

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

5 SEPTEMBER 2019

Present: Cllrs: Davies (Chair), Levane (Vice Chair), K Beaney, Cox, Foster, O'Callaghan, Rankin, Roberts (substitute for Charman), Turner

19. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies received for Cllrs: Barnett, Battley, Charman (substituted by Roberts)

20. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor	Item	Interest
Evans	Item 4 – performance monitoring Q1 report	Personal - freedom leisure member
Sue Beaney	Item 4 – performance monitoring Q1 report	Personal – Hastings Housing Company Director

21. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 11TH JULY 2019

Councillors thanked officers for the answers to the questions asked at the last Overview and Scrutiny meeting.

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting held on 11th July 2019 be approved by the Chair as a true record.

22. PERFORMANCE MONITORING QUARTERLY REPORT FOR 2019/20 - QUARTER 1

With the agreement of the chair this item was moved down the agenda to item 5

Councillors asked questions of the present officers about the report

Question: The improvement of street cleanliness is 4% compared to its 5% target what exactly does this mean

Answer: It is a percentage of tests failed so a lower percentage is less tests failed and therefore better.

Question: The length of time to process housing benefit applications is too long at 17 days, the private rented sector won't hold a property for two weeks how can we improve this?

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Answer: The council would like to process these faster. The council is in the upper quartile of the country for average days to process an application. It is a complicated process that requires co-operation of many different people. The council has aspirations to get this faster, but it should be noted that very few councils have it lower than 10 days.

Councillors passed on their appreciation of the planning team at achieving 100% on targets on major applications and exceeding targets of minor applications. The Director of Operational Services commented that whilst he would pass on the comments it should be noted that the planning team continue to be hit with sickness and absence so the performance may not continue into the future. It was also commented that note 7 of the report mentions the possible future performance loss.

Councillors commented that there is a lot of strain on staff at the moment causing sickness, this causes more strain on the remaining staff and this causes a vicious cycle. The also commented that the first focus should be protecting staff in their jobs.

Question: Is Hastings Borough Council's sickness in line with other authorities?

Answer: Need to look at sickness stats across the organisation. There has been significant amount of work looking at trends but there is a difficult winter ahead. In the crudest terms £1.5m is 50 staff posts and a number of posts are externally funded. This will cause stress and worry on staff and affect their work and personal lives. It is expected that the sickness and absence figures will get worse in the next two quarters.

Councillor Rogers commented that she meets with the Director of Corporate Services and Governance on a regular basis as well as the Executive Manager of People, Customer and Business Support. They are looking at where the sickness is, which departments, and are doing lots of work with occupational health and mental health. It has to have an effect on staff, but proud of the support and help that is there and available.

Question: Is the low number of homelessness cases prevented due to staffing issues?

Answer: Now that there are some additional staff in the role Hastings Borough Council expects the numbers to increase in the next three quarters

Question: Has the council collected more council tax? Can we improve on the number of days to process?

Answer: Universal Credits (UC) has affected the time to process and until that situation or the council tax reduction scheme changes then this will continue. Council taxes collected have been affected by staff levels as there are four missing posts now. The hardest debts to chase are being handled by solicitors; this is also a long process. It should be pointed out however that Hastings Borough Council is the billing and the reduction authority so it isn't claiming the extra money from the customer whilst being processed. Time to process doesn't affect the customer just the council's income.

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It was commented that collection has not increased due to the recruitment of recovery agents being difficult. There is a need to get more of this service online to help the pressure on the revenues and benefits department. It was also commented that the council has eased off on its use of bailiffs as it causes people great stress. It has always caused issues with people being targeted when they cannot afford to pay, instead of people who can afford to pay but are avoiding it.

Question: What does the council do about monitoring Bailiffs?

Answer: Can find out the answer

ACTION: Councillor Rogers to find out and report back about the councils monitoring process or Bailiffs.

