

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

8 MARCH 2022

Present: Councillors Battley (Chair), Patmore (Vice-Chair), Bishop, Carr, Edwards, Pragnell, Roark, Sinden and Turner

100. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies received from Councillors Arthur and Fernando and apologies for lateness from Councillor Pragnell

101. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

102. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Councillors noted a mistake on page four that should read 'recoup'.

RESOLVED - That the minutes of the meeting held on 26th January 2022 be approved as a true record.

The chair informed the committee that agenda item 5 Financial Monitoring Quarter 3 (2021/22) Update will be called first before item 4 Performance Monitoring Quarter 3 (2021/22) Update.

103. PERFORMANCE MONITORING QUARTER 3 (2021/22) UPDATE

The Managing Director reported to the committee the Quarter three 2021-2022 performance Monitoring. This covers the period from October to December 2021. A lot of work was needed to be completed over this time due to the Omicron variant of Covid. The finance, revenues and audit have undertaken further business grants and support schemes. This work is still ongoing with the cost-of-living crisis and council tax rebate. There was an upturn in staff sickness due to Covid.

The Chair thanked Council Officers for their continued hard work.

The Committee members asked questions with the Portfolio Holders and Managing Director available to answer.

What are the Covid guidelines to staff?

The Managing director answered that Hastings Borough Council is following Government guidance which up until 1st of April states that if you do test positive, you are recommended to still isolate at home. Staff who are working in council buildings are asked to test themselves a couple of times a week. Some staff who have tested

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positive have become unwell for sometimes nine or ten days. Some staff who have tested positive have been able to continue to work from home.

Is the performance target wrong on Land searches being returned?

The Managing Director agreed that targets need to be reviewed going forward into next year. The Land searches target will be looked at to understand why the target is not being met.

Will some of CHART Funding allocation need to be returned?

The Deputy Leader of the Council answered that most of the CHART funding has been spent however there has been some projects who have struggled to deliver as initially planned. Where monies have not been spent as a result, attempts are being made to reallocate to other projects and or support new projects where practicable. Match funding needs to be found which has been a struggle for smaller projects. A reduction in the CHART budget will reduce staff support for the project. Money not spent by the end of the year will need to be returned to Government

What are the percentage of long term and short-term sickness due to Covid? Is there mental health support for staff?

The Organisation Portfolio Holder recognised that mental health is a key concern and praised the HR department for their robust support. They have been working with staff who have needed assistance. The sickness percentages will be emailed.

How can the council keep staff and Councillors safe after April 1st?

The Managing Director informed the committee that in the short term there is a supply of Covid tests the Council has in stock, but that more longer term ongoing supply and affordability is uncertain. The Government will allow for priority groups to access tests but is not clear who those groups are yet.

Can the museum meet its visitor number target for the year?

The Deputy Leader of the Council replied that the Museum is only open part of the week with booking to attend. The attendance figure is picking up, but it will be sometime until the figures go back to normal. There are significant online resources that have won many awards over the last few years

Is the empty homes target realistic? Is the Enforcement officer in post?

The Housing portfolio holder updated that there was a very successful start to the Empty homes program. Now the empty homes are hidden within blocks of flats, a single flat in a freehold is a lot more complicated to address and potentially CPO. This will be another area the housing task force will be looking at. The Managing Director updated the Senior Enforcement officer post has been filled. There is an ongoing challenge to fill planning enforcement positions. Salaries have been increased to attract more applicants to the posts.

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The chair asked that staff be thanked for their hard work and achievements to date.

104. FINANCIAL MONITORING QUARTER 3 (2021/22) UPDATE

The Chief Accountant gave a summary of the quarter three position. The largest concern is the homelessness costs. The costs continue to rise above forecasts. In the last month costs have risen, and this is likely to continue into the next financial year. There has been a rise in one bed requirements. It is hoped the Housing task force reviewing homelessness will assist with this burden. The other area is dangerous structures. The costs have gone up and are likely to continue to rise.

How will the likely rise in fuel impact the Council Budget? Do contractors have uplift in their contracts?

The Chief Accountant answered that this financial year it is thought to not have too bigger impact. Moving forward this is being monitored with some figures needing to be revised. The approach will be to move as much to green initiatives as much as possible. Regarding uplifts in contracts The Chief Accountant will get back to the Councillor with the appropriate details.

Will we receive money from Government for Refugee placements?

The Managing Director informed the committee that previous refugee placements have been made through the private sector. The challenge now is housing the number of people who there is a duty to house who already live in the UK. The problem is the ability to find enough housing to support people and the price of accommodation. The Housing portfolio holder informed the committee that the homes for the Syrian refugee program had been from external private owners. Some guidance has come through from Government looking for sponsorship. There are now 410 temporary housing units being held by Hastings Borough Council and we are trying to move families into suitable housing. There is a Housing task force in place looking at staffing and benefits. There has been a decrease in the discretionary budget from government with an increase in people needing help and support.

105. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME (2021/22)

Council Motions

The motions piece of work has been concluded and has now been taken to cabinet and agreed by cabinet to take forward the recommendations. These are for democratic services to track motions and through WAG to look at consultation for updating full Council on motions a couple of times a year.

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Seachange

The Deputy Leader informed the committee that the Councillor who represented Rother council, has resigned from the Seachange board now. There is consideration as to whether Hastings should do the same. Any further updates will be given in due course.

Town Deal

An internal group meeting has been held, with a follow up briefing in April. There will be interim recommendations at the June Overview and Scrutiny meeting.

Equalities and Women's Safety

This will be brought to the April meeting with interim recommendations at the June Overview and Scrutiny meeting.

Councillors thanked Councillor Battley for his time as Chair of Overview and Scrutiny.

The Managing Director thanked Mark Horan for his time at Hastings Borough Council

106. RISK ASSESSMENT

(The Chair declared the meeting closed at. 6.59 pm)