

# East Sussex Fire Authority

## Annual Governance Statement 2022/23

### 1. Scope of Responsibility

East Sussex Fire Authority (the Authority) 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 Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 require the Authority to prepare an annual governance statement, which must accompany the statement of accounts. The Authority 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 Authority is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs and facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, which includes arrangements for the management of risk.

The Authority has approved a code of corporate governance, which is consistent with the seven principles of good governance as identified in the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) / Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE) 2016 Framework – “Delivering Good Governance in Local Government”. This statement explains how the Authority has complied with the code and meets the requirements of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015.

### 2. The Purpose of the Governance Framework

The governance framework comprises the systems and processes, culture and values by which the Authority is directed and the activities through which it accounts to and engages with its communities. It enables the Authority to monitor the achievement of its strategic priorities and to consider whether those priorities 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 system of internal control is based on an on-going process designed to identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of the Authority's policies, aims and objectives, to evaluate the likelihood and potential impact of those risks being realised and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically.

The governance framework has been in place at the Authority for the year ended 31 March 2023 and up to the date of approval of the statement of accounts.

### 3. The Governance Framework

The Annual Governance Statement (AGS) provides a summary of the extent to which the Authority meets the seven principles of good governance as identified in the “Delivering Good Governance in Local Government” Framework 2016.

#### **Principle A: Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law**

The Authority’s Purpose and Commitments are at the centre of everything that we do and are published on our website. The Authority has a strong culture based on our shared values of pride, accountability, integrity and respect. The Authority achieves this by adopting, monitoring and keeping under review:

- a Code of Conduct for Members, built upon the Nolan Principles of Public Life;
- an Officer Code of Conduct and Core Code of Ethics;
- a Register of Members’ Interests;
- a Register of Officer Declarations of Conflicts of Interest, and Declarations of Gifts and Hospitality accepted;
- comprehensive induction programmes for both Officers and Members built on the standards of behaviour expected, supported by appropriate training;
- a Competency Framework and Rolling Review Scheme used for improving organisational performance through focusing and reviewing each individual’s ability and potential;
- Member Panels with clear responsibilities for governance, audit and standards;
- a Dignity and Respect Policy
- an effective Anti-Fraud, Bribery and Corruption policy allowing for reporting and actioning any incidents; and
- a whistleblowing policy providing protection to individuals raising concerns.

The Authority ensures that appropriate legal, financial and other professional advice is always considered as part of the decision-making process and observes both specific requirements of legislation and general responsibility by Law.

The roles of the Authority’s statutory officers are outlined in the Constitution, there are clear arrangements for the discharge of the statutory functions of the Head of Paid Service, Monitoring Officer and Treasurer. The Authority also ensures compliance with the CIPFA’s Statement on the Role of the Chief Finance Officer.

The Authority is transparent about how decisions are taken and recorded. The Authority does this by:

- ensuring that decisions are made in public and recorded. Those decisions and relevant information are publicly available (except where that information is exempt under the provisions of the Local Government Act or determined as being confidential by Government);

- having rules and procedures which govern how decisions are made.

The Authority has a published Whistleblowing Policy and provides protection to individuals raising concerns. This policy is periodically reviewed in line with guidance.

The Authority ensures that effective, transparent and accessible arrangements are in place for dealing with complaints. The website contains guidance for submitting complaints against the Authority by the public and processes are in place to progress any complaints that are made.

### **Principle B – Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement**

The Authority responds to the views of stakeholders and the community in the following ways:

- publishing a Corporate Plan that sets out our purpose and commitments to the community and the outcomes we intend to achieve;
- an established business planning process, including the development of a published medium term finance plan;
- regular, published reporting of performance against the Authority's key performance indicators;
- the Authority has approved and implemented a comprehensive Communications, Engagement & Consultation Strategy setting out a range of methods of engaging with the community and stakeholders, include those groups which are harder to reach;
- the Authority recognises that people are different and gives everyone the same or an equal opportunity to information, advice and support in ways that are suited to the needs or circumstances of the individual;
- the Authority has a clear guidance and defined approach which promotes good governance in our partnership working and collaboration;
- providing the public with the opportunity to ask questions, submit petitions or make representations to the Authority;
- publishing the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) providing information in relation to how the Authority delivers its services;
- providing a modern, effective IT Strategy and solution that meets the needs and aspirations of the organisation and the communities that we serve.

