

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR RESOURCES

11 SEPTEMBER 2014

Present: Councillors Webb (Chair), Howard, Batsford, Sinden, Roberts, Beaver, Birch and Cartwright

Apologies for absence were noted for Councillor Atkins

9. **MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 12 JUNE 2014 AND THE MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL JOINT MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES HELD ON 19 JUNE 2014**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held 12 June 2014 and the minutes of the Annual Joint meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees held on 19 June 2014 be approved as a correct 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 2014/15 targets and performance indicators in Part II of the corporate plan. The report included a summary of financial information.

Members welcomed progress in maintaining high occupancy of the council's industrial units. The Head of Finance advised that the 3 factory units identified as vacant in the report were now under offer. The council had been informed that 3 further units would be returned in March 2015, at the end of their current lease, and efforts would be made to ensure that these are prepared to be marketed as soon as possible.

The committee noted that collection rates for council tax were currently below target. The Head of Finance explained that a new system had been introduced for recovering council tax payments. Under the new system, the council intervened after a court summons had been issued with the intention of exploring repayment options, rather than referring the case directly to a bailiff. The Head of Finance commented that the council would continue to take a necessarily firm approach, in cases where the council tax payer refused to engage with the council after a court summons had been issued. It was anticipated that the collection rates for council tax would meet their year-end target. Members welcomed this new approach and commented that the quality of advice on housing and council tax matters had also improved significantly.

Members were mindful that businesses now had the opportunity to pay non-domestic rates in 12 monthly instalments throughout the year, rather than 10 instalments. It had also been necessary to adjust the profiling on non-domestic rates following the outcome of some historic appeals. The Head of Finance advised that he anticipated the council would reach its target of a 97.5% collection of non-domestic rates by the end of the financial year.

Discussion took place regarding the transition to Individual Electoral Registration (IER). The Head of Corporate Services commented that the council had been required to introduce IER as a result of changes to legislation. When the system went live in June 2014, the council had achieved an 86% data match, which was higher than

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projected given the demographic of the area. Due to software issues, staff had been required to carry out more manual processes to administer the later stages of IER and this had resulted in the transition becoming more resource intensive than first expected. However, efforts continued to ensure that the changes did not adversely affect the number of people eligible to vote in the town.

The committee asked for an update on the work of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). Councillor Birch responded that the next meeting of the board would focus on efforts to improve educational attainment in the town; the meeting would include presentations by the Director of Children's Services at East Sussex County Council (ESCC) and the Head of the Ark William Parker Academy. The board also considered other issues of local concern, including efforts to improve bathing water quality and proposed changes to local bus services.

Members welcomed the use of i-pads across the organisations, the Senior Corporate and Democratic Services Officer added that this initiative would deliver further savings to the council as take-up of i-pads increased.

Consideration was given to the target to facilitate and promote the Switched On Hastings campaign, which encouraged local people to take part in collective energy switching. Preparations were underway to take part in the October 2014 auction, the Head of Corporate Services advised that the Sustainability Policy Officer would provide Members with a briefing note on plans for the initiative. Members were keen that the campaign should target vulnerable groups, particularly those using pre-pay meters; they suggested displaying promotional materials at pay points around the town. Ward Members were also encouraged to take an active role in raising awareness of the scheme amongst residents. The Head of Corporate Services acknowledged the comments of the committee; she added that it would now be possible for residents with debts to their previous provider to participate in the scheme, by transferring the debt to their new supplier. The terms of the contract were also being investigated to find out if it would be possible to contact residents who had registered for the first round of the scheme, but not taken up the offer.

Members were pleased to note that the average percentage of calls answered by the contact centre had increased in quarter 1 2014/15 to 80.0%, compared to 59.2% in quarter 1 of the previous year. The average assistance time had also fallen to 10.05 in quarter 1 2014/15, against 13.34 in quarter 1 2013/14. Councillor Cartwright agreed that the results were encouraging, he added that efforts continued to ensure the contract centre can adjust to the peaks and troughs in demand. The Head of Corporate Services said that efforts were underway to reduce avoidable contact, by ensuring that all correspondence from the council was clear and easy to understand. Reducing avoidable contact would also improve the flexibility of officers to deal with more complex enquiries. The opening hours of the contact centre were now 8.30pm – 5.00pm, which allowed staff to work a single shift and provide a more consistent service.

The committee congratulated the Legal Services team on their achievements over this quarter.

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Following a request from Members, the Head of Corporate Services agreed to provide information on short term and long term sickness as part of the next round of performance monitoring information.

Consideration was given to arrangements for delivering services into the future, and in particular the ongoing service reviews. The Head of Corporate Services agreed to circulate a document to Members to provide an overview of the process for service reviews. The Head of Finance advised that Shelter were due to give a quote on undertaking a review of the housing benefit service. He advised that the transfer of fraud investigations to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which was due to take place in November 2014, would end the current shared service arrangements with Rother District Council. Investigations were underway to explore options for a shared service with other authorities, to undertake the remaining fraud work the council would be required to carry out.

The Head of Finance explained that, following a review by the Chief Auditor on the number of electricity meters in the authority, a new system had been introduced on SharePoint to monitor the organisations spend on electricity. Each service now had access to its metered account, to monitor the use of electricity. Further efforts were also underway to reduce the council's spend on electricity by changing the seafront lighting to LED's.

The Head of Corporate Services had written to the council's five largest contractors to find out if they were living wage employers. The Head of Finance advised that Lloyds Bank, who had recently been appointed as the councils banking services provider, was a living wage employer.

The committee requested a breakdown of the gender split between full time and part time staff employed by the council.

The Head of Corporate suggested that the cross cutting target to monitor and co-ordinate the partnership activity in response to impact of the welfare reforms should be included within the papers for Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Services in the future.

RESOLVED that –

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

The reason for these recommendations was:

To enable the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to undertake their performance management function.

11. UPDATE ON THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2014/15

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The Senior Corporate and Democratic Services Officer gave a spoken update on the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme for 2014/15. Members had begun two of the three pieces of work they had identified as a high priority at the Annual Joint Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees. The Scrutiny review of engaging with academies was due to begin later in the year.

(The Chair declared the meeting closed at. 7.15 pm)