on a regular basis. - Managing resources in line with Council procedures and requirements. - Complying with Contract Procedure Rules and Financial - Ensuring financial transactions are properly authorised. - Delivering VFM through continuous improvement activity. - Ensuring decisions are made in a timely way, based on robust performance information <p>Service prospectus are issued annual and support the proposals put forward as part the finance and business planning process.</p> <p>There is a business development framework which ensures investments are aligned to the priorities of the council. The Business Development group consists of a multi disciplined team, who consider the Financial, Strategic and Economic impacts and opportunities as part of the full business case submission.</p> <p>Further work has been undertaken to integrate financial and performance reporting to drive accountability and sustainability. Business Plans for the Service Areas now combine key delivery priorities with Financial Benefits; Improved Performance and / or Improved Outcomes. With a view of strengthening service delivery and financial sustainability.</p>

SECTION 3			
Long to medium term financial planning		Expected	Assessment
Standard F	The authority has carried out a credible and transparent financial resilience assessment.	Authorities must critically evaluate their financial resilience. It is possible that the existing strategy is financially sustainable, but this must still have been tested and demonstrated in a financial resilience assessment. In this financial resilience assessment the authority must test the sensitivity of its financial sustainability given alternative plausible scenarios for the key drivers of costs, service demands and resources. It will require an analysis of future demand for key services and consideration of alternative options for matching demand to resources. Testing will focus on the key longer-term revenues and expenses and the key risks to which the authority will be exposed	The Council's Finance and Business Planning process is underpinned by informed risk assessments.
			Financial risks are considered within the Council's overall risk register.
			Financial & Business plans are reporting into Leadership Team
			Significant overspends are assessed for service delivery impact and impact on MTFP.
			The budget reported to members includes a positive assurance statement from the chief finance officer about the adequacy of the proposed financial reserves, in accordance with the requirements of section 25 of the LG Act 2003.
			The Council reports on the level and nature of its reserves and balances annually and through quarterly performance reports and longer term through the MTFP process.
			Where structural overspends are identified appropriate improvement plans are put in place and considered as part of future planning rounds. Any additional resources through financial settlements are aligned to these areas.
Standard G	The authority understands its prospects for financial sustainability in the longer term and has reported this clearly to members	A local authority needs an over-arching strategic vision of how it intends to deliver outputs and achieve outcomes for which it is responsible. This should include a statement that sets out both the vision and the underlying strategy, together with the mix of interventions that the organisation will adopt in delivering services to achieve the intended outcomes. In many cases a basis for this will already exist in a corporate plan.	Finance and business plan highlight range of challenges and opportunities the Council is facing. Demographic pressures on social care demand; inflation and interest rate rises are the most significant issues.
			As in 2023/24, the Council has received a one year financial settlement from central Government with longer term changes to the local government financial model being postponed for at least another year.
			The Council Plan documents and communicates the priority /outcome framework that sets the direction for the Council. During 24/25 the Council Plan will be refreshed.
			Financial strategy picks up issues around financial resilience and the response the Council is taking.
			Business plans are risk assessed and subject to continuous monitoring by the Council’s leadership throughout the year. They now also reflect the key priorities which will have a financial benefit.
			Well established budget monitoring processes are in place which include arrangements for the identification of variances and implementation of remedial actions where necessary.
			Challenges are acknowledged in that there are currently gaps within years 2 and 3 of the agreed MTFP.
Standard H	The authority complies with the CIPFA <i>Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities</i>	One of the requirements of the Prudential Code is a capital strategy. This capital strategy is a fundamental component of good financial management. It should set out how the organisation is currently managing its assets and more importantly its future plans linked to available resources. Balance sheet management in local authorities is about the better management of assets and liabilities to support service delivery and capital strategy	These gaps will be proactively challenged and options considered as part of the current years budget monitoring process.
			The Council keeps its treasury management strategy under review and monitors performance against it. The strategy reflects the requirements of the CIPFA Code of Practice for Treasury Management in the Public Services.
			The Council undertakes cash-flow monitoring which is used to inform short and long-term investment and borrowing decisions.
			A Capital investment Strategy underpins an affordable capital programme designed to deliver the Council’s strategic priorities has been agreed and the current and future funding of this is built into revenue planning.
			Capital reprofiling continues to be actively monitored within each service area, with financing requirements updated regularly to reflect the latest spend profiles.
			Financial strategy is linked to key strategic priorities. Increasingly, the Council is taking a more commercial approach and investments are anticipated to make a significant contribution to the Council’s strategic objective of enabling the growth of a strong and sustainable local economy in the longer term.
			The medium-term financial strategy models funding, income and expenditure and resource requirements over three years and is reviewed and updated throughout the year.
Standard I	The authority has a rolling multi-year medium-term financial plan consistent with sustainable service plans	The MTFP should support financially sustainable decision making. Importantly, performance against the plan will enable recent success and/or failures in delivering financial objectives to be taken into account in the annual budget process. A symptom of financial stress is the emergence of unanticipated overspends in recent years from the MTFP. While the long-term strategy needs to be a stable point of reference, the MTFP needs to be rolled forward annually to ensure that it reflects the latest detailed information	The financing of expenditure is transparently explained in budget summaries and reports.
			Corporate priorities drive the MTFP and internal resource allocation, with changes in allocations determined in accordance with policies & priorities and subject to scrutiny.
			The Council's financial strategy has clear links to other key strategies and plans. For example, funding is linked to growth expectations detailed within local plan and capital investment strategy aligned to economic strategy.
			MTFP investments aligned to expectations outlined within Children's improvement plan.
			Annual budget has been established taking into account expectations in terms of pay, inflation, and known investment plans.
			At present the MTFP contains gaps in years 2 and 3 which will need to be addressed to ensure council meets its statutory obligations.
