

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR RESOURCES
12 SEPTEMBER 2013**

Present: Councillors Batsford, Corello, Howard, Sinden, and Webb
(in the Chair)

Lead Members in attendance: Councillors Birch and Cartwright

Apologies were received from Councillors Davies and Pragnell.

8. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors made no declarations of interest at the meeting.

9. MINUTES

Councillor Howard amended his declaration of interest at the meeting held on 6 June 2013, and advised that he was a member of Unison, rather than GMB Union.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 6 June 2013 be approved as a true record, subject to the above amendment, and the minutes of the Annual Joint Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees held on 13 June 2013 be approved as a true record.

10. QUARTER ONE PERFORMANCE AND FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORT

The Head of Corporate Services presented a report to advise Members of the performance against the 2013/14 targets and performance indicators in Part II of the corporate plan. The report also provided a summary of financial information.

The Head of Finance advised Members that there had been significant interest in the vacant units at the Castleham Business Centre.

Discussion took place regarding the challenges faced in preparation for the phased introduction of the Government's Universal Credit. The report stated that it was unlikely Universal Credit would be implemented in Hastings during the current financial year. Members noted that, to date, Universal Credit had been piloted in areas with a dissimilar population demographic to Hastings; it was therefore difficult to accurately forecast training and resource requirements. The Council may also be required to provide additional face to face advice to claimants, following the changes. The committee highlighted the changes proposed under Universal Credit for consideration as part of the Scrutiny Review of Changes to the Welfare System.

Members were advised that the second phase of the Local Authority Mortgage Scheme had been well received; a further £100,000 was still to be allocated from this tranche of the scheme. Preparations for a third tranche of

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the scheme, with a further £1 million of funding from East Sussex County Council, were also at an advanced stage. The Head of Finance agreed to ensure that the council's website was updated with current information on the scheme.

Discussion took place regarding delays to the restoration of 6-8 Pelham Arcade. The delays had been caused by additional unforeseen works, due to the age of the building. In the meantime, the facility continued to be well used, and the project remained within budget. Members requested further information from the Estates Manager, on the likely completion date for the refurbishment. The committee also requested an update from the Lead Member for Regeneration on the wider restoration plans for Pelham Arcade.

Consideration was given to the possible slippage on the target for the number of serious fraud cases investigated. Members were advised that the team had made further progress since the report was published and that the new figures were closer to the target.

The committee discussed the collection rate for council tax. Members noted that collection rates had been exceptionally high in previous years. There had been a need to postpone court action during quarter 1 of this financial year, however, the team were now catching up with a back log of cases. Members considered the impact on collection rates of changes to council tax exemptions, which had recently been introduced. Members highlighted the importance of taking a consistent and fair approach towards collection of council tax, in keeping with the council's anti poverty strategy. Members noted that this issue would be examined further as part of the Scrutiny Review of Changes to the Welfare System and would also be referred to the Scrutiny Steering Group to consider an update to a future committee meeting.

Members considered preparations for the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER). The Head of Corporate Services advised that the Electoral Services team were undertaking training to prepare for the changes. Electoral Services had also recently conducted a dry run of data matching with the Department of Works and Pensions, and received a better than expected match rate. The Head of Corporate Services noted that there were still issues outstanding regarding central funding for the project. Members acknowledged that this was a large and complex project, which would result in significant changes to the way people register to vote. The committee wished to be kept up to date of plans for an all member training session on the subject.

The committee discussed the council's ongoing transformation to a leaner, more resilient organisation. The process included reviewing the council's committee structures and internal processes, to ensure they met the needs of the organisation in the future.

Discussion took place regarding the Community Contact Centre. The Head of Corporate Services explained that a thorough review of the project was in

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progress, with the aim of making the contact centre as efficient and customer focused as possible. The review also set out to ensure that the contact centre was working effectively with other council departments, by encouraging a more collaborative way of working. The improvements included reducing any unnecessary contact, by ensuring that all correspondence was clearly worded and easy to understand. The Head of Corporate Services highlighted that staff training had also been identified as a key issue and efforts were underway to facilitate training sessions, whilst still maintaining a fully operational contact centre. A specialist member of staff had been recruited to train contact centre staff to deal with revenues and benefits enquiries.

Councillor Cartwright gave an update on plans to develop and improve online training for members. He advised that a new module on equalities would go live shortly, after the remaining final checks had been completed. The Member Training and Development Group would continue to review the training offer for Members, and the committee's suggestions on training priorities were sought.

RESOLVED that –

- 1. the committee's comments on Quarter 1 performance be addressed by the relevant Lead Member(s) with appropriate action and report back.**
- 2. staff in the Corporate Resources Directorate be thanked for their hard work and achievements in this quarter.**

**11. FORWARD PLAN SEPTEMBER TO DECEMBER 2013 AND
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME 2013-14 QUARTER
ONE UPDATE**

The Senior Corporate and Democratic Services Officer introduced this item, and asked Members to identify any reports on the Forward Plan for more detailed consideration. He also explained that work had begun on the Scrutiny Review of Bathing Water Quality and the Overview and Scrutiny Charter, the Scrutiny Review of Changes to the Welfare System was due to commence in autumn 2013.

**12. SUGGESTIONS FOR FINANCIAL ECONOMIES AND NEW
SOURCES OF INCOME**

The Senior Corporate and Democratic Services Officer sought Member's suggestions for financial economies and new sources of income.

(The Chair declared the meeting closed at 7.20pm)