

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF FINANCE AND CORPORATE SERVICES

23rd July 2020

SECTION A – MATTER FOR SCRUTINY

WARDS AFFECTED: ALL

Finance and Corporate Services Directorate service response during Covid-19 Pandemic

1. Purpose of Report

To provide members of the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee with an overview of the status of the Finance and Corporate Services Directorate and the work undertaken by the directorate during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Background

As members are aware on the 18th March 2020, the Health Protection (Coronavirus) Wales Regulations 2020 came into force, which placed significant restrictions of service delivery within the Finance and Corporate Services Directorate.

All services were required to adapt, not only to the concept of working remotely but also to develop new ways of meeting service delivery but also implement, often on short notice, programmes of work necessary to meet the requirement on local authorities during the emergency period and often develop new services to meet required needs.

The aim of this report is to provide an overview to members of the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee, the status of each service area and an overview of work that has been undertaken to date by these sections. To assist members, key service information in respect of each service area is also provided with this report.

3 Service Overview

3.1 Legal Services Division

Key Service Information

Monitoring Officer - To ensure that the Council, its officers and its elected Councillors maintain the highest standards of conduct in all they do, as prescribed in the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.

Litigation - To provide advice to the directorates of the Council in respect of all contentious issues and providing advice in respect of Licensing, Employment Law, Environmental Law, Environmental Health and Public Protection, Rights of Way, Freedom of Information and Data Protection, Adult Social Services, Enforcement and Prosecutions, Education and any other contentious areas.

Property and Corporate - To undertake all non-contentious legal work in respect of the Council's Estate Management functions and to undertake the preparation of all statutory agreements including Highway, Planning Agreements, Commons Registration Work and other property related matters.

Business Administration – To provide support to the Legal Services section in all areas of business administration and to assist the Finance and Corporate Services and Chief Executive Directorates with information governance responsibilities and complaints.

Land Charges – To maintain the Local Land Charges Register and to provide Solicitors, Conveyancers and prospective purchasers or sellers of a named property or piece of land within Neath Port Talbot, with information by means of a local authority property search document

Information Governance – To provide advice and support to the Council in respect of information security and data protection issues.

Legal Safeguarding - To advise the Social Services Directorate on all aspects relating to its social services functions including safeguarding, adult social services and child protection issues.

Corporate Procurement – To set out best practice for procurement across the Council, ensuring that all procurement activities operate within the context of value for money, efficiency and continuous improvement. The team supports the Council's aims and objectives and undertakes the legal work in relation to all of the Council's commercial arrangements and supporting the Council in corporate tenders and use and availability of the procurement frameworks issued by the National Procurement Service, Crown Commercial Services, etc.

Licensing – To oversee the licensing and enforcement functions of the Council in accordance with the applicable licensing laws, with the accountable manager acting as the Commons Registration Officer

Registrars Service - undertake all registration services for births, marriages (including civil partnerships) and deaths in accordance with registration laws.

Mailroom – To oversee the mail related functions of the Council and the provision of a courier service to Council buildings and other venues as and when requested.

Work during Covid-19 Emergency Period

Monitoring Officer

As well as all legal work and management of the Legal Section, the Head of Legal Services/Monitoring Officer also sits on the Council's Incident Management Group. Work has also been ongoing to consider the implementation of the recent legislation produced by UK and Welsh Government because of the pandemic, with a particular focus being on the facilitation of Council decision making during the pandemic.

Litigation

The Litigation team have worked remotely since March 2020, advising on the enforcement issues the Council faces as a result of Covid-19, facilitating traffic orders to ensure safety of the public in town centres and other areas, employment matters on redeployment/furlough, education matters as a result of school

closures and now reopening, rights of way closures, debt recovery, data protection matters and freedom of information queries,

Officers have also ensured the smooth running of ongoing Council litigation and contentious matters.

The local criminal and county courts adopted a system for case management during the pandemic where court hearings were limited to key decisions required, for example bail hearings or individuals remanded in custody. As of the 14th July 2020, Council matters are now being heard in court once more and work is ongoing to complete any outstanding prosecutions.

Property and Corporate

The Property and Corporate team have also worked remotely, with limited presence in the office to facilitate the completion of complex property transactions, which are still required to be prepared in hard copy.