Question: With the average days to process a new benefit claim at 14 days and the average days to make a change at 4 days, it seems that once a claim is on the system it is faster to process changes. Is this due to Universal Credits?

Answer: Universal credits (UC) are causing significant problems for Hastings Borough Council. Once someone has been put on the system and is in the council's control it is much faster to process as it doesn't involve back and forth with other organisations.

WASTE

Councillors commented that with the councils new in house street cleansing team (DSO) being in its early stages, it was a positive report on their progress so far. However it would be better to look at it in more detail when it has been operating for a longer period.

It was commented that the new team is a large team and will continue to work hard. The performance so far is already a great achievement.

Councillors commented that the areas the Hastings Borough Council control and cleans are looking much better. However it is now making the areas that are not under the councils control look much worse.

It was commented the setting up of the DSO was well done and officers are delivering as asked. There are still parts to sort out and Hastings Borough Council will be looking at possible things to extend to in the future if success continues.

MODERNISATION

Councillors passed on their congratulations to the team responsible for modernising the papers presented to overview and scrutiny.

Question: With all the work that has been done on the plain English project being effect so far, where is the project at the moment? Also the plain English and project tools applied boxes have not been ticked for this report why is this?

Answer: The plain English project is led by the communications team and has so far had a 96% staff uptake. The council now has communication champions

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that help staff realise that professionalism doesn't just mean fancy words. As for the website, the council needs the resource to allow officers the time to fix it.

ACTION: Councillors would like an update on the customer first and plain English project from a member of the communications team.

The Democratic Services and Continuous Improvement Manager commented that the project tools were applied to each individual part of the report rather than the report as a whole. And that he ran out of time for the plain English review.

It was commented that there are online course for councillors to complete and all councillors should have access to these now. The IT team are currently looking at google analytics and making sure that the right thing comes up when it is searched for. Also they are uploading forms to the website, but they are down to two and a half members in the team. It was noted that other authorities have commented on how good Hastings Borough Council's website is.

Question: Why are the digital first team being trained in business analysis?

Answer: This is the new team that was agreed by councillors at full council. There are a number of officers trained within the council now but digital first have been trained so they can analyse teams and successfully upload services online.

Councillors commented that the success of the council moving towards a project management approach should be celebrated.

It was also commented that all those officers have been trained in PRINCE2 (a project management approach). Councillors will soon be getting a tailored version of this training so they can understand the way the council is now working.

Question: Did the new document management system go live and was it successful?

Answer: Director for Corporate Services and Governance will find out details.

ACTION: Director of Corporate Services and Governance to find out about new document management system and report back to overview and scrutiny.

HOMELESSNESS

Councillors commented on the Syrian resettlement programme. They commented that the communication around the project will be very important as the support for the refugees has been great but it highlights the help needed by some locals in the same situation.

It was commented that the Syrian resettlement programme has been very successful in Hastings. This has been down to the officers and the programme itself. It is now over 100 families and is a very well-funded programme. The refugees are going into private rented accommodation and not social housing and the funding received is very specific.

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Councillors commented that longer term residents are facing more issues and this might cause resentment and affect community cohesion. A local who would not require as much support but may seem to get nothing. How does the council communicate this to the public.

It was commented that the refugees are able to work and study here once they have gone through the programme. They will be getting Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate housing and nothing better than that subsidised. Houses are found through the private rental sector.

ACTION: Director of operational services to find all the information about the scheme and circulate to councillors.

Councillors commented that they need to be conscious of the impact BREXIT could have on the programme and on community cohesion

Question: What is the new model for the Social Lettings Agency (SLA). The SLA was set up prior to the Hastings Housing Company (HHC) why are both of these needed?

Answer: There will be a report on the new model for the SLA coming to cabinet soon. What will be true is that the SLA will not be able to rely on the HHC income. The financing will need to be different. There will be an opportunity to debate why both are needed at the cabinet the report goes to.

Question: Are the SLA and homelessness prevention separate or are they linked?