The Authority understands the key role that it has to play in supporting collaboration and partnership working within East Sussex and the City of Brighton & Hove and the role that our partners play in assisting the Authority to deliver on its objectives.

The Authority ensures good governance in respect of partnerships and collaboration by:

- having an approved and published Collaboration Framework containing clear collaboration priorities

- reviewing and evaluating partnerships on a regular basis;
- auditing partnership and collaboration frameworks and policies through internal audit; and
- ensuring that partnerships and collaborations offer value and contribute to the Authority's strategic objectives.

### **Principle C – Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits**

The Authority publishes on our website our Corporate Plan which reports on what has been achieved during the past year and what we intend to achieve to meet our purpose and commitments for the forthcoming year. The document outlines our purpose and values and is used as the basis for all corporate and service planning.

In delivering its purpose and commitments, the Authority reports regularly on activities, performance and the financial position. Timely, objective and understandable information relating to the Authority's activities, achievements, performance and financial position is provided through the publishing of:

- an Integrated Risk Management Plan, covering a period of three or five years;
- a Medium-Term Financial Plan;
- a clear framework for financial governance based on Procurement Standing Orders and Financial Regulations;
- established budgeting systems, clear budget management guidance and regular reporting of financial performance against budget forecasts to Officers and Members;
- externally audited accounts;
- detailed performance information.

The Authority considers the governance implications of its actions and has undertaken an external review of its corporate governance. The Authority has established and updated its Local Code of Corporate Governance to be consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework – “Delivering Good Governance in Local Government.”

The Authority is committed to delivering high quality services to the public in an efficient and effective way. The Authority does this by:

- delivering services to meet local needs through the Integrated Risk Management Plan, and putting in place policies and procedures to ensure that they operate effectively in practice;
- developing effective relationships and partnerships with other public sector agencies and the private and voluntary sectors;
- actively pursuing and implementing collaboration opportunities with the Police, Ambulance, other Fire Services and other local authorities;
- responding positively to the findings and recommendations of external auditors, reviewers and statutory inspectors and putting in place arrangements for the implementation of agreed actions;

- comparing information about services with those provided by similar organisations, assessing why levels of efficiency, effectiveness and quality are different and considering alternative means of service provision, processes and procurement to maximise opportunities and improve value for money where appropriate;
- following its Responsible Procurement Policy that aims to support our collective responsibility to limit any negative impact and promote the Authority's commitment to deliver sustainable and responsible outcomes across social value, ethical sourcing and environmental sustainability.

### **Principle D – Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes**

To achieve this, the Authority has:

- a detailed Medium Term Financial Plan which includes actions to ensure financial sustainability;
- a performance management and assurance framework to ensure plans are met and remedial action taken;
- processes in place to ensure that data quality is high, so as to enable objective and rigorous decision making;
- monthly Senior Leadership Team (SLT) meeting together with regular Assistant Director meetings where issues are raised and actions agreed;
- a risk management process to identify where interventions may be required;
- a sound understanding of risk in our community and service demand (current and future) which informs resource allocation decisions.

### **Principle E – Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it**

The Authority ensures that the necessary roles and responsibilities for effective Governance are identified and allocated through its Constitution so that it is clear who is accountable for decisions that are made. The Authority does this by:

- electing a Chairperson, establishing Panels and nominating Member Leads with defined responsibilities;
- a clear scheme of delegated responsibilities to Senior officers;
- undertaking a regular review of the Constitution;
- having effective and comprehensive arrangements for the scrutiny of services;
- making the Chief Fire Officer responsible and accountable for all aspects of operational management;
- ensuring that at all times arrangements are in place for the proper administration of its financial affairs (Section 112 Officer);
- ensuring that at all times arrangements are in place for ensuring actions are taken in accordance with Statute and Regulation (Monitoring Officer);

- developing protocols that ensure effective communications between Members and Officers.
- a risk management process to identify where interventions may be required
- a sound understanding of risk in our community and service demand (current & future) which informs resource allocation decisions.
- leveraging IT investment to improve internal processes and increase internal capacity through more effective use of resources.

