

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR RESOURCES
24 FEBRUARY 2014**

Present: Councillors Batsford (from 6.40pm), Corello, Davies, Howard, Martin (as the duly appointed substitute for Councillor Pragnell) and Webb (in the Chair)

Lead Members in attendance: Councillors Birch and Cartwright

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Pragnell and Sinden.

19. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following councillors declared an interest in the minutes as indicated:

<u>Councillor</u>	<u>Minute</u>	<u>Interest</u>
Webb	21	Personal – member of the East Sussex Health and Wellbeing Board

20. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 25 November 2013 and the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Budget meeting held on 30 January 2014 be approved as a true record.

21. QUARTER THREE 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 committee was updated on the ongoing refurbishment of the café area at St Mary in the Castle. An application for listed building consent, for the use of the premises as a café, had been submitted. It was hoped that the new café would be open by June 2014. The Council had committed twenty thousand pounds per year for the next three years, to contribute towards the maintenance of the building. Members noted that this was a significant saving on the previous running costs of the building.

Members welcomed the achievement of an unqualified audit opinion for the annual statement of accounts.

Discussion took place regarding the implementation of a council tax support scheme. The Council had worked with other East Sussex authorities to

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develop a scheme for council tax support, which would seek to minimise the impact of the changes on residents. It would be necessary to review the model for council tax support over the coming year, in light of the very significant budget reductions in 2015/16. The review would examine how many residents were likely to be affected by changes to council tax support, and the impact of amending the scheme on council tax collection rates. The committee wished to be kept up to date of progress with the review.

Members considered the administration of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs). The committee noted that the council had taken a proactive and flexible approach, including working in partnership with Amicus Horizon, to ensure that vulnerable groups were aware of the availability of DHP's. However, as the grant for DHPs was a fixed amount, payments must be administered to ensure that resources are available for the full financial year. The allocation of DHPs was monitored on a monthly basis, it was anticipated that the Council would spend close to the full allocation by the end of the financial year. The committee requested further information on the guidelines for administering DHPs, and the number of recipients over the 2013/14 financial year. It was suggested that the Head of Finance and the Revenue and Benefits Service Manager give an update at a future committee meeting on the review of the first year of allocations and to advise of plans for the administration of payments in 2014/15.

Members were pleased to note that income from industrial units at the Castleham Business Centre was above target.

Discussion took place regarding possible slippage on the annual audit plan, depending on the outcome of work to the Housing Benefit Grant Subsidy. The Head of Finance noted that the review of the Housing Benefit Grant Subsidy had been a lengthy process, but it was hoped that this target would be met.

Members noted the ongoing work of the Fraud Investigation Service. A number of high value serious cases had been investigated, and the Council had worked closely with other investigative authorities. Members thanked the team for their efforts.

The committee welcomed an update from the Head of Finance that the second phase of the Local Authority Mortgage Scheme, which was launched in March 2013, had now been fully committed. Information regarding the Local Authority Mortgage Scheme on the Council's website would be updated accordingly.

Discussion took place regarding preparations for the transition to Individual Electoral Registration. Members highlighted the importance of exploring funding opportunities, to facilitate the introduction of IER and to ensure that electoral registration was maximised. The committee reiterated the importance of targeting hard to reach groups, to ensure they are not disenfranchised by the changes. The Director of Corporate Resources

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responded that the Council would draw on learning from a number of IER pilots, which the government was holding with other authorities.

Members welcomed the continued work of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), which acted as a forum for collaboration across a broad range of agencies. Members noted that service providers, community representatives and the voluntary and private sectors were represented on the Board. Members suggested exploring opportunities for further representation of BME and equalities groups.

Members were advised of the introduction of a new Strategic Leadership Board which would identify the vision, priorities, business model and culture of the organisation. The Board would also manage the Priorities Income Efficiency Review (PIER) process, to ensure that the Council's available resources were targeted to meet its corporate priorities. An Organisational Development Group had also been established to support the delivery of a refreshed customer first strategy and customer charter. The group would also explore opportunities to engage with staff, to ensure the organisation's existing knowledge base was fully utilised and the Council operated as one team. Members noted the performance indicators around staff sickness absence, and suggested that this matter be added to agenda for the next meeting of Scrutiny Steering Group.

Members noted that the voice recognition system would continue to be refined over time. Councillor Cartwright requested that this item be added to agenda of the next Equalities Steering Group meeting.

The committee noted the success of the recent Switched on Hastings campaign. 15% of registrants had switched to a new energy supplier as a result of the campaign, against a national average of 11%. Further work would be undertaken to evaluate the initial campaign, and to ensure the scheme targeted those who were most in need.

Consideration was given to preparations for the next round of council tax billing, in particular the role of the community contact centre in handling enquiries from members of the public. The Head of Corporate Services advised that extensive pre-planning work had been undertaken, drawing on monitoring of customer enquiries and feedback from the previous billing period. A further programme of training had been completed, to enable contact centre staff to take a flexible approach when dealing with enquiries. Efforts were also underway to reduce avoidable contact, by improving the accessibility of council tax bills and ensuring all explanatory information was easy to understand. The Head of Corporate Services advised that the number of enquiries received was expected to reduce for this billing period, as there were no changes to the council tax support scheme. Members were pleased to note that the organisation was a living wage employer, with regard to all staff directly employed by the Council. The Council's contractors had been contacted regarding their current rates of pay. The response from the contractors would help to inform the approach in future.

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The committee noted the disruption to the revenues and benefits team, following a recent roof leak and heating leak at Aquila House, staff had been temporarily relocated to the Town Hall. Options to seek compensation for this disruption would be considered. The Director of Corporate Resources advised that the effective use of accommodation at Aquila House remained part of the Council's long term plan.

Members welcomed the move to enable more transactions to be carried out online. Paye.net had been rolled out through the Council. Members noted that this would enable the council to take a flexible approach when processing payments, and reduce avoidable contact.

RESOLVED that –

- 1) the committee's comments on Quarter 3 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.**

21. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY CHARTER

The Senior Corporate and Democratic Services Officer presented a report which invited Members of the committee to sign up to an Overview and Scrutiny Charter.

A working group of Members had drafted an Overview and Scrutiny Charter which was intended to make it clear to committee members, the Council's partners and the public what they can expect from the Overview and Scrutiny function. The draft charter had been based on best practice, and examples of Overview and Scrutiny Charters from other authorities.

The charter would also raise awareness of the work already undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny function, by including web links to previous reviews. Members noted that the charter may also form a useful learning resource, as it included web links to related content.

The charter had been considered by a recent meeting of Scrutiny Steering Group. The comments made by the group had been incorporated into a revised draft charter, which had been appended to the report.

Members welcomed the introduction of the Overview and Scrutiny Charter.

RESOLVED – (unanimously) - that:

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- 1) Members approve the Overview and Scrutiny Charter, and;**
- 2) the Overview and Scrutiny Charter be published on the Council's website**

Reasons for Recommendations:

The Overview and Scrutiny Charter sets out the principles of the Overview and Scrutiny function, and its impact on key stakeholders.

(The Chair declared the meeting closed at 7.25pm)