Answer: There is a link as the SLA will help find permanent accommodation from emergency accommodation; this is keeping people off the streets. A stock of temporary accommodation has been purchased and the council will look at acquiring more in the future.

Question: Developers are saying that they are building affordable accommodation but it is not affordable. Can we have a more concrete strategy?

Answer: Figures coming from some of the new builds are staggering; the affordable housing at Archery Road was very impressive. All that can be done is to keep a watching brief on this.

Question: Regarding social rent, housing associations changed the status of peoples rent when they moved out. Did this ever get reversed? How are housing associations calculating rents?

Answer: Not sure about this but can contact the two housing authorities and ask.

ACTION: Director of Operational Services to contact the two housing authorities to see how there pricing is calculated.

Question: How is the HHC doing on its targets set by the leader of 140 units by 2019/2020?

Answer: Emphasis from earlier reports has shifted to acquiring properties £5m has been spent on the HHC so far looking to make a business case for more.

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The government has changed the rules on purchasing property so it is less favourable for the council to purchase to rent.

Question: What is the leaders view on right to buy in the private sector?

Answer: Not opposed to the idea if they are replaced like for like. It is a good idea in principal.

DEVELOPING THE TOWN

Question: Two large developments in the report. How are the section 106 arrangements arrived at? Who has input into those arrangements? Is there any scope for ward councillors to be involved in this process?

Answer: section 106 is a complex area and would be better to set up a session with a planner to explain it fully. Other councils use Community Infrastructure Levy's (CIL's) which could be seen as more of a tax. Section 106's are more strict. With the workload on planners at the moment it would benefit to get them to prepare a briefing note rather than arranging a meeting.

ACTION: Planning team to prepare a briefing note for councillors on section 106 and the section 106 presentation to be recirculated to councillors.

Question: The report mentions a consultant for a feasibility study for the Bohemia area development plan. It is an ambitious and expensive plan but we haven't heard much about it

Answer: The council is not sure what it is going to be doing with the bohemia area yet. The feasibility study will tell the council if it should or how to do it. The study will assist councillors in the scale of their ambition.

Question: With speculation rampant how will the public be kept involved?

Answer: A communication plan will be attached to the project plan

ACTION: Communication plan to be circulated to councillors as soon as available

It was commented that Travelodge are looking to build a hotel there and the council is seeing if this can be fit into the plan. They cannot be made to wait two years whilst the development begins to see if it's possible as they will go and build somewhere else.

Question: Regarding the governance on the local plan update, how are the stakeholders defined? How do local Councillors fit in? How do Councillors get involved?

Answer: Through the local plan monitoring board, they make sure that policies are in place for the future developments. Stakeholders were chosen by a consultant. Once it comes back it will be shared with all councillors and comments and concerns will be welcomed.

It was commented that when the council developed its local plan there was a consultation strategy. It has to be approved as part of the process as well as publically scrutinised. It was changed as part of the public examination. It finally has to be approved by a government inspector. The plan will be very challenging, housing is

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especially challenging as is the integration of climate change. There will be plenty of opportunities for councillors to get involved along the way.

ACTION: Councillor Forward to find the consultation strategy and circulate.

Councillors commented that climate change is a very important issue especially in development. The policy needs to be sure as Councillor Evans could become the target of criticisms.

INCOME GENERATION

Question: The business plan that went to cabinet on income generation for the housing company. There was a provisional view about acquisitions and advice that a new business plan would be needed. The report went in July for this and was very comprehensive. How is the HHC continuing without a business plan?

Answer: There is a business plan but it is out of date, so everything is on hold until it is updated. The report in July detailed the money spent on commercial property and energy programmes.

It was commented that energy generation is longer term money than commercial property in that it takes longer to yield financial results. The council hopes that favourability will be given to clean energy in the future. It does not generate money for the council at the moment to put green energy generation on commercial buildings. Ground mounted solar will be more profitable in the future as less green energy generation becomes less attractive. Commercial property yields the best instant income for the council at present, and the council can look to sell assets in the future to try and purchase commercial property outside of the borough.

