

# OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17 DECEMBER 2019

Present: Councillors Davies (Chair), Levane (Vice-Chair), Barnett, Battley, Beaney, Cox, Foster, O'Callaghan, Rankin, Roberts and Turner

## 29. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None

## 30. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor	Item	Interest
Rogers	32.	Personal- Has coordinated events for Happy Harold

## 31. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**RESOLVED** – that the minutes of the meeting held on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2019 be approved by the Chair as a true record.

## 32. FINANCIAL MONITORING QUARTERLY REPORTS FOR 2019/20- QUARTER 2

With the committees consent the Chair moved this item on the agenda.

It was highlighted that the data in the report was from September. Updates to this are unavailable due to the Assistant Director Financial Services & Revenues unable to attend the meeting due to ongoing Budget commitments.

The current deficit has reduced from £195,000 to £159,000. The Councils current funding settlement amount from national government should be known soon. There are other factors contributing to the Councils final sum that would need consideration. The budget will be published in January but may be subject to change before the budget council meeting February.

Councillors commented that the reduction in deficit had been through the use of funds from the transitional reserves and asked if they would run out. The officers advised that when councillors voted on the budget in February they agreed to transition reserves. They suspect that they would need to be used again next year but when they would eventually run out.

Councillors commented that a lot of the savings were one off salary savings. They enquired about departmental efficiency savings for the long term. Officers responded that the salary saving were a combination of not needing to recruit or not being able to. Efficiencies savings were being continued to try to be found. Previous efficiencies had been used in budgets to prevent redundancies but the council now needs to consider this option in order to save money.

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There was a significant overspend in the homelessness of £355,263. This was due to the significant demand for bed and breakfast temporary accommodation and a lack of affordable social housing properties for people to move into. Councillors asked when this would reach a saturation point. Officers agreed that it was unsustainable.

To help with this situation the council has brought a batch of properties intended for temporary accommodation use. The council intends to buy a second batch. This will allow us to save on costs and also control the standard of accommodation people are receiving. There is still a need to strengthen structures that help homeless people external to the council. At a later date an expert will be brought in review what we are currently doing to make sure we are doing everything viable.

The Assistant Director Housing & Built Environment is exploring a number of options including the Councillors suggestion of setting up a Housing Revenue Account to help acquire homes.

The Councillors spoke about how we have spent £65,000 on Cliff railways which generates revenue for the council. They questioned why £11,000 had been spent on Happy Harold (open topped tram bus), as it doesn't make any revenue. Should the funding be stopped and Happy Harold retired to a museum.

Officers responded that the repairs to the Cliff railways were more complicated than anticipated and became more expensive. The decision to fund Happy Harold is a political one.

Councillor Rogers declared an interest as she is currently helping to coordinate Happy Harold events. The £11,000 was needed as running repairs on Happy Harold hadn't been done. There is currently a full programme of events. They do not charge the public during these but they have received £3000-£4000 in donations. Currently this money goes back into an account run by the trolley committee, maybe in the future this money should be returned to the Council instead. Happy Harold will be making a trip on Christmas Eve to the deprived wards north of the borough where children will be able to see Santa.

Councillors asked if there was a business plan for Happy Harold. They were concerned that the Council was subsidising a hobby group. Councillors would like it run more like a commercial enterprise.

Councillor Rogers responded that a business plan was being created next year in the off season. Happy Harold is now being run more professionally. Risk assessments have been done and changes such as uniform have improved the image from hobbyists to professionals.

Councillors believed that it may be worth looking at smaller budget items such as Happy Harold to see that we are getting the best out of these assets. Councillors believed that whilst it could be small amounts of money, cumulatively they could still contribute given the Councils financial situation.

Councillors also raised the possibility of looking at events in town that the council contributes too such as Hastings Week and venues such as St Mary in the Castle.

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Officers reminded Councillors that Officers had been through the budget line by line. There is a need to find £1.5 million cuts but this does need to be done in priority order. Councillors have a copy of the budget book and are welcome to look through and identify possible areas of savings. Councillors responded that not all elements that they are concerned with are identifiable in the book.

Councillors asked further questions about the repairs to the Cliff railways. They asked if they could get further information about this.

