

JOINT BUDGET OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

28 JANUARY 2016

Present: Councillors Westley (Chair), Fitzgerald, Scott, Turner, Charman, Edwards, Beaver, Howard, Pragnell, Sinden, Webb and Batsford

Apologies for absence were noted for Councillor Clarke and Roberts

22. **APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR**

The Continuous Improvement and Democratic Services Manager invited nominations for the appointment of Chair for the duration of the meeting.

Councillor Fitzgerald proposed that Councillor Westley should take the Chair, which was seconded by Councillor Webb and supported by the remaining members of the committee.

RESOLVED that Councillor Westley be appointed as Chair for the duration of the meeting

23. **DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN 2016/17 TO 2018/19**

The Director of Corporate Services and Governance presented the draft corporate plan 2016/17 to 2018/19. The corporate plan set out the council's strategic direction and priorities, together with the service activities that would be undertaken to achieve them.

The Continuous Improvement and Democratic Services Manager explained that the layout of the draft corporate plan had been revised, to show how the key activities that would be undertaken in 2016/17 related to the council's corporate priorities. The plan also described how the success of these activities would be measured. He explained that draft work plans and performance indicators for the key activities would be submitted to overview and scrutiny members, to assist them with their performance monitoring role.

The committee welcomed the updated layout of the corporate plan, commenting that it improved the accessibility of the document for members and the public.

Consideration was given to the key activities and indicators of success set out in the plan. Further information on the Hastings Flood Plan was requested, which the lead member agreed to circulate by email.

Discussion took place regarding plans to mark the 950th anniversary of the Battle of Hastings. Councillor Chowney explained that a programme of events had been agreed, and further details would be released throughout the year. An independent ROOT 1066 website had also been launched, providing details on a range of events taking place in 2016.

Members asked for the timescale to agree a list of local Heritage Assets. Councillor Chowney explained that this area of work had initially been dependent on the adoption

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of the local plan. Now that the plan was in place, a process had been agreed by which a local group of interested parties would make suggestions on assets which could be included on the list, members of the public could also put forward suggestions independently.

The committee acknowledged that a number of aspects of the plan included work with partners to support improvements to key services which the council was not directly responsible for, such as education, highways and securing a high speed rail service. Councillor Chowney commented that it was important that the corporate plan reflected the council's broader ambitions for the town, and that the council would continue to work with its partner agencies to support improvements to key services.

Members noted that it was intended for the council-run leasing scheme for privately rented accommodation to become cost neutral by 2019, subject to the results of a pilot scheme in 2015/16. The Director of Corporate Services and Governance commented that members would continue to receive updates on this service as part of their quarterly performance monitoring report. Councillor Chowney added that interest in this scheme had increased over recent months.

The committee recommended that section 10 of the draft Corporate Plan, leisure, health and wellbeing, should reference the development of the Combe Valley Countryside Park. A new discovery centre at the countryside park was due to be opened in March 2016, and a range of other activities were being planned.

Members recommended that the key activities listed at viii in section 9, a good place to live, regarding bringing long term empty properties back into use should be amended to reflect that the target applied to 70 long term empty properties over two years and the improvement of 50 neglected properties each year.

Members noted that museum attendance figures nationally had declined over recent years, particularly at smaller venues. The Director of Corporate Services and Governance replied that members would continue to receive performance monitoring information for museum attendance figures over the coming year.

Discussion took place regarding whether the council's values should be amended to list religious beliefs separately from philosophical beliefs. Councillor Chowney explained that the wording of this section had been taken from equalities legislation, and the committee did not recommend that this was changed.

RESOLVED (unanimously) that the comments of the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the council's draft Corporate Plan for 2016/17 – 2018/19 be referred to the Budget Cabinet for consideration

The reason for this decision was:

To ensure the joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee comments can be considered by the Budget Cabinet, prior to final recommendations being made to the Full Council.

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24. CONSULTATION ON THE REVENUE BUDGET 2015/16 (REVISED) AND 2016/17, PLUS CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2016/17 TO 2017/18

The Assistant Director for Financial Services and Revenues presented a report to consult members of the committee on the revenue budget and capital programme. Comments made by the committee would be reported to Budget Cabinet at its meeting on 15 February 2016.

Members were advised of amendments to the draft report, the new capital project for an industrial unit in Brunel Road, as the potential occupant of the unit no longer wished to proceed with the project.

The council had also received a significant claim for mandatory rate relief from business rates from the National Health Service, in respect of the Conquest Hospital. The Assistant Director for Financial Services and Revenues commented that the claim impacted on all authorities in East Sussex, who were part of a rating pool for business rates. A number of other authorities had received similar claims, and the Local Government Association intended to raise this matter with the Department for Communities and Local Government.

Consideration was given to options to help mitigate the continued uncertainty in respect of business rate appeals. The Assistant Director for Financial Services and Revenues advised that additional funds had been set aside in the stability reserves, however, this approach could not continue into the long term. Members requested a breakdown of the allocation of the council's reserves as well as significant payments for business rates appeals made by the council.

The Assistant Director of Financial Services and Revenues acknowledged the continued areas of uncertainty affecting the council's budget. This included essential repairs and maintenance to the cliff face at Rock-A-Nore, which was owned by the council. It would not be possible to estimate the full cost of the project until initial works to remove vegetation had been carried out.

A compensation claim was also still outstanding in respect of Hastings Pier. The Assistant Director for Financial Services and Revenues explained that the legal fees incurred during this process would need to be met in 2016/17, and the allocation in the draft budget had been amended to reflect this.

Members were mindful that these areas of uncertainty were in the context of very significant reductions to the council's funding settlement until 2020.

Given the ongoing uncertainty facing the authority, Councillor Chowney explained that it was important for the council to explore options for income generation. He outlined a number of possible opportunities in terms of housing and energy generation which would be investigated. An additional suggestion was made about developing catering facilities, as part of the events package offered at Hastings Museum.

RESOLVED that members comments will be reported back to the Budget Cabinet on 15 February 2016

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The reason for this decision was:

Members views are sought as part of the consultation process.

(The Chair declared the meeting closed at. 7.35 pm)