Question: With a longer term aim from energy generation and climate change is the council reconsidering its aims?

Answer: A process has been agreed where discussions can be had with natural England to be involved in energy generation plans. As energy prices increase the green energy generation schemes will increase in value. The cost is higher than the council initial thought but the cost of the whole scheme needs to be re-appraised.

It was commented that the social values of green energy generation need to be considered as well.

BLUEPRINT

Question: With reference to engagement with councillors in the report is this all councillors or just cabinet members?

Answer: Cabinet members with oversight from SOAPB. Other councillors and stakeholders will be after this.

Question: What does EPISTEL stand for?

Answer: Project management term, means; Economic, Political, Information, Sociocultural, Technological, Environmental, Legal

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TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE

Question: With the new post of lead councillor for climate change now in place how is the plan going towards our greener goals as a council?

Answer: The plan so far has been very tricky, there is only one officer to support at the moment but recruitment is underway for a second. Keen to bring procurement back in house so the council can use more local businesses and services to save fuel and decrease carbon footprint of the council. The council's climate change strategy needs updating and this will be done soon. Work has started with the community as it will take the efforts of everyone and not just the council to fix this crisis. There is also an urgent need for housing in the borough so compromise will be necessary in the building of these homes but championing that the compromise not be the climate change aspects. In this respect Hastings Borough Council is ahead of most local authorities.

Question: Are schools being approached, especially around diet?

Answer: Has been a lot of work with schools in Hollington. Currently looking at turning run down community playgrounds into community gardens. Looking at greater awareness around diet. Concerning that the food bank in Hastings was empty last week, so very behind communities growing their own food. But will take Scrutiny's suggestion going forward about move involvement with schools and diet.

Question: Will Section 106's be used in future for solar panels on houses and batteries in houses?

Answer: Straightforward answer is planning policy is currently being reviewed to be updated. This will revise the policy to include these tools. Planning law however will affect this and the main thing is how happy everyone is with the planning policy going forward.

It was commented that young people are already ahead of the curve when it comes to diet and its effect on climate change. A lot of young people are already moving to more plant based diets and eating less red meat. There have been marches locally and in the town. Hastings Opportunity Area (HOA) have run a lot of projects over the summer about climate change. Young people seem to have a strong feeling about waste, especially beach waste so the council should look at a seaside code similar to the old county side code.

Question: So there will be a climate change strategy put in place?

Answer: Yes

Question: A lot of expectations around developers and what we would like them to do to make builds greener. How do we make them comply with these aspirations?

Answer: Through the local plan the council can include things to inspire developers. The council can talk to developers to get across our aspirations and the council can use its position as a developer to set an example for other developers.

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Question: What is the thought on building on green space, especially Brownfields sites?

Answer: There have been many discussions on this already and the coombe valley site will have less than 0.5% built on and this will back mostly onto housing. In terms of biodiversity gardens are more diverse than playing fields. It would be great to have as many green spaces as possible but there is a serious need for housing so there must always be some compromise. The council is doing everything it can to be as sensitive as possible. The Council doesn't own most brownfields sites so cannot build on them.

Question: Multi school academies don't seem to be taking climate change as seriously as they can be will you be attending these schools to talk about this?

Answer: Met with many of the Hollington schools already and willing to visit all the schools in the future.

Councillors' commented that scrutiny has a role in supporting the lead councillor for climate change and the writing of the process. Also a monitoring role to make sure officers and senior officers are supporting to the best of their ability. Scrutiny can also help think through some of the strategy with the lead councillor for climate change and some of the work scrutiny does can be used to support in the task at hand.

Question: Can climate change be moved further up the agenda in future as it is an important issue?

Answer: Yes

Councillors commented that the large programme in this report is a testament to the council's ambition. Councillors also raised concerns around ward councillors not being considered stakeholders in projects affecting their wards and agreed that this can be looked at in the stakeholder matrixes in the future.

