

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17 OCTOBER 2022

Present: