

# Oadby & Wigston Borough Council Self-Assessment against the Best Value Standards

## Introduction & Methodology:

The Best Value Duty relates to the statutory requirement for local authorities and other public bodies 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”.

Where, over a period of time, continuous improvement is not demonstrated sufficiently the Secretary of State has legislative powers to intervene to ensure compliance with the Best Value Duty. These powers include taking action to protect the public purse and ensure significant or long-term failings are corrected and performance is raised to an acceptable and sustainable level.

This report provides a self-assessment against the Best Value Standards. The following sections provides a table for each theme within the guidance.

The heading are as follows:

- **Continuous Improvement**
- **Leadership**
- **Governance**
- **Culture**
- **Use of Resources**
- **Service Delivery**
- **Partnerships and community engagement**

Each heading then has the descriptive text provided by Government along with our self-assessment score. There are many approaches that could be applied to the assessment so for consistency with the Council’s other assessments, the approach taken for the Annual Governance Statement has been utilised and a score has been provided.

## Assessment Score:

- **Good** – Good governance exists and there are no improvements required.
- **Fair** – Satisfactory governance exists but improvements are required to meet good governance.
- **Poor** – Significant issues with governance exist which needs addressing.

Each assessment then has evidence to support the score. It needs to be clarified that the Government guidance provides example of what it deems to be “**Characteristics of a well-functioning authority**” and “**Examples of Indicators of potential failure**”.

The evidence provided either supports the characteristics of a well-functioning authority or provides evidence that negates the indicators of potential failure.

Follow-on actions are then identified.

## 1. Continuous Improvement

Oflog says....

Making arrangements to secure continuous improvement in performance and outcomes is a core requirement for achieving best value.

Any organisation with a duty of best value needs to make effective arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which all its functions are exercised on an ongoing basis and at pace.

These arrangements will include inviting independent external challenge and scrutiny, in the form of regular service specific as well as corporate or finance peer challenges, engaging with sector support initiatives on offer and informal experience sharing among peers.

Local authorities should also have a sense of collective responsibility for the performance of the sector and help other authorities to improve.

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) / Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework, along with the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny and Localis Governance Risk and Resilience Framework can help authorities to identify, understand, and act on risks to good governance.

### Self-Assessment: Good

#### Evidence:

The Council has been awarded the externally assessed Customer Service Excellence Award for the fourth consecutive year. Performance monitoring is provided to CMT, SLT and formally to Members through Service Delivery Committee. The CFGS carried out an independent review of member/officer relations which has been presented back to senior councillors.

An LGA Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) took place in 2022 and an action plan was established and is still being delivered. There is a corporate Sustainability Plan which has a series of service reviews contained within the programme.

The CPC took place in 2022, it had previously taken place in 2017 and it is anticipated that a further corporate peer challenge will take place in 2027. Additional evidence includes the Peer Challenge update and Financial Health Check. The Council has adapted to financial and organisational challenges with various restructures. A Sustainability Plan is in place which includes a Service Review Programme.

The Annual Governance Statement (AGS) is prepared in accordance with the CIPFA/SOLACE Good Governance Framework. It is a living document that is regularly monitored and updated. There is an AGS Action Plan which is reviewed and formally reported to Audit Committee.

In addition to a thorough induction process, members of committees such as the Audit Committee often have training sessions allocated immediately prior to the start of the formal meetings or briefings during the meeting; the Council recently conducted a Meet the Teams session to further educate members on 'what the services do'.

The Council has recently adopted a new People Strategy, the appraisal process has been recently updated and relaunched. Managers are regularly reminded about HR processes. Members have gone through a thorough induction process and regular training is provided as identified as necessary.

Innovation is encouraged, considered, and evidenced by the way that the Council has acted with regards to a number of strategic projects. Examples are (a) the move from a dilapidated old town-hall to a redeveloped modern office, delivering cashable savings in the long term and freeing up the old building which will result in a capital receipt and better usage. (b) Exiting a failing county-wide ICT partnership and setting up a more effective ICT architecture and service, also delivering cashable savings and a significant improvement in performance.

The Council actively participates in joint working groups and sharing best practice. It is currently leading a group of Councils that share similar financial constraints and issues with OWBC to lobby Government regarding funding difficulties.

**Next Steps:** The Council will continue to monitor its activities, increasing characteristics of a well-performing authority and ensuring it does not display indicators of potential failure.

## 2. Leadership:

Oflog says....