The Authority aims to identify the development needs of Members and Senior Officers in relation to their strategic roles and ensure that they are supported by appropriate training. The Authority ensures that those charged with governance have the skills, knowledge and experience they need to perform well. The Authority does this by:

- operating robust and transparent recruitment and selection processes;
- cascading regular information to Members and staff;
- regular Member Seminars providing a forum for sharing information, consultation, training and demonstration of operational procedures;
- providing resources that support Member and Officer development;
- promoting schemes supporting ongoing professional development;
- undertaking the annual appraisal of the Chief Fire Officer and setting objectives that contribute to the Authority's purpose and commitments, strategy and plans and that incorporate key development needs.

The Authority is fully compliant with the principles outlined in the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government. The Treasurer to the Authority is professionally qualified and suitably experienced. The Treasurer has a central role in providing a strategic insight to the direction and control of Authority business decisions affecting financial resources. They ensure compliance with financial standards and gives due consideration to the economic, efficient and effective use of resources. The Treasurer works closely with the Chief Fire Officer in ensuring the finance function provided is fit for purpose and that the management of the Authority's resources is robust.

### **Principle F – Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management**

The Constitution sets out how the Authority operates, how decisions are made and the procedures which are followed to ensure that decisions are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people. Areas of potential change are identified and the Constitution is amended accordingly.

The Authority undertook a comprehensive and independent review of its constitution in 2021/22 to ensure that it was both current and robust.

The Authority has completed a self-assessment against the CIPFA Financial Management Code (FM Code) 2019. Strong financial management is an essential part of ensuring public sector finances are sustainable and the FM Code provides guidance for good and sustainable financial management in local authorities and provides assurance that authorities are managing resources effectively.

The Authority has a risk management framework, which takes account of both strategic and operational risks and ensures they are appropriately managed and controlled. This approach aids the achievement of its strategic priorities, supports its decision-making processes, protects the Authority's reputations and other assets and is compliant with statutory and regulatory obligations. The Authority ensures that the risk management approach:

- enables a culture of risk awareness;
- formally identifies and manages risks;
- involves elected members in the risk management process;
- maps risks to financial and other key internal controls;
- documents and records details of risks and is developing a risk management information system;
- monitors the progress in mitigating significant risks, and reports this to Members;
- reviews and, if required, updates its risk management process at least annually;
- considers risk within all projects.

The Authority utilises the findings and suggestions of Internal Audit, External Audit, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and other review agencies, statutory bodies and inspectorates to assist in the management of risk and performance.

The Scrutiny & Audit Panel provides independent assurance of the risk management framework and the internal control environment. It provides an independent review of the Authority's governance, risk management and control frameworks and oversees the financial reporting and annual governance processes. It oversees internal audit and external audit, helping to ensure efficient and effective assurance arrangements are in place.

### **Principle G – Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting and audit to deliver effective accountability**

To achieve this, the Authority:

- publishes relevant information relating to salaries, business interests and performance data on its website;
- has a Procurement team who provide advice and issue clear guidelines for procuring goods and services;
- has a Scrutiny & Audit Panel operating in accordance with guidance provided by CIPFA;
- publishes information to the Authority and its Panels as part of established accountability mechanisms;
- acts upon the findings or recommendations of Internal and External Audit Reports;
- prepares an Annual Governance Statement;
- prepares an Annual Statement of Assurance;
- prepares a Corporate Plan;
- Publishes a forward plan on its website.

The Authority is committed to the publication of transparent performance information. This includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Budget reports;
- Operational performance reports;
- a Medium-Term Financial Plan;
- a Corporate Plan;
- Statement of Accounts;
- Annual Governance Statement;
- Annual Statement of Assurance;
- information as required under the Local Government Transparency Code.

