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Minutes of the meeting of the **GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE** held at the Council Offices, Whitfield on Thursday, 7 December 2023 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Chairman: Councillor H M Williams

Councillors: S H Beer
M Bates
R M Knight
J P Loffman
L M Wright

Officers: Strategic Director (Corporate and Regulatory)
Strategic Director (Place and Environment)
Head of Corporate Services and Democracy
Head of Audit Partnership (East Kent Audit Partnership)
Deputy Head of Audit Partnership (East Kent Audit Partnership)
Democratic Services Officer

20 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor S C Manion.

21 APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no substitute members appointed.

22 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made by Members.

23 MINUTES

The Democratic Services Officer advised Members of a correction to the draft minutes within the resolution of item. No 17 and the need to amend 'him' to 'her' where required. Having agreed to that change the Minutes of the meeting held on 28 September 2023 were approved as a correct record for signing by the Chairman.

24 RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

The Head of Corporate Services and Democracy presented the Risk Management Strategy report to the Committee. The report addressed several areas identified for review following a Risk Management desktop review of the Council's Corporate Risk Strategy and Risk Register, undertaken by Zurich Resilient Solutions in August 2022.

The Strategy had been developed using examples shared by the Kent Risk Network who were consulted on their models of corporate risk management and examples of best practice elsewhere were sought. A draft of the Strategy was shared with East Kent Audit Partnership who provided feedback and these comments were integrated into the final draft.

The Risk Management Strategy was predominantly an internal document for officers and Members. An 'at-a-glance' style summary sheet would be included in a redesigned Risk Register to provide details to the public of the risks facing the Council.

Members' attention was drawn to a typographical error at page 12 of the Corporate Risk Toolkit at Step 6: Monitor and Update and that competition should read as completion.

It was explained that whilst some risks may not be possible to mitigate the Council may want to proceed to determine how to manage the risk and the key point was whether to tolerate the risk or act. Being a living document (one that is continually updated and edited), it was recommended that all risks should be documented to show the direction of travel of that risk even if the risk level was minimal (Risk Score 1) thus documenting the changes and mitigations associated with that risk.

RESOLVED: That it be recommended to Council that the new Risk Management Strategy and accompanying tool kit be adopted.

25 ANNUAL COMPLAINTS REPORT

The Head of Corporate Services and Democracy presented the Annual Complaints Report 2022/23 to the Committee. The report included the number of complaints received for each service provided by the Council for the financial year from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, detailing where the number of complaints had increased or decreased. Members were advised that an in-house computer system for handling complaints was in the process of being implemented and was due to go live on 8 January 2024, automating many of the manual processes currently in place and that, within the year, the Council had approved an amended Complaints Policy reflecting changes in line with Housing Ombudsmen guidance.

Members' attention was drawn to the following headlines within the report:

- The total number of complaints received had fallen from 281 in 2021/22 to 267 in 2022/23. Some of the key areas were as follows:
 - The number of complaints relating to Council Tax had increased by 19, from 22 in 2021/22 to 41 in 2022/23. This increase was expected to be due to the cost-of-living crisis.
 - Housing Options complaints had increased by 22, from 14 in 2021/22 to 36 in 2022/23 and had been due to staff shortages and the implementation of a new database which created delays to medical assessments and the processing of information.
 - Housing Repairs complaints had increased by 38, from 26 in 2021/22 to 64 in 2022/23. The majority of complaints related to the length of time taken to carry out work, some which were legacy complaints from East Kent Housing. The Council had been pro-active in seeking repairs, encouraging tenants to report through the complaints process.
 - Waste Services complaints decreased from 120 in 2021/22 (abnormally high and as a result of problems encountered with the new waste contract) to 12 in 2022/23.

- Two complaints made to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman were upheld and related to the Housing Options service.

Further, a typographical error was noted at paragraph 2.10 of the report and was corrected to read 'The decision was not upheld by the Ombudsman...'.

Members were advised that the service areas were responsible for the monitoring of the complaints made against the service and taking appropriate corrective measures. The new in-house computer system would be able to create a log to help identify emerging patterns. It would be the responsibility of the service managers to deal with re-emerging issues, including those involving contractors. Any complaints made against staff, such as staff attitudes and behaviours, would be dealt with by managers. There were different mechanisms in place to deal with staff issues (via Human Resources if necessary) and they would not be recorded on the complaints database.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

26

QUARTERLY INTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE REPORT

The Deputy Head of Audit Partnership presented the Quarterly Internal Audit Update Report to the Committee. The report included a summary of the work completed by the East Kent Audit Partnership (EKAP) since the last meeting of the Governance Committee.

The Deputy Head of Audit Partnership drew Members' attention to the following:

- The audits completed and concluded, which were: Substantial Assurance (Local Code of Corporate Governance and East Kent Services (EKS) – Housing Benefit Admin & Assessment); Substantial/Reasonable Assurance (Community Safety); Reasonable Assurance (Housing – Anti Social Behaviour); No Assurance (Planned Maintenance – Procurement and Contract Management) and an audit of East Kent Services – Housing Benefit Testing 2022-23 where an assurance opinion was not applicable.
- The seven follow-up reviews completed and that after follow-up: EKS Business Rates and EKS Discretionary Housing Payments revised assurance level remained Substantial; Homelessness and Housing Allocations revised assurance level remained Reasonable and Car Parking & Enforcement revised assurance level was Reasonable, having previously received No assurance.
- The number of audit days completed and provided an update to the report that as of 30 November 2023 75% of the audit plan was completed and they were ahead of schedule.
- The number of customer Satisfaction Questionnaires issued and the number returned was raised and whilst EKAP would like more of these completed and returned there was a steady 30% return rate achieved across the partnership.

Members discussed the Housing Anti-Social Behaviour audit and the areas identified for improvement, and particularly the lack of monthly data sent to Members about their wards. Councillor M Bates cited a virtual map that had been

used to record the number of incidents by ward that Members had previously been able to access. He was concerned that data was now only provided by Community Services and to provide a more accurate picture he would want data merged from Community Services, Housing Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) and Kent Police.

The Deputy Head of Audit confirmed that this had been addressed in the audit and identified as an area for improvement and that those recommendations had been accepted by management. The Tascomi system would increase the data available, pulling data from Community Services and Housing ASB, and would encourage combined working between the two teams. It was recognised that data from the Kent Police was not available, and the council was beholden to what it chose to share.

With regard to the Planned Maintenance – Procurement and Contract Management audit, an extensive action plan had been agreed with management and a follow-up would be completed within Quarter 4 to ensure that each recommendation was implemented and effective. A separate audit of procurement was underway to look at wider issues raised within the management response.

RESOLVED: That the update report be noted.

27 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was moved by Councillor S H Beer, duly seconded and

RESOLVED: That, under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the remainder of the business on the grounds that the items to be considered involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Act.

28 QUARTERLY INTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE REPORT - RESTRICTED

The Head of Audit Partnership introduced the report which provided details of a restricted audit completed by the East Kent Audit Partnership during the period and that had received a Limited assurance opinion. An update would be provided to a future meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED: That the update report be noted.

The meeting ended at 7.31 pm.