Effective political and administrative leaders who have a clear vision and set of priorities for their area, are key to building local economic growth, social cohesion, and a healthy local democracy. When they model positive and effective leadership behaviours at all levels, this can be beneficial to a local authority's overall culture and governance.

It is essential that all officers with statutory responsibility, including the Section 151 and Monitoring Officers, uphold their duties, both individually and collectively and, in accordance with good practice, report directly to the Chief Executive and, as necessary, to full Council. Statutory officers must work effectively together, and all must have a voice for key decisions.

An authority that either fails to recruit to its statutory officer posts on a permanent basis over an extended period of time or has a high turnover in these roles indicates instability and potential wider cultural concerns.

When this is compounded by many senior positions being appointed to on an interim basis over an extended period, this can signal a problem.

### Self-Assessment: Good

#### Evidence:

A new Corporate Strategy is being developed which focuses on the five themes agreed by members as their strategic vision.

The Medium-Term Financial Plan is refreshed every year and priorities from the emerging corporate strategy are duly aligned to the MTFP. Senior Officers have the capability to provide the authority with effective strategic leadership. The MTFP has been reviewed to meet the financial constraints that the Council faces and the emerging Corporate Strategy supports the necessary strategic direction.

Officers display positive and effective leadership behaviours at all levels and provide a positive influence on the Council's culture and governance. Member and Officer collaboration has been made in order to align the Finance Strategy with priorities to address the challenging budget gap. Members and Officers have a clear understanding of public sector standards.

Senior and Statutory Officers uphold their duties and speak truth to power. This has been evidenced when providing information regarding the challenging financial situation the Council finds itself in. Senior manager positions are mostly covered by permanent members of staff. Interims are utilised to temporarily fill in 'gaps' where it is effective to do so. The corporate strategy is being updated with the new political administration.

Financial management is generally sound. There have been some capacity/capability weaknesses historically identified within the Finance Team which are being addressed through a combination of improved processes and the recruitment of permanent senior management.

The Council's current Risk Management Policy was approved in January 2023. The Audit Committee receives an updated strategic risk register on a quarterly basis for public scrutiny.

The register has been updated beforehand by Corporate Management Team and Senior Leadership Team.

Succession planning is carried out as effectively as possible, but due to the size of the Council staff often leave and move to larger neighbouring authorities. The Council has had success with staff progression to senior positions.

Member/Officer relationships remain constructive and external engagement is wide-ranging, (EG Resident Forums, Armed Forces Working Group, ((A Guide To Consultation on the Intranet)) Following the 2023 election, there has been a change in senior political positions, albeit within the same political party. Due to the size of the authority and the national landscape the Council has struggled to retain a Section 151 for long periods and a current recruitment exercise is underway.

There is a demonstrable commitment to leadership development within the officer base and there have been notable successes with internal progression to senior positions.

The Council holds elections on a four-year cycle. It has recently developed and approved Procurement Policy, People Strategy and numerous IT policies.

There is no evidence of a reduction in stakeholder or public confidence.

The Council has a good track record in improvement and in the ability to tolerate and welcome challenge. It has recently experienced an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge and has had a review from the Centre For Governance and Scrutiny. In January 2024, it was formally acknowledged that the Council had received the externally assessed Customer Services Excellence Award for the fourth consecutive year.

**Next Steps:** The Council will continue to monitor its activities, increasing characteristics of a well-performing authority and ensuring it does not display indicators of potential failure.

A particular focus has been made on senior management recruitment into the Finance Team to support the need for strong financial reporting.

### 3. Governance:

Oflog says....

A well-run council will have clear and robust governance and scrutiny arrangements in place that are fit for purpose, appropriate to the governance arrangements adopted locally (executive/committee system), understood by politicians and staff alike and reviewed regularly.

Decision-making processes, within clear schemes of delegation, should be transparent, regularly reviewed, clearly followed, and understood, enabling decision-makers to be held to account effectively. There should also be evidence of the decisions following good public law decision making principles (reasonableness, proportionality, fairness, etc.).

Codes of conduct and HR processes should be to sector standard and ensure effective support for whistle-blowers.

### Self-Assessment: Good

#### Evidence:

There are effective procedures in place - this is demonstrated by the AGS. Members and Officers comply with the Nolan Principles. Significant weaknesses have not been identified in annual audit reports.

The Council's scrutiny function is challenging. Policy, financial performance and service performance are scrutinised through the PFD Committee and Service Delivery Committee.

A risk assessment is included in each Committee / Council decision and Risk is regularly reviewed by the Audit Committee.

The Auditor's Annual Reports are presented to Council as well as Audit Committee. All key decisions are taken in the respective committee.