The team have continued to keep all complex property/planning transactions proceeding as well as providing advice and assistance on the recent project work undertaken by the Council because of the pandemic, for example the property documentation required as part of the construction of the Field Hospital in Llandarcy and arrangements to assist in the Council's homelessness strategy

Business Administration

The Business Administration section have worked from home but have since recommenced limited office working since the 1st June 2020 to facilitate the general administrative functions of the service.

They have assisted at all times in the provision of administrative support to the Legal Section. Officers have coordinated the supply of PPE for the Legal Section, undertaken the payment of invoices and coordinated any Freedom of Information Requests, Subject Access Requests and Complaints.

Work has also been ongoing during this period to prepare for the migration of the Legal Services Case Management System to a new provider in October 2020.

Land Charges

The Land Charges officers have worked from home during the pandemic with occasional visits to the office to facilitate certain aspects of the service i.e. the issue of search results and to check plans that are not held digitally.

Although the number of land charge searches being received has dropped slightly they are now starting to increase because of restrictions in respect of home moving being relaxed by the Welsh Government.

Since March 2020, officers have processed 242 official searches (compared to 525 in 2019 for the same period).

Officers were also able to develop a system to provide personal searches given the Port Talbot Civic Centre has been closed to public access whereas other authorities did not provide such a service. Officers have processed 118 personal searches (compared to 289 in 2019 for the same period).

Work is now ongoing to further develop the service by the conversion of hard copy documents to electronic versions

Information Governance

The Information Governance officers have worked remotely from home during the pandemic. The team consists of two officers though one officer has recently been seconded to the Safe and Well Service until the end of August 2020.

The team have advised on all matters concerning data protection and information security and governance during the pandemic, for example the establishment of data sharing processes with organisations such as Public Health Wales, Welsh Government, and Business Wales to assist in the arrangements put in place in other sections in respect of their service changes. They have also led in the development of new privacy notices (due to new ways of

holding data) and the preparation of data protection impact assessments.

As a result of the usage of new software and technology, the officers have also liaised with the Digital Services team to ensure information governance and data protections are considered at all times.

To date compliance with data protection laws has been extremely positive during the pandemic with no breach reports being submitted to the Information Commissioners Office

Legal Safeguarding

The team have also worked remotely during the emergency period.

Legislation in respect of social services provision was amended by the UK and Welsh Governments by virtue of the Coronavirus Act 2020 and officers have advised the Social Services directorate of all new requirements and obligations throughout the emergency period.

Advice has also been provided on all areas of work in respect of safeguarding via the legal surgeries that are held between officers of the legal section and social services directorate.

All ongoing safeguarding cases have continued to be progressed within the statutory times and procedure laid down by the courts.

Court hearings in respect of public law childcare matters and adult safeguarding matters are now being dealt with remotely by the local Courts, this often being due to the number of parties in such cases meaning physical hearings are often not possible (given the difficulties in social distancing). Work however is presently ongoing to allow for the safe reintroduction of physical court hearings.

Corporate Procurement/Commercial

Officers have worked from home during the emergency period.

As well as the complex work of overseeing procurement and commercial contracts, work has also been ongoing to liaise with the supply chains of the Council to determine the effect that Covid-

19 has had on them. Officers have also advised (in conjunction with finance colleagues) on support available for our suppliers, following guidance introduced by the Welsh Government. Advice has also been provided on contractual obligations through the emergency period to work with our contractors to address contractual issues.

Officers have as well liaised with various sections throughout the Council to consider the sourcing and purchase of PPE for all sections of the Council and liaising with the Welsh Government on the approval of suppliers.

Work is now ongoing with various sections of the Council to commence on programmed procurement activities whilst at the same time liaising with national organisations such as the National Procurement Service to further develop procurement best practice

Licensing

All staff continue to work from home with an occasional physical presence in the office to enable the processing of documents. All members of the public have been directed to a generic email (licensing@npt.gov.uk), which is being monitored continuously throughout the working day.

All renewal applications for taxi drivers are being processed, with electronic verification of documents for DBS validation continuing. Changes in service provision whilst working remotely have also been introduced, for example, knowledge tests for drivers are being conducted virtually (using Microsoft Teams). All taxi vehicle renewals are being processed, with vehicle safety inspections recommencing on the 1st July 2020.