#### **4. Review of Effectiveness**

The Authority 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 Members through the Fire Authority and its Panels, including Policy & Resources and Scrutiny & Audit;
- the work of Senior Officers who have primary responsibility for the development and maintenance of the internal control environment;
- the work of the Monitoring Officer and the Treasurer;
- the risk management arrangements including the maintenance and regular review of corporate risks by the Senior Leadership Team and Scrutiny & Audit Panel;
- the work of Internal Audit including individual reports and their overall annual report and opinion;
- the Authority's External Auditors in their Annual Audit Letter and Annual Governance Report;
- the judgements of other review agencies, statutory bodies and inspectorates including HMICFRS.

#### **5. Assurance & Significant Governance Issues**

No assurance can ever be absolute; however, this statement seeks to provide a reasonable assurance that there are no significant weaknesses in the Authority's governance arrangements. The Authority is fully committed to the principles of corporate governance. The Assurance, Performance & Governance Group monitors the progress on the governance issues contained within the Annual Governance Statement. Those issues that were ongoing at 31 March 2023 will be included in the 2023/24 action plan below.

On the basis of the review of the sources of assurance set out in this statement, we are satisfied that the Authority has in place governance arrangements and a satisfactory system of internal control, both of which are fit for purpose and operating effectively. As part of this review we have not identified any gaps in assurance over key risks or significant governance issues. The Authority has, however, identified a range of improvements to its corporate governance



arrangements. Action Plans are in place to address the necessary improvements and these will be monitored during the year.

Both governance and internal control arrangements are kept under review to ensure that they continue to operate effectively, meet changing legislative needs, and reflect best practice and our vision of making our communities safer.

We propose over the coming year to take steps to further enhance our governance arrangements as summarised below. We are satisfied that these steps will address the need for improvements that were identified in our review of effectiveness and we will monitor their implementation and operation as part of our next annual review.

- (i) Review of Corporate Business Risk Policy and Implementation of Directorate Risk Registers**  
*Continue to work to improve the identification and mitigation of corporate risks throughout the organisation. (Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer) (Continuing action)*
- (ii) Health and Safety Action Tracking and Management System**  
*Continue to work to improve the tracking of agreed actions in response to Health & Safety Investigations, ensuring lessons are learnt and improvements in risk management and control are applied effectively. Implement the revised Health and Safety Management Framework. (Assistant Director People Services) (Continuing action)*
- (iii) Incident reporting for Insurance purposes**  
*Continue to work to improve the reporting of incidents that may result in insurance claims in line with the requirements of the Authority's Insurers. (Assistant Director Resources and Treasurer) (Continuing action)*
- (iv) Monitor issues relating to the Firefighter Pension Schemes**  
*Continue to work on the national fall out of the McCloud/Sargent case by ensuring that the necessary resources and support are given to dealing with these. (Assistant Director People Services) (Continuing action)*
- (v) Review of Constitution – Financial Regulations**  
*Review the financial regulations & scheme of delegations contained within the Authority's Constitution including budget limits. (Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer) (Continuing action)*
- (vi) Service Culture**  
*Carry out an assurance exercise to ensure that we have the working practices and organisational culture expected of a modern and efficient Fire & Rescue Service. This will include considering the recommendations and findings from national reports. (Assistant Director People Services) (New Action)*
- (vii) Sustainability and Carbon Management**  
*Complete the development of a Carbon Reduction Action Plan and a broader review of the Authority's community leadership role in relation to*

*climate change for consideration by the Fire Authority. (Deputy Chief Fire Officer & Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer) (Continuing action)*

**(viii) Assess & implement the findings of the HMICFRS Inspection**  
*Where appropriate implement the findings resulting from HMICFRS Inspections of East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service and additionally recommendations made to all FRS at a national level. (Deputy Chief Fire Officer) (Continuing Action)*

**(ix) Review the effectiveness of the Scrutiny & Audit Panel**  
*Conduct a review into the effectiveness of the Scrutiny & Audit Panel against the revised best practice guidance on Audit Committee issued by CPIFA and in the light of the Redmond Review. (Assistant Director Resources/Treasurer and Assistant Director Planning & Improvement) (New Action)*

**Councillor Carolyn Lambert, Chairperson, Scrutiny & Audit Panel**

**Dawn Whittaker, Chief Fire Officer**

**27 April 2023**