### ACTIONS

- *Councillors would like a list identifying smaller budget heads such as Happy Harold*
- *Councillors would like a list that identifies smaller contributions to events and venues such as St Mary in the Castle, Hastings Week, Hastings Contemporary and other festivals and events*
- *Councillors would like information about the cliff railway repairs including;*
  - *How long the repairs are estimated to last*
  - *Was a full survey done of the condition of the site*

### **RESOLVED that:**

**To accept the contents of the report, and the actions within the conclusion and management action section**

### Reasons for Recommendations

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

### **33. PERFORMANCE MONITORING QUARTERLY REPORT FOR 2019/20 - QUARTER 2**

Councillors looked at the performance summary section of the report first and looked at the performance indicators. Councillors were keen to celebrate the successes of several areas and ask for clarity in others. These included;

- **Street cleansing:** this had recently been brought back in house for the Council to run. Councillors were pleased with the project management to set this up but also how successful it has been in improving the cleanliness of the town.
- **Planning:** the department has exceeded targets despite having staff shortages. Councillors recognised this had not been an easy task in these circumstances.
- **Housing benefit:** the days to process a new claim were met the indicator but some councillors would like to see this quicker as they feel this could impact tenant and landlords relationships

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- **Council tax and Business rates:** Councillors asked that it looked like collection rates were at approximately 60%. The officers responded that this will increase as the year goes on (cumulative figure). The figure was lower due to no Recovery staff recruited. There are now agency staffs in place and improvements are expected.
- **Long term empty properties & neglected and derelict building improvement:** Councillors could not see the correlation between these two targets (number 11&12). Officers advised that the figures were currently incorrect. Staff shortages and new software systems contributed to this. The figures for Q3 will be better.
- **Homelessness:** Councillors congratulated the work by officers on helping homeless residents. Officers confirmed that the increase in homelessness cases has correlated with overspend on bed & breakfast accommodation. Councillors should expect to see this decrease as there are fewer cases but also shortened stays. Currently there are large shortages of social housing that prevents people from moving from temporary accommodation.

In order to move people from temporary accommodation into private landlord run accommodation, it has to meet liveable standards. Housing stock has improved in the town's private sector due to schemes such as selective licensing. Councillors raised that some of their ward residents were experiencing poor conditions from Housing Association properties.

Officers raised that there are regular meetings with the Housing Associations and the performance indicators are regularly met by them. The Housing Associations have also made improvements at the Councils previous requests.

Councillors believed that when residents ask for improvements or complain that this takes a very long time to resolve and residents have to live in poor conditions during this time.

It was suggested given how important Housing was to Councillors that there was a meeting with relevant Councillors and Officers as well as representation from the local Housing Associations.

- **Elections:** Councillors recognised the effort that Officers put into the recent election especially given the 5 week turnaround. They wanted to thank all Officers for their contribution to this.

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- **Museums:** Councillors were very pleased with the figures. The new manager was recognised for this and the secured funding for outreach work.
- **White Rock theatre:** Councillors would like more information on the outreach work. The performance had improved from last year.
- **Freedom Leisure:** Councillors expressed concern that the Summerfields swimming pool was a municipal one and that residents felt excluded when they are unable to access the facility when private parties are being held.

Councillors recognised the need to raise income but were concerned by the effects of this. Officers advised Scrutiny could look at the terms of the agreements when the next opportunity arises. Councillors would like more information about the outreach work.

- **Developing the town:** Councillors had questions relating to the Tilekiln and the Pilot field planning agreements. They also would like more information about the Memorandum of Understanding with Rother district Council.

### ACTIONS

- *Housing Officers and representatives from local Housing Associations (Orbit and Optivo) to attend Overview and Scrutiny*
- *Information about the outreach work of the White Rock Theatre Contractor*
- *Information about the outreach work for Freedom Leisure*
- *Under 'Developing the Town' there was a line that read;  
"Memorandum of Understanding with Rother District Council drafted pending final signature"  
Councillors would like further information about this,*
- *Under 'Developing the Town' there was a line that read;  
"Tilekiln & Pilot Field- Heads of terms agreement and outline planning work completed in line with agreed business plan"  
Councillors would like an update on this.*

### **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

### 34. **SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

The work programme was discussed and Scrutiny looked at the progress made and the following was raised;

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- The briefings and updates section will be replaced with the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Section
- There was to be an update on the Councils Solar Project. Scrutiny would still like this.
- Scrutiny would like a report from Safer Hastings. Residents are concerned by organised crime, drugs, sex trafficking and modern slavery. They would like to see the impact on the borough and the preventative measures in place to combat this.
- Councillor Barnett will be organising a meeting to progress the work further on the regeneration review.

(The Chair declared the meeting closed at. 7.30 pm)