All applications under the Licensing Act 2003 (for pubs, clubs etc.) continued to be processed, with the first remote Licensing and Gambling Sub Committee being held on the 9th July 2020. Overall premises compliance with the Health Protection (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020 has been positive across Neath Port Talbot and regular inspections are undertaken to ensure compliance. With restrictions, having been relaxed in respect of the opening of licensed premises on the 13th July 2020, the workload of the Licensing Team has increased as further enforcement and

inspections take place in cooperation with other stakeholders such as South Wales Police.

All other applications such as Commons Registration and Street Trading Licences have continued without disruption.

Registrars Service

On the advice of the General Register Office and the Welsh Government, all marriage/civil partnerships and citizenship ceremonies were cancelled from March 2020 onwards. However, because of restrictions now being relaxed and guidance being made available by the Welsh Government, the provision of marriages and civil partnerships have now recommenced at the Register Office (with the first such ceremony taking place on the 10th July 2020). Work is presently ongoing to rearrange dates that were required to be postponed to new dates and Cabinet agreed in June 2020 to waive any amendment booking fees that may be necessary to facilitate this. At present, ceremonies are only taking place at the Register Office (the first taking place on the 10th July 2020) with a limited number present (due to the size of the venue) but ongoing work is being undertaken with the approved premises in the locality to allow ceremonies to take place at those venues.

The General Register Office also advocated the suspension of birth registrations during this period, given that birth registrations have to be undertaken face to face. This meant that 124 birth registrations in the locality could not take place. The legislation has now since being changed to allow elements of the birth registration to be undertaken remotely meaning the level of physical contact that is required with individuals is now limited (only required to attend to sign the birth certificate). With some alterations being made to the premises to provide additional safeguarding to staff, the birth registration process re-commenced on the 26th June 2020, with the Neath Port Talbot Register Office being one of the first in Wales to do this. As of the date of this report, 51 births have now been registered.

The Coronavirus Act 2020 identified that changes were required to facilitate the death registration service and changes were made to allow this process to take place by telephone. This allowed all processing of such forms to be dealt with electronically or verbally (instead of having to be produced in person) which has had a very

positive impact on the service to the extent that consideration is underway nationally whether to retain these temporary changes. Since March 2020, the Registration Office has registered 387 deaths (with 64 being Covid-19 related), this being compared to a figure of 261, in the same period in 2019.

Mailroom

The dedicated mailroom and courier staff have continued to work from Port Talbot Civic Centre during the pandemic. As well as dealing with all incoming and outgoing mail (which has seen an increase because of increased public awareness and the provision of material for the safe and well service), they have also recommenced a courier service to members to assist in the participation in remote meetings. In order to assist other sections throughout the Council who are remote working a printing service has also been developed where sections are able to refer documents for printing to the service that are then subsequently mailed out.

Margam Crematorium

The work of Margam Crematorium is overseen by the Joint Committee of Margam Crematorium and a report on service provision during the Covid-19 Emergency Period was placed before the Joint Committee on the 21st July 2020.

3.2 Human Resources Division

Key service information

Human Resources

The **3 Professional Teams** are comprised of CIPD qualified HR Officers and managed by the 3 FTE HR Managers of the Division providing professional, specialist support for the most complex and difficult aspects of managing people and in maintaining employee relations, consultation and negotiating arrangements with trade unions. This includes putting in place the necessary employment framework, e.g. policies and procedures, etc to ensure the Council is legally compliant as an employer. The team have a key role to play in support the management of change across the Council, including change linked to the Council's financial situation.

Included within these teams are 3 posts dedicated to supporting sickness; one of these is funded by schools.

The **HR Employment Support Team** provide the administrative services to the Council that are associated with employment, including recruitment administration, pre-employment and safe recruitment checks, employment contract administration, etc and as well as providing basic HR information and advice. This team also has the important role of supporting redeployment activity, and providing advice and guidance to those at risk of redundancy. The team has now embraced the use of robotics technology to support service delivery.

The small **HR Workforce Information Team** support workforce data management, establishment control and provision of workforce data internally and externally and support workforce planning activity across the Council.

Seconded Trade Union Officers (UNISON / GMB)

The number of trade union representatives who are seconded is a matter that is discussed and agreed annually with the respective trade unions and within the available budget.

Learning, Training and Development

The team provide learning, training and development services to the Council as well as private and voluntary social care providers in the County Borough. The majority of employees in the team are funded through, and employed in line with, the Welsh Government's grant for the Social Care Workforce Development Programme, as well as match funding – services are largely focused therefore on training and developing the social care workforce.