The appropriate professional expertise is obtained, and due diligence is carried out before any key decision.

The Audit Committee receives regular training and briefings. A self-assessment is being undertaken. Briefings are given to all committee chairs prior to formal meetings.

There are no LATCOs at the Council, but general scrutiny regarding decision taking is robust. The Council's Internal Audit (currently 360 degrees) team meets PSIA standards and considers and reports identified high risks.

Lessons are learned from complaints and there is an internal review of all complaints which is overseen by the Customer Service Improvement Manager.

The Audit Committee brief is proportionate and is undertaking a review of its effectiveness as a committee and as individual members.

Risk Management (including Risk Registers) is taken seriously by the Council. SLT review the corporate and strategic Risk Register at least quarterly, and it is reported through to Audit Committee on a regular basis.

Performance management information is used to improve service delivery, this is carried out formally by SDC and PFDC.

The Council's Audit Committee's T-o-R allows for an Independent Member and steps are underway to look at the recruitment of one.

There is a transparent approach to information sharing with elected members. Each member has been allocated a member of SLT to buddy up with and there is a clear Members Enquiry System in place.

The Monitoring Officer regularly reviews codes of conduct and standards complaints.

**Next Steps:** The Council will continue to monitor its activities, increasing characteristics of a well-performing authority and ensuring it does not display indicators of potential failure.

Work will be commencing on the recruitment of an independent Audit Committee Member in the Summer 2024.

#### 4. Culture:

Oflog says....

The culture of a local authority is determined by its shared values, ethics and beliefs, how decisions are made, as well as how elected members and officers behave, interact and carry out their roles.

Political and administrative leaders that model strong and effective leadership are beneficial to a local authority's overall culture.

An agreed set of shared corporate values which are effectively implemented and modelled across the authority are also essential to maintaining positive organisational culture.

The existence of an outward facing, transparent and open culture, where challenge is welcome and acted upon are indicators of a modern authority and is also essential for ensuring continuous improvement runs throughout the organisation.

#### Self-Assessment: Good

##### Evidence:

Council officers and members promote and demonstrate the highest ethical standards and appropriate working behaviours through established shared values and ways of working.

There has been a feeling of mistrust from some members with officers, however there is commitment to transparent decision making. The CFGS carried out an independent review of member/officer relations which has been presented back to senior councillors and numerous recommendations have been actioned.

There are visible positive relationships with members and officers and there are regular openly inquisitive meetings prior to decision making.

There are proactive working relationships between group leaders - and the leader of the opposition has been invited into STAR Chambers as part of the annual budget-setting decision.

There is a commitment to promoting transparency and sharing information with the public. The majority of decisions are taken in public and recorded and available on the council's website.

There is a respect for a Councillor's right to know and to enquire. OWBC has an established Member Enquiry process, and each Member has been allocated a member of SLT to act as a buddy to assist them with knowledge learning.

The Council embraces external scrutiny as demonstrated by the LGA Peer Challenge, approach with External Audit. Regular Resident Forums take place in the Council Chamber.

There are appropriate processes in place to address issues such as harassment and bullying. The complaints system is effectively utilised as demonstrated by the recent Internal Audit findings. There is an accessible whistleblowing policy.

There are weekly staff newsletters and weekly member newsletters with tailored content that are emailed out. Residents Forums and the Tenants and Leaseholder Form also take place on a regular basis where residents have the opportunity to challenge the Council on its activities as well as request ad-hoc services / interventions.

In the past two years there have been 3 standards complaints by members against members and none have been upheld.

The most recent staff survey (Sept 2023) regarding the office move to Brocks Hill has demonstrated a very positive response of satisfaction.

Staff were actively involved with and shaped “Our Values” which are:

- Customer and community focused
- Proud of everything we do
- Collaborative and creative
- Resourceful and resilient

The vast majority of decisions are taken in open meetings, going through the formal channels of SDC and PFDC.

The declarations of interest procedure and gift declarations are understood and regularly monitored. The Policy has been recently updated and shared with staff.

The website is easy to navigate; all the council reports and decisions are available through mod.gov, within the website, there is a customer self-service portal available for residents to log into and a clear A-Z of services.

**Next Steps:** The Council will continue to monitor its activities, increasing characteristics of a well-performing authority and ensuring it does not display indicators of potential failure.

## 5. Use Of Resources:

Oflog says....

The financial strategy and budgets are clearly aligned with strategic priorities and there is a robust process for reviewing and setting the budget.