			These gaps will be proactively challenged and options considered as part of the current years budget monitoring process.
SECTION 4			
The Annual Budget		Expected	Assessment
Standard J	The authority complies with its statutory obligations in respect of the budget setting process	The annual budget report sets out the proposed budget for the year ahead and demonstrates compliance with the Prudential Code. Budget Plans are owned by the whole of the Leadership Team not just the CFO.	The budget process demonstrates compliance with the legislation for setting a budget, issuing a Section 25 notice and Council tax resolution. Finance and business plans supporting the budget are completed and agreed with the relevant assistant director.
Standard K	The budget report includes a statement by the chief finance officer on the robustness of the estimates and a statement on the adequacy of the proposed financial reserves.	The budget report should include details of ear marked reserves.	Robustness of estimates and adequacy of reserves statements are compliant with legislation. Details of reserves held are included in the budget report.

SECTION 5 Stakeholder Engagement		Expected	Assessment
Standard L	The authority has engaged where appropriate with key stakeholders in developing its long-term financial strategy, medium-term financial plan and annual budget.	Stakeholder consultation helps to encourage community involvement not just in the design of services but in their ongoing delivery. This is especially the case when a local authority adopts an enabling approach to public service delivery which, along with the active involvement of the third sector, may facilitate future reductions in service costs.	The budget strategy and planning reports clearly outline the engagement framework for the budget. Engagement includes members, business, voluntary sector and community groups including online public consultations.
Standard M	The authority uses an appropriate documented option appraisal methodology to demonstrate the value for money of its decisions	Financial sustainability will be dependent upon difficult and often complex decisions being made. The authority’s decisions must be informed by clear business cases based on the application of appropriation option appraisal techniques. It is the responsibility of the CFO to ensure that all material decisions are supported by an option appraisal which in its rigour and sophistication is appropriate for the decision being made. It is likely that the authority’s documented option appraisal methodology will include a relatively simplistic approach for decisions of low value and/or low risk.	A decision making framework exists for all business development proposals The Business Development Group consider all outline and full business cases for capital, revenue and external funding. Project evaluation is built around the Governments 5 case model contained within the Green book and is applied proportionally demand on size and risk.
			Complex and business critical decisions have appropriate due diligence undertaken. Large material projects such as Freshney Place redevelopment and Towns Fund investments have appropriate level of due diligence (external where specialist expertise required). A Wider Projects Group has now been established to provide oversight and assurance on major projects inc. project and risk management.
SECTION 6 Monitoring Financial Performance		Expected	Assessment
Standard N	The leadership team takes action using reports enabling it to identify and correct emerging risks to its budget strategy and financial sustainability.	Early information about emerging risks to its financial sustainability will allow it to make a carefully considered and therefore effective response. Significant unplanned overspends and/or carrying forward undelivered savings into the following year might be a sign that an authority is not translating its policy decisions into actions. It also creates the conditions for further financial pressures and possible service reductions in subsequent	Regular monitoring provides information on financial performance to leadership
			As part of the integrated business and financial planning process the budget envelopes are aligned to priority areas. Business Plans for the Service Areas now combine key delivery priorities with Financial Benefits; Improved Performance and / or Improved Outcomes. With a view of strengthening service delivery and financial sustainability.
			Ongoing challenges within Children's and family services acknowledged but work continues through improvement plan to support delivery of medium and long term financial sustainability.
Standard O	The leadership team monitors the elements of its balance sheet which pose a significant risk to its financial sustainability.	It is a requirement of this code that authorities should more closely monitor the material elements of their balance sheet that may give indications of a departure from financial plans. This is especially important for local authorities with significant commercial asset portfolios. Contingencies and commitments are monitored to identify any items where a balance sheet provision may have crystallised. Key drivers of provisions (e.g. asset decommissioning decisions, legal claims, reorganisation activities) should be monitored to identify whether an actual or constructive obligation has arisen. Finally, each flow is managed	The leadership team receives monthly finance, performance and council plan updates. Quarterly financial reports include details of key balance sheet areas including borrowing, treasury management, reserves, provisions and capex. In relation to reserves, the S151 Officer provides statement on adequacy of reserves as part of the finance and commissioning plan process. All leadership team members briefed. There are regular financial updates to Assistant Director group.
SECTION 7 External financial reporting		Expected	Assessment
Standard P	The chief finance officer has personal and statutory responsibility for ensuring that the statement of accounts produced by the local authority complies with the reporting requirements of the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom.	The statutory and professional frameworks for the production and publication of the accounts underpin their importance and demonstrate how public money is used.	Production and publication of accounts undertaken in accordance with statutory and professional frameworks. 2022/23 accounts have been formally signed off, with the quality of the accounts being assessed as good, based upon feedback received through external audit process.
Standard Q	The presentation of the final outturn figures and variations from budget allows the leadership team to make strategic financial decisions.	It is key to ensure that the authority and its leadership understand how effectively its resources have been utilised during the year, including a process which explains how material variances from initial and revised budgets to the outturn reported in the financial statements have arisen and been managed. The success of these arrangements will be demonstrated by the ability of the leadership team to make decisions from them. In some circumstances this will lead to a reappraisal of the achievability of the long-term financial strategy and the financial resilience of the authority	The Outturn report is reported to Leadership and Cabinet. Financial monitoring reports are fed into budget planning processes to identify key pressures and investment priorities. Assistant directors play a key role in mitigation and recovery action planning. Increasingly performance information is being integrated into financial monitoring reports. During 2023/24 the overall Council Plan plus Service area Performance (inc. KPI's; achievements & risks) and Financial information have been incorporated into a single report to improve reporting efficiency and provide wider context to the challenges faced in delivery of services.