A small corporate team of training officers provide focused training support to the rest of the Council in identified priority areas, for example, Health & Safety related training with Environment and the digital skills development of the workforce.

Occupational Health & Safety

The **Health and Safety** team deliver services in line with Health and Safety legislation and operate safety management systems. This helps minimise risks to health and safety by ensuring that they

are effectively controlled, managed and minimised. The team ensure that the necessary framework is in place through the provision of policy, procedure, advice, guidance and support where necessary, as well as supporting accident investigations. This team also provides support to the Council's Safety Advisory Group, which ensures safe event planning for special events held within the County Borough.

The role of **Occupational Health** is to provide management and employees with the medical advice required to support the management of attendance, reduce the impact of ill health and sickness absence within the workplace and to promote a safe and healthy working environment.

Emergency Planning

This small team ensures that the Council can comply with obligations under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (policies, plans and exercises). The team assess local risks in order to identify what we need to plan for, write and review emergency plans, work with other key organisations to enhance the management of an emergency, ensure that the Council has plans in place to deliver important services to the public during an emergency (Business Continuity Plans), share important information with local organisations to enhance emergency preparedness and provide a 24 hours, 365 days a year on call service to help in the management of a major emergency. The Health & Safety team also provide support to this on call service.

Work during Covid-19 Emergency Period

The majority of employees across the service have been reorganised to ensure that critical services have continued to be delivered throughout the emergency. In the main, staff across the service are now working from home. This ensured that:

- Council staff continue to be paid
- Key actions to support the Council's response to the Covid-19 emergency have been delivered
- Recruitment to critical posts has continued
- Office telephones have been diverted to mobile phones ensuring that managers and employees can contact officers from across the service to seek advice and support as necessary

- Activity has moved online where this has been appropriate and possible and this has reduced disruption in key employment processes
- Case work (discipline, grievance, etc), management of change, etc that commenced pre-lock down, has been progressed and resolved where it has been possible to do so
- Digital technology has enabled supervision “1 to 1s”, and team meetings to take place, reducing the isolation of team members
- The Council’s emergency planning processes can be activated as and when necessary (and this has proved necessary).

We have risk assessments in place for the circumstances in which officers do need to attend the workplace; this includes health and safety officers undertaking site visits, training officers delivering critical training (and where it cannot be delivered online or via an alternative method) and for any staff across the services who need to visit the office in the Quays to e.g. collect post, print documentation or ID badges, etc. Risk assessments have been shared and agreed with trade unions.

In addition to “work as usual” activity, the following key strategies were implemented to support the Covid-19 emergency response:

1. To support the **redeployment** of employees who are fit and able, and who cannot work from home. Working with other Heads of Service to establish critical skills shortages, and organising the safe redeployment and **urgent recruitment** of staff to plug the gaps, ensuring risk assessments and safe systems of work are in place and induction and necessary training provided. This has included actions to provide workforces for the Distribution Centre and the Contact Tracing Service. To date, 242 employees have been redeployed into alternative roles on a temporary basis.
2. To support the **safety of employees who have remained in workplaces** and to develop processes to ensure **the safe return of some employees to workplaces** where it has been risk assessed as appropriate. This has included developing risk assessments and safe systems of working, including advice and guidance on the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The trade unions have worked with the Health & Safety team to support the development of safe working practices and have supported the messaging around this to the workforce - this has helped provide reassurance to the Council’s employees. We have also focused

on the mental health support available to employees, particularly those at the front line. The Council's Communications Team have developed innovative methods of communicating these measures to employees including video messaging from the Chief Executive and Trade Unions, a cartoon video to demonstrate health and safety measures, and a virtual tour the Quays to help employees understand what to expect when they attend the office.

3. To support the **safety of employees working at home**. This has included the development of a Display Screen Equipment (DSE) Application to enable employees to risk assess their home working environment and provide a report to managers for appropriate action to ensure the safety of our employees. We have also developed resources for line managers now managing remote workforces, on line training and development and mental health support.
4. To manage **employees relations**, working with the Trade Unions in social partnership. This has included developing guidance for employees to implement Welsh Government and Public Health Wales guidance for employers, and National Joint Council circulars. We have also worked with the trade unions to develop local employment strategies to ensure the continued health and safety of our employees. We have sought to develop joint messaging with the trade unions, in order to provide employees with both consistent information and reassurance. Our seconded trade union officers have worked, mainly from home, throughout the emergency, as well as actively participating in volunteer redeployment, with 3 of the seconded officers helping out in the Distribution Centre.
5. To establish **Well-being and Mental Health** support for employees (see Section below for a summary of this activity).
6. To manage **workforce communications**, working with the Council's Communications team to ensure clear messaging and appropriate guidance, evolving with the changing situation.
7. To support the Council's Incident Management Team and Recovery Group. The **Emergency Planning** Team has been fully supporting both groups, providing cover 7 days a week, working tirelessly throughout the emergency.