Human resources and fixed assets are managed efficiently and effectively.

A robust system of financial controls and reporting exists, which provide clear accountability and ensure compliance with statutory requirements and accounting standards.

Compliance with the Prudential Framework, a clearly presented Investment Strategy, Capital Strategy and Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) policy exists.

A clear strategy exists to maintain adequate reserves.

There is collective accountability for the budget and medium-term financial plan, rather than a siloed approach to management.

There are regular financial reports to Cabinet and training for all members on finance. Robust systems are in place to identify, report, address and regularly review financial risk.

Sustainable, competitive corporate functions including procurement and IT which deliver value for money.

The Audit Committee has the knowledge, skills and independent expertise to provide robust challenge and ensures effective controls are in place and issues addressed.

The purposes of companies are carefully considered and regularly reviewed, with effective governance and oversight arrangements in place.

Effective project management of projects to enhance governance and effective use of resources.

### Self-Assessment: Good

#### Evidence:

The Council has a clear and approved MTFP, which is updated annually by Council. The S151 officer takes regular reports through the PFD Committee and onto Council which also describes and approves the budget setting process.

There are robust HR policies in place.

With the exclusion of housing stock, there are limited assets in Council ownership, however an asset list has been compiled which provides opportunities for maximising their potential usage.

There is a robust system of financial controls and reporting in existence which complies with statutory requirements and accounting standards. The AGS is approved annually, and Audit Committee monitor the progress of actions set out in the AGS.

There is a robust system of financial controls and reporting in existence which complies with the Prudential Framework, the investment strategy is limited, but clearly presented. A capital strategy is updated each year and a MRP policy exists and is being refreshed.

The council has a low level of reserve and historically regularly utilised reserves to balance the budget. Members have recently taken the decision not to use the general fund reserve to balance the budget in the future, resulting in significant service changes and a reduction in staffing.

There is a collective accountability for the budget and MTFP. The Council's SLT and CMT have a shared ownership of the Service Review Programme which is a fundamental plank of OWBC's Sustainability Plan.

Quarterly outturn reports are presented to SLT and onto Policy, Finance and Development Committee. Regular briefing sessions are provided to Members explaining the Council's financial position. A training plan is in place for the Audit Committee.

Robust systems are in place to identify, report and regularly review financial risk. The financial risks are still acute and live for the Council. The Council has a fit for purpose Treasury Management Strategy with no risky investment practices.

ICT has recently been insourced and delivers better VFM than the previous provision provided. Strategic procurement support is currently provided through the Welland Partnership although this contract is under review. A brand-new Procurement Policy was adopted in December 2023. The Legal team often provide services outside the Council. Staffing in the Finance team is challenging as per the national outlook.

The Audit Committee is aided by the S151 Officer, Internal and External Audit. Regular training sessions are scheduled and the CIPFA AC and AC Member Self-Assessment has been undertaken. There are no significant weaknesses identified in the annual audit report.

The Council does not operate any trading companies in its own right, however there are detailed and robust arrangements in place for the management of the outsourced leisure services contract which is with a private sector provider.

The Council has an established corporate programme and project approach which reports monthly into the Senior Leadership Team. Each project has a member of the SLT as a Project Executive.

The finance function is fit for purpose; there have been some capacity/capability concerns that have been addressed by management. Recruitment of qualified and experienced staff is a challenge for the Council as demonstrated regionally and nationally.

The Council has a good track-record in staff development of staff in both the front and back-office.

The Council's recent savings target required redundancies to be sought and following internal policies, it was able to successfully minimise the need for compulsory redundancies and worked with staff to identify opportunities for voluntary redundancies.

**Next Steps:** The Council will continue to monitor its activities, increasing characteristics of a well-performing authority and ensuring it does not display indicators of potential failure.

A particular focus has been made on senior management recruitment into the Finance Team to support the need for strong financial reporting.

Service delivery, post service transformation activities will be closely managed by the Senior Leadership Team

## 6. Service Delivery:

Oflog says....

Poor individual services can often be an indication of broader governance and financial weaknesses within an authority.

Equally, corporate governance failure almost certainly will at some point negatively impact how services are delivered locally, in terms of missed opportunities or silo working and a failure to make strategic connections.

Local authority data, the assessments of other government departments and service regulators, such as Oflog, Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, Planning Inspectorate and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, identify whether services are being delivered efficiently and effectively, and whether authorities are responsive to customer complaints. Authorities should provide services at a comparable level to other authorities of a similar size and location when benchmarked.