Councillors voiced their gratitude to former Overview and Scrutiny member Councillor Andrew Cartwright who passed away recently and passed on condolences to his partner and reminder councillors of the funeral date.

RESOLVED that:

- 1. That the committees comments on 2019/20 performance be addressed by the relevant Lead Member(s) with appropriate action and report back**
- 2. That staff be thanked for their hard work and achievements**

Reasons for Recommendations

To assist the council to undertake performance management arrangements

23. FINANCIAL MONITORING QUARTERLY REPORTS FOR 2019/20 - QUARTER 1

With the agreement of the chair this item was moved up the agenda

The Assistant Director Financial Services & Revenues introduced the item. He commented that there is a new financial management code coming in, so to coincide with that the decision was made to improve and extend the financial information given

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to overview and scrutiny. This information is similar to the information that is given to Cabinet Agenda Planning (CAP) and Cabinet. He went on to comment that from recent reviewing and work done by the finance team there has been an update to the deficit analysis. There are savings expected however the temporary accommodations costs have increased.

Councillors thanked the Assistant Director Financial Services & Revenues for the report. Councillors asked if due to the current financial climate, will pensions be a larger liability on the council? The Assistant Director Financial Services & Revenues answered that pensions are a large expense for the council and the large £41m is not all bared by the council, it is valued and from that valuation the amount the council pays is calculated. This will be paid in April next year and contributions will cover the actual deficit over a 20 year period. He also commented that a recent court judgement (the McLeod Judgement December 2018) pensions are currently under government wide review.

Councillors commented that the report is much easier to understand than previous ones but with the council's plain English and readability guidelines can the report be improved in the future to make it more accessible for everyone. They also asked if the terms positive variance and ERP could be defined for clarity.

The Assistant Director Financial Services & Revenues answered that the council is aiming for the report to be simpler in the future. He also answered that positive variance is an underspend on additional income, and ERP stands for Enterprise Resource Planning and is the council's finance and HR system that they are in the process of being fully operational..

Councillors asked that with the forecasted deficit of £1.9m looking more like £1.5m how long can this be maintained with reserves, how robust is the council?

The Assistant Director Financial Services & Revenues answered that the £1.9m has reduced as a result of savings so the actual deficit figure is closer to £1.5m. The council is currently still using the transitional reserves and not the actual reserves. If the £1.5 million savings are made this year then the transitional reserves will be available for next year only.. The actual reserves can be used but this will diminish money to do projects identified by the council. The main intention of the council is to have a sustainable budget.

The Director of Operational Services commented that management agree with finance on this point and the council will not have a forward going role if the reserves are all used and it is critical that this doesn't happen.

RESOLVED that:

- 1. To accept the contents of the report, and the actions within the conclusion and management action section.**
- 2. To consider the level of detail provided and whether more or less information is required.**

Reasons for Recommendations

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To assist the council in understanding the financial position and particularly areas of over and under spend. This assists in identifying areas for review in the revised 2019/20 budget and the production of the 2020/21 budget.

24. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

24.1 Confirm date and group for S106

Councillors agreed that this item would be discussed at a later date.

24.2 Regeneration Funding Review

Councillors thanked officers and colleagues for their input and assistance on the project scoping that has been going ahead for the scrutiny work programmes. Councillors were reminded that the next Scrutiny Steering Group meeting is to be held on the 25th of September.

Councillors commented that there will soon be a group meeting for all female councillors to discuss Hastings Borough Council policy and how it fits female councillors. It was commented that similar groups could be set up to discuss disability inclusion, childcare and full time working arrangements.

Councillors also commented that they would consider splitting quarterly scrutiny meetings into two parts and having the chair and vice chair alternate meetings. This would prevent meetings going on too long in the future, but would mean more meetings.

(The chair declared the meeting finished at 21:00)