Members can refer to the following resources that have been developed by officers from across the service and working with colleagues in Digital Services and the Communications team:

Coronavirus – Staff Information

<https://www.npt.gov.uk/staff>

Frequently Asked Questions

<https://www.npt.gov.uk/22499>

Staff Health and Well-being

<https://www.npt.gov.uk/22793>

Return to Workplaces Information

<https://www.npt.gov.uk/23777>

Homeworking resources

<https://www.npt.gov.uk/24395>

Online training resources

<https://www.npt.gov.uk/22632>

These resources are updated as the situation evolves.

Mental health and well-being support during Covid-19 emergency

This sets out a summary of the health and well-being support that has been made available to employees since March 2020.

Staff Health & Well-being website

This was launched on 9th April 2020 via Gov Notify message from the Chief Executive. Accessible inside and outside the Council, via range of digital devices, including personal smartphones. Provides support on a range of topics including:

- Look after your body (NHS Fitness Studio with gym led exercise videos, links to range of health websites, e.g. Action on Smoking and Health, Change4Life website, resources include food facts, tips, sugar swaps, recipes, and activities to help families be healthier and happier, etc)

- Wellbeing Resources to support mental health (includes online Cognitive Behaviour Therapy Course, online stress management course, NHS Coping Exercises, etc).
- Working from home (Desk set up, posture, mobility, stretching)
- Helplines and support services (Samaritans, Wellbeing Through Work, The Silver Line, MIND, etc).
- Advice for families and children (range of resource packs)
- Bereavement (resources from AtALoss, CRUSE, MIND, etc)
- Carers (links to Carers UK and Carers Trust)
- Domestic Abuse (Welsh Women's Aid, South Wales Police, You are Not Alone)
- Guidance for Line Managers, to help them support the health and wellbeing of their employees (CIPD tips on managing remote workers, tips for healthy home working, etc)
- Online training courses have proved particularly popular, with 1,040 courses completed between 23rd March and 10th July 2020. This includes mandatory training e.g. safeguarding, GDPR VAWDASV, as well as occupation specific training courses, Welsh at Work, Managing your Finances, Digital training, including TEAMS and Online Basics.

Online First Aid for Mental Health course

Prior to the Covid-19 emergency we had started to roll out this certificated course, provided face to face by Neath College to groups of around 20 at a time. The LT&D team have worked with Neath College to develop this into an online webinar, which is also certificated. 83 employees have completed this certificate since the online course was launched in June 2020.

Occupational Health Unit Helpline for employees

Monday to Friday, office hours provision providing advice and signposting to employees.

Wellbeing Through Work

The Council has been able to access this service, the mental health and wellbeing service provided to NHS employees. This provides a wide range of support on both physical and mental

health well-being including referral to specialist support services. This onward referral includes Trauma Support for those who encounter traumatic experiences.

Occupational Health Unit Referral Helpline

A referral service for managers to deal with critical OH matters. We are developing plans to recover OH Physician Clinics to The Quays subject to risk assessment and recovery planning.

Communications focus on wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing feature regularly in employee communications, including the Intranet, HR SWAY and In the Loop. Promotion of Mental Health Awareness Week in May, with the 'Kindness Initiative' and "5 Ways to Wellbeing".

Mindfulness Course

In partnership with UNISON and funded by WULF, this 4 week online course was offered to 2 cohorts of employees throughout June.

Return to workplaces following Covid-19 lockdown / Home working guidance

Risk assessments and manager guidance refer to the emotional well-being impact of the return to workplaces and working at home, as well as the physical arrangements that are necessary.

Anti-Stigma Talks

Delivered by Time to Change Wales, aimed at raising awareness of mental health stigma in the workplace. These will be provided online throughout the summer months.

3.3 Finance Division

Key Service Information

Accountancy Services – Includes maintenance of the financial ledger, budget preparation and monitoring, Statement of Accounts, Treasury Management (where we manage £300m of borrowing and £60m of investments), Insurance, Court Deputy Service.