### Self-Assessment: Good

#### Evidence:

Service plans are clearly linked to the Council's priorities and strategic objectives. There is a golden thread that runs through to individual appraisals and objectives. Standards for the quality of services are basically incorporated in the Customer Charter. One of the main measures for the quality of service, is the score for overall satisfaction with each finite service.

Service delivery is generally evidence-based, there has been no external interventions. Managers are responsible for reporting on their team's performance against Service Standards on a monthly basis using a Service Standard dashboard. Monthly performance review meetings are held, where the results are discussed, problems are identified, and solutions put in place. Service performance is reported quarterly through to the Service Delivery Committee.

The Council has a very effective complaints process, and lessons are learned. The CEX is actively involved with the regular reviewing of complaints and outcomes. The Council produces a Complaints Trends Analysis document and a Lessons Learnt Register. There is also a "You Said We Did" page on the website to show how they have reacted to comments and suggestions.

Performance is formally reported quarterly to the Service Delivery Committee, which is a public meeting, which is also video-recorded and available on the Internet. Residents Forums (12 meetings p.a.) are also managed by the Council, giving the opportunity for residents to raise any concern and learn about Council operations.

The Council will be reporting on the recently introduced Housing Regulator performance targets.

The Council has a newly adopted procurement policy and a service transformation programme mapped out to work through all the Council's services. Performance is managed through the senior leadership team.

The Council has taken difficult decisions in order to achieve a balanced budget, without drawing on reserves to deliver services, having regard to economy, efficiency, and effectiveness.

The local authority takes an innovative approach to future service delivery, e.g. Insourcing IT service, office relocation to reduce running costs and provide a significant capital receipt. There is a formal approach officers are invited to make suggestions for improvement which are taken up by management.

The Service Improvement progress is managed and reported to the SLT through the Corporate Programme Assurance Board.

Benchmarking is conducted across the Council, and Customer Services participate in a local benchmarking group with other Leicestershire Councils. There are several other specific groups, for example, the DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) Benefits Performance Management Group. As a result of benchmarking with regard to planning processes, the Council have streamlined their process so that now they lead in terms of decision times. The management of extensions has also been improved.

**Next Steps:** The Council will continue to monitor its activities, increasing characteristics of a well-performing authority and ensuring it does not display indicators of potential failure.

## 7. Partnerships & Community Engagement:

Oflog says....

Driving local economic growth, promoting social cohesion and pride in place is increasingly dependent on the effectiveness of partnerships and collaborative working arrangements with a range of local stakeholders and service users.

Authorities should have a clear understanding of and focus on the benefits that can be gained by effective collaborative working with local partners and community engagement in order to achieve its strategic objectives and key outcomes for local people.

Appropriate governance structures should also be in place to oversee these arrangements, and the process of consultation and engagement should be inclusive, open and fair. An inclusive approach that accepts challenge is an indicator of a confident organisation

### Self-Assessment: Good

#### Evidence:

The Council operates in a wide range of partnerships and is very effective with the community safety partnership, the various leisure and well-being partnerships and the Universities Civic Partnership.

The Council actively seeks collaboration in order to maximise benefits and demonstrably knows when it is best to enter into partnerships, e.g. Blaby DC (Building Control, Lightbulb, Community Health & Wellbeing services) and with third sector organisations such as 'Helping Hands'.

Governance structures are in place to monitor and challenge partnership arrangements. Reports are provided to the Senior Leadership Team and up to Service Delivery Committee. In terms of consultation and feedback the Council provides a robust engagement approach as described in the communication strategy and customer experience strategy. Resident Forums Tenant & Leaseholder forums also provide regular additional opportunities for engagement and feedback.

Planning is undertaken at service manager level within the Council and Member oversight is provided where appropriate. Resident surveys through the Housing Team suggest good levels of satisfaction.

Regular communication between the relevant partners occurs in both routine business meetings and through more formal and public meetings such as the Community Safety Partnership. In a recent survey, two partners, Blaby Community & Wellbeing Partnership, and the University of Leicester, described very positive and beneficial working relationships with the Council.

Social and environmental values are identified within the newly adopted Procurement Policy. Consultations are thorough and proportionate. A specific strategy was created for the recent large-scale consultation to create a Customer Experience Strategy. Extensive consultation was undertaken using a wide range of methods. Examples include 'Thursday Pop-Ups' at various locations throughout the Borough - 'Take part in our survey' about the future of customer services within the Council.

**Next Steps:** The Council will continue to monitor its activities, increasing characteristics of a well-performing authority and ensuring it does not display indicators of potential failure.