
Sprowston Town Council

Internal Audit Report: 2019-20 (Interim Update)

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*For and on behalf of
Auditing Solutions Ltd*

Background and Scope

The Accounts and Audit Arrangements introduced from 1st April 2001 require all Town and Parish Councils to implement an independent internal audit examination of their Accounts and accounting processes annually. The Council complied with the requirements in terms of independence from the Council decision making process from the outset, appointing Auditing Solutions Ltd to provide the function to the Council annually. This report sets out those areas examined during the course of our recent interim update visit to the Council, which was undertaken on 12th February 2020, supplements the initial work on 18th November 2019, and will be subject to further update following the final visit at a date yet to be arranged after the year-end close down of the Accounts in May or June 2020.

Internal Audit Approach

In continuing our review of the Council's processes and records for 2019-20 we have again examined a selection of the Council's fundamental central financial control functions in order to provide assurance to members and the electorate that the systems continue to operate in accordance with best practice and approved Council procedures: we have also had regard to the materiality of those transactions and their susceptibility to potential mis-recording or misrepresentation in the year-end Statement of Accounts.

As in previous years, we have assessed the risks associated with each financial system, based on previous experience of the extent of potential for those risks coming to fruition and tailored our review programme accordingly.

Overall Conclusion

We are pleased to conclude that, in the areas examined to date, the Council continues to have effective systems in place to ensure that transactions are free from material misstatement. The Clerk and his colleagues are again to be commended on the quality of work produced and the high standards of documentation provided for the purposes of our audit visits

We are also pleased to report that no issues have been identified from the work completed to date to warrant formal comment or recommendation: consequently, it has not been considered necessary to append an Action Plan currently.

Detailed Report

Review of Accounting Arrangements & Bank Reconciliations

Our objective here is to ensure that the accounting records are being maintained accurately and currently and that no anomalous entries appear in cashbooks or financial ledgers. The Council remains a Sage software user, with four Current, Drawings, Salaries and Active Saver accounts operated at Barclays Bank with periodic Treasury Term deposit “investments”.

- We have again verified that an appropriate cost centre and nominal ledger structure remains in place for 2019-20;
- We have checked the opening Trial Balance in the accounting software for 2019-20 to the closing Financial Statements for 2018-19 to ensure that all the detailed balances have been properly rolled forward;
- We have checked and agreed two sample months’ receipts and payments transactions (April and September 2019) from all cashbooks to relevant bank statements, including all periodic inter a/c transfers to and from the Active Saver for the full year to date; and
- Finally in this area, we have checked and agreed the closing bank reconciliations as at 30th September 2019 on all accounts with no long-standing or other anomalous entries arising.

Conclusions

There are no matters arising in this area to warrant formal recommendation currently.

Review of Corporate Governance

Our objective in this area is to ensure that the Council has a robust regulatory framework in place; that Council and Committee meetings are conducted in accordance with the adopted Standing Orders and Financial Regulations and that, as far as we are able to ascertain, no actions of a potentially unlawful nature have been or are being considered for implementation.

- We have previously noted during 2018-19 that the Council’s Standing Orders and Financial Regulations had been the subject of periodic review and re-adoption and note that this continues to be the case with both documents considered “fit for purpose” with no revisions necessary at the Full Council meeting in May 2019; and
- We have extended our examination of the minutes of Full Council meetings held to date (mid-January 2020) to ensure that, as far as we can practically be expected to be aware no issues exist affecting the Council’s financial stability in the short, medium or long-term exist.

Conclusions

There are no matters arising in this area to warrant formal recommendation currently.

Review of Expenditure

Our objective here is to ensure that: -

- Council resources are released in accordance with the Council's approved procedures and budgets;
- An official order has been raised for supply of goods and services on each occasion where one would be anticipated;
- Payments are supported by appropriate documentation, either in the form of an original trade invoice or other appropriate form of document confirming the payment as due and/or an acknowledgement of receipt, where no other form of invoice is available;
- All discounts due on goods and services supplied are identified and appropriate action taken to secure the discount;
- The correct expense codes have been applied to invoices when processed; and
- VAT has been appropriately identified and coded to the control account for periodic recovery.

We have extended testing in this area and examined a sample of payments in the year to 31st January 2020, including all those individually in excess of £2,000 together with a further selection of every 20th cashbook transaction (irrespective of value) during the period. Our test sample comprised approximately 120 invoices in all, totalled just under £585,000 and represented 88% of all non-pay expenditure incurred during the year to that date.

With regard to VAT, we note that the Council continues to make timely, electronic return submissions: we have previously examined the detail of the March 2019 debtor and return and verified the disclosure in the Statement of Accounts, and subsequently at this interim update visit we have noted the appropriate conclusion of the December 2019 submission in accord with the underlying Sage control account balances as required.

Conclusions

There are no matters arising in this area to warrant formal recommendation currently.

Assessment and Management of Risk

Our aim here is to ensure that the Council has put in place appropriate arrangements to identify all potential areas of risk of both a financial and health / safety nature, whilst also ensuring that appropriate arrangements exist to monitor and manage any risks identified in order to minimise the opportunity for their coming to fruition.

- We note that the Council's insurance cover continues to be provided by Zurich (under a reasonably standard long term agreement) and have examined a copy of the current policy schedule for the year to March 2020. We note that Public Liability stands at £15 million, that Employer's Liability stands at £10 million, that Fidelity Guarantee stands at £500,000 and that adequate Loss of Revenue is in place at £75,000;

- We have previously noted in our final report for 2018-19 that the Council has sound Financial Risk Assessments in place and, subsequently from examination of minutes and other documentation provided, note that these were re-adopted in May 2019 for the current financial year; and
- We note that third party safety inspections are periodically undertaken by Zurich, supplementing the day-to-day reviews by grounds staff who provide sound regular reports and photographic evidence where applicable to the Administrative Officer for retention.