Internal Audit – Produce, on average, over 65 formal audit reports per year and ensure good governance arrangements across Council Services.

Exchequer – We make 80,000 salary payments and more than 74,000 creditor payments a year.

Debt Collection and Cashiering – The Miscellaneous Income section administers c£35m of debts, whilst the Cashiering section deals with 1,900 transactions per week.

Business Rates – The service deals with the billing and collection of c£42m from more than 4,200 commercial properties. It also manages the collection of funds for the Neath Business Improvement District (BID); and with effect from 2020/21 the newly established Port Talbot BID.

Council Tax – The service deals with the billing and collection of £74m from more than 65,000 properties.

Benefits – This section handles the assessment and payment of £45m to 10,000 tenants and approximately £18m in Council Tax Support to some 17,000 council tax payers.

Social Care Assessments – This service provides assessment for all Social Care clients and payment of £34m to people for social care services.

Work during Covid-19 Emergency Period

Finance staff are in the main working effectively from home with full access to the required IT and telephony kit. On rare occasions, members of the team visit the Civic offices to carry out particular functions which cannot be performed from home but these are by exception only.

The ability of the Council's Digital Services team to work at pace to facilitate homeworking has meant that the Finance Division has been able to carry on providing services to customers in as normal a fashion as possible.

The only exception to the above is the Internal Audit Service where the team has been temporarily re-deployed to manage and resource the newly established critical Test, Trace and Protect (TTP) Service. The team will start to return to their substantive roles from the middle of August and all will have returned by September.

Throughout the pandemic the Director of Finance and Corporate Services and the Finance Division has worked closely with Welsh Government Officials, the Society of Welsh Treasurers, Distribution Sub Group and the WLGA. This has involved collating information and data for various returns, sharing best practice and developing and designing systems for delivering emergency policy initiatives often at little or no notice.

The following paragraphs provide some additional detail in relation to specific areas of the service.

Finance and Accountancy

The Council's Draft Statement of Accounts for 2019/20 was prepared during the lockdown and forwarded to Audit Wales by the beginning of June in line with the pre Covid timetable. The Draft Accounts were reported to Audit Committee on 9th June and the audit process is nearing completion. The final version of the Accounts will be reported to Audit Committee by the original pre Covid statutory deadline of 15th September.

In addition to the normal day job the accountancy teams have been required to prepare returns for the Welsh Government and WLGA both in relation to actual and forecast additional expenditure and lost income. This work has been crucial in terms of ensuring that the appropriate evidence and audit trails are in place so that the Council can maximise drawdown of funding from the WG Hardship Fund(s). As part of the emergency response the Accountancy team and Financial Assessments team have worked alongside the Social Services Commissioning team to agree and process additional payments to Care Homes ensuring that they could continue to provide care during the ongoing Pandemic

In order to ensure compliance with Welsh Government funding rules the team were required to develop new ways of recording and coding expenditure in relation to both Covid-19 emergency

costs and also costs incurred developing and running the TTP service.

Work is also ongoing to develop mechanisms for implementing the Welsh Government's policy to pay £500 to all eligible workers in the social care sector. This work is not only in relation to ensuring that Council employees receive the £500 they are entitled to but also working with private residential and domiciliary care providers to ensure that their staff receive the payment; and also finding a way to determine and pay eligible Personal Assistants.

The teams also prepared detailed estimates as to the forecast year-end financial projections for income and expenditure which fed into the Budget Update report presented to Cabinet on 25th June with further update reports to be published from September 2020 onwards.

Council Tax

The Council Tax team have been working from home and have been busy assisting tax payers affected financially by the Covid-19 Pandemic. Some of the help being offered to tax payers has included:

- Signposting them to the Council Tax Support Scheme (over 500 new claimants since 1st March 2020).
- Deferring payments for 2 months upon request
- Spreading payments over 12 months if initially paying over 10
- Lowering April and May instalments and spread balance June to March 21

All formal Council Tax recovery has been suspended during the pandemic however 'soft reminder' letters have recently been issues to tax payers who have fallen behind on their payments to encourage them to get in touch with the team.

Business Rates

The Business Rates team is made up of four members of staff three of whom work part time. This team have been impacted on significantly due to new work demands over and above the norm

during this period. At the start of the pandemic the Welsh Government announced a new NNDR Rate Relief scheme for businesses operating in the Retail, Leisure and Hospitality Sectors. The team worked tirelessly to ensure that this new relief to the value of c£7.7m was applied to 455 eligible accounts so that businesses received the correct bills for 2020/21 before the beginning of April.

