

GOVERNANCE AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

Date: 29 July 2020

Venue: Virtual Meeting

Time: 7.30pm

Present: Councillors: Peter Wathen (Chairman)
Alex Smith (Vice Chairman)
Sylvia Hobbs Peter Tomas
Richard Gell Robin Underwood

External attendees:

Rachel Ashley-Caunt (Head of Internal Audit)

. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

No apologies for absence were received.

. **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 June 2020 were approved as a correct record.

. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of interest were made.

. **QUESTIONS UNDER COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 10.3**

No questions were submitted under Procedure Rule 10.3.

. **NAO GUIDE FOR AUDIT COMMITTEES ON FINANCIAL REPORTING DURING COVID-10**

The Head of Internal Audit gave a verbal report regarding the guidance recently issued by the National Audit Office on financial reporting during Covid-19. The Committee was advised that there were a number of questions audit committees should consider, relating to changes to procedure and expenditure as a result of Covid-19. A self assessment against the questions would be undertaken, to look at the assurances for any changes that had been made. The Head of Internal Audit would work with the finance department, the Head of Environmental Services and any other relevant officers to bring a response to the questions from the self assessment to the Governance and Audit Working Party, before presenting them at the next meeting of this Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the verbal report be noted.

RISK MANAGEMENT UPDATES

The Housing Strategy and Delivery Manager gave a verbal report on the fire safety precautions of housing providers, advising that Registered Providers would usually be contacted in April to report if they had identified any additional fire risks in properties across the district, or if any cladding works had been carried out. Asbestos was not specifically included in the survey that Registered Providers were required to complete, but it was noted that most housing associations did have an asbestos removal programme in place. Due to having to provide an emergency homelessness response in the wake of Covid-19, the survey was delayed. Registered Providers were now being contacted, and the results of the survey would be brought to the next meeting of this Committee.

The Waste Manager gave a verbal report on the Covid Risk Update, advising that since the last update, officers had continued to engage both internally and externally to ensure progress in the recovery from the pandemic. Risk assessments, planning and adaptations had been undertaken to ensure that officers would be able to return to work at East Northamptonshire House, which had been signed off by the Chief Executive as Covid-19 secure at the beginning of July. Visitors could attend the offices by appointment only, and similar plans were being put in place in order to reopen both the Oundle and Rushden Centres.

The Committee was also advised that a mobile Covid-19 testing unit had been located in the car park at East Northamptonshire House, and had one of the highest footfalls. It would likely return once a month. Officers were still engaging in strategic, operational and tactical county-wide meetings, and were working closely with town centres and businesses to ensure the safe re-opening of High Streets and shops.

RESOLVED:

- That the verbal reports be noted

SERVICE RISK UPDATE FROM CUSTOMER AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

The Head of Customer and Community Services gave a verbal update, advising the Committee that since March there had been an increased risk in respect of Council Tax due to COvid-19, as customers may have been furloughed or had lost their jobs. Each case had been assessed and treated on its own merits. As the courts were not currently operating, the team were unable to proceed with recovery work for the non payment of council tax; this had been put on hold until the situation became clearer. Reminders were being sent out to customers who had fallen behind on their council tax payments, and included advice on how and where to get help. Collection rate monitoring had been increased from once to twice per month, along with increased reporting, including monthly returns to MHCLG. Officers advised that it would take time to see the full effects that Covid-19 would have on council tax, and there could be further pressures as government schemes, such as furlough, began to unwind.

The Committee was advised that business support funding had been awarded to 475 businesses; with 1378 grants awarded totalling £15.3m. The allocated discretionary grant funding of £828,000 had also been spent and awarded to a total of 99 businesses. There was a high risk of fraud associated with the grants, and the team had set up an online form to capture the information required, and payments had been made by BACS to combat this. The Chief Finance Officer had signed off the list of checks that would be undertaken before any payments were issued, and it was noted that there had been no attempts at fraud. The Committee asked that their thanks be passed onto the team for their hard work and diligence.

A fraud risk assessment template had been created, and officers were confident that due to the stringent checks that had already been implemented, this would not be time consuming to complete. The NNDR target rate for collection was 29%, and we had achieved 25.49%, meaning we were 3.51% down on target. Due to the current situation this was a good result. Officers advised that grant schemes would close on 28th August 2020, and businesses that had fallen behind on payments would be contacted by telephone in the first instance and be offered advice and wider business support from the Economic Development team.

In terms of leisure, the committee was advised that the Council had continued to maintain its good relationship with Freedom Leisure since the closure of the facilities in March, and had engaged District Law to ensure that the contract was not deviated from. We also engaged SLC, who specialised in leisure contracts; to assist us in reviewing the activation plan and its associated costs that Freedom Leisure had produced. The Committee was advised that the Pemberton Centre had reopened on July 25th, and both Splash and the Nene Centre were due to open on August 1st.

RESOLVED:

That the verbal report be noted

. **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

RESOLVED:

That the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the consideration of the following item (Minutes of the Governance & Audit Working Party) as exempt information as defined under Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, was likely to be disclosed.

. **ASSET MANAGEMENT UPDATE**

The Head of Economic and Commercial Development gave a verbal update on asset management, advising the Committee of the progress that had been made on some of the outstanding actions.

RESOLVED:

That the verbal update be noted.

Chairman