Conclusions

There are no matters arising in this area to warrant formal recommendation currently.

Precept Determination and Budgetary Control

We aim, in this area of our work, to ensure that the Council has appropriate procedures in place to determine its future financial requirements leading to the adoption of an approved budget and formal determination of the amount to be precepted on the District Council, that effective arrangements are in place to monitor budgetary performance throughout the financial year and that the Council has identified and retains appropriate reserve funds to meet future spending plans. Consequently:

- We note from examination of current Council and Committee minutes that periodic budget monitoring reports and accompanying variance analyses continue to be considered by members of the full Council (most recently to 31st December 2019) and there are no significant, un-explained variances arising therein to warrant further enquiry or explanation by officers; and
- We also note from examination of minutes for meetings held in November and December 2019 that members had been provided with the proposed budgets and Precept for 2020-21 and, subsequently, their deliberations were concluded at Full Council on 4th December 2019 with the Precept being formally adopted and properly recorded at £688,011.

Conclusions

There are no matters arising in this area to warrant formal recommendation currently.

Review of Income

In considering the Council's income streams, we aim to ensure that robust systems are in place to ensure the identification of all income due to the Council from its various sources, to ensure that it is invoiced in a timely manner and that effective procedures are in place to pursue recovery of any outstanding monies due to the Council.

- We are pleased to note that members continue to review the Council's scales of fees and charges annually, those for 2019-20 having been re-affirmed in the previous municipal year;
- As noted earlier in this report, we have checked and agreed two sample months' receipts transactions from cashbooks to relevant bank statements;

- We have examined a sample of Cemetery activities (August, September & October 2019) by reference to the detailed Burial Registers maintained by the appropriate officer to ensure that the fees charged for each interment were in accord with the published scales depending on Ashes or Full Burial, with or without Exclusive Rights and so on and that there was no undue delay in settlements of funds and relevant entries in the Sage nominal ledgers;
- A sample week's Diamond Centre hires (18th to 24th November 2019 totalling approx. 30 separate bookings) was tested by reference to the diary entries and sales ledger invoicing to ensure rates charged were in accord with the published scales and were settled without undue delay; and
- We have examined the current Aged Debtors report (as at 31st January 2020) and are pleased to note that there was just £1,588 in outstanding balances with no long standing matters of note.

Conclusions

There are no matters arising in this area to warrant formal recommendation currently.

Petty Cash and Credit Card Usage

We are required, as part of the Internal Audit Certification process in the AGAR to assess and give a view on the effectiveness of control over any petty cash account in use by the Council.

- The Council operates an extremely limited petty cash scheme, with a maximum holding of £50, which is “topped up” as and when required (with just one such transaction in the year from April to October 2019) and we have tested a sample month's payments for October 2019 to ensure that all were properly supported by supplier invoices or till receipts.
- Additionally, the Council holds a corporate Barclaycard with one authorised user, an overall credit limit of £6,000 and settlement in full by monthly direct debits. We have also tested a sample month's payments (September 2019) to supporting invoices or till receipts with no issues.

Conclusions

There are no matters arising in this area to warrant formal recommendation currently.

Salaries and Wages

In examining the Council's payroll function, we aim to confirm that extant legislation was being appropriately observed as regards adherence to the Employee Rights Act 1998 and the requirements of HM Revenues and Customs (HMRC) legislation as regards the deduction and payment over of income tax and NI contributions, together with meeting the requirements of the local government pension scheme as further revised from 1st April 2019 in relation to the employee contribution percentage bandings. Consequently, we have:

- Ensured that the Council reviews and approves pay scales for staff annually and has duly implemented the NJC award for the current year;

- Noted previously that the payroll service continues to be produced “in house” using bespoke Sage software and this remains the case in 2019-20;
- Agreed the amounts paid to employees by reference to the approved pay scales on the council’s establishment list, examining a sample of all those salary payments made in October 2019;
- Ensured that Tax and National Insurance deductions for all employees have been made applying the appropriate PAYE code and NIC Table;
- Checked that the correct superannuation percentage deductions are being applied where applicable;
- Ensured that any variations to standard payments, such as overtime and sickness and mileage, have been subject to formal timesheet records and approval by senior officers;
- Verified the net payments to staff from payslips to the summary Bacs settlement reports; and
- Checked and agreed the payment over of deductions to HMRC and Norfolk County Council from copy payroll reports to cashbooks and have, as part of the supplier payments testing noted earlier, summarised the month by month total payments with explanations obtained for any variances arising therein.

Conclusions

There are no matters arising in this area to warrant formal recommendation currently.

Investments and Loans

Our objectives here are to ensure that the Council is “investing” surplus funds, be they held temporarily or on a longer term basis, in appropriate banking and investment institutions, that an appropriate investment policy is in place, that the Council is obtaining the best rate of return on any such investments made and that interest earned is brought to account correctly and appropriately in the accounting records. We also aim to ensure that any loan repayments due to or payable by the Council are processed in accordance with the respective and relevant loan agreements.

- The Council previously had eight outstanding PWLB liabilities and we checked and agreed the instalment repayments in May and November 2019 from their third party “demand notices” to cashbook entries as part of the higher value supplier payments testing noted earlier in this report. Subsequently, following a detailed report and proposal from the Clerk in conjunction with considerations of potential future borrowings in relation to a street lighting project, we note that members approved the settlement in full (including future interest payments) of four of these loans and this was duly executed in December 2019; and
- As noted earlier in this report, the Council currently has two periodic Treasury Term deposits and we have verified those due to mature in 2020-21 to the Barclays “deal confirmations”.

Conclusions

No matters warranting formal comment or recommendation arise in this area currently.