The team have also been responsible for implementing the Welsh Government's NDR Grant schemes, these being:

- £10,000 grant for all businesses in receipt of Small Business Rates Relief
- £10,000 grant for businesses with a Rateable Value (RV) less than £12,000 in receipt of charitable rates relief and operating in the retail, leisure or hospitality (RLH) sectors
- £25,000 grant for business with an RV of between £12,001 and £51,000 operating in the RLH Sectors

Implementation of this scheme involved working with Digital Services to design an online application portal, targeting eligible businesses and then verifying applications received. The team will have been responsible for the payment of c2,500 grants supporting businesses to the tune of c£30m. Support in relation to this work has also been received from colleagues in Business Services of the Regeneration and Economic Development Section.

Exchequer Payroll and Creditors

The Exchequer Teams have working from home to ensure that Employees, Members and Creditors continue to get paid on time.

The teams have been required to develop new ways of paperless working in extremely short and challenging timescales to ensure that payments can continue to be made in a timely and accurate fashion whilst ensuring adequate controls are in place.

In addition two Members of the payroll team have been seconded to work on the development of a new HR/Payroll system which is due to be implemented with effect from 1st April 2021. Whilst proving a challenge due to the nature of remote working the project is currently on track and all milestones are being met.

Internal Audit

The majority of the Internal Audit team have been re-deployed to set up, manage and resource the critical Test, Trace and Protect (TTP) Service. The TTP service is vital to the Country's ability to begin relaxing lockdown rules and allowing parts of the economy to start to recover.

The Internal Audit team will return to their substantive posts over the course of the summer and all team members will have returned to Internal Audit by September. An updated Internal Audit Plan will be presented to Members of Audit Committee in September. During the early stage of lockdown the service provided advice and support for implementing new controls for new ways of working and most recently 1.5 FTE staff have continued to undertake audit work including reviewing NFI data outputs.

Housing Benefits and Financial Assessments

Benefits and Assessments staff have carried on performing their substantive roles from home. Benefits staff have been assisting tax payers affected by Covid-19 to apply for Council Tax Support and providing advice and signposting to other available support services.

Financial Assessments staff have been working with Social Services Commissioning Unit to assess and ensure that care providers receive the appropriate additional financial support during the pandemic so as to continue to be able to care for some of the most vulnerable and high risk members of our society.

Cash Receipting and Sundry Debtors

Despite the closure of the main Civic Buildings the Cashiers and Debtors team have continued to work mainly from home but on some occasions from the office. The cashiers have been processing income received into the Council's bank account and cheques received by post ensuring that individual tax payers and other accounts are kept up to date. The Debtors team have continued to raise invoices and deal with queries from the public ensuring that any income due to the Council is collected.

Court Deputy Service

The Court Deputy Service provides a service to vulnerable people who in the view of the Courts cannot manage their own financial affairs. This includes the distribution of cash allowances to some of them on a weekly basis. At the outset of the pandemic emergency arrangements were put in place to ensure that these vulnerable individuals were able to receive their allowances which they rely on to purchase life's essentials. The team worked with Social Services colleagues to put individual arrangements in place such as arranging to pay cash allowances to clients' support workers ensuring that no client was without their allowance.

4 Crime and Disorder Impact

The Council has a legal duty under Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to carry out all its various functions with "due regard to the need to prevent Crime and Disorder in its area". All service delivery is considered with this in mind.

5 Integrated Impact Assessment

There is no requirement for an integrated impact assessment for this report.

6 Workforce Impacts

See main body of report on cumulative impacts to staff as a result of Covid-19 pandemic and work undertaken.

7 Consultation

There is no requirement for external consultation on this report.

8 Risk Management

The Finance and Corporate Services have adapted to current working restrictions and sought to implement service delivery that aims to meet the financial and corporate needs of the Council as well as implementing systems and programmes of work to benefit the Neath Port Talbot locality during the current emergency period. Without such arrangement the Council would have been unable to

fulfil key services that have been necessary during the Covid-19 pandemic.

9 Recommendation

It is recommended that Members review and scrutinise the content of this report.

10 Appendices

None

11 Background Papers

None

12 Officer Contact

For further information on this report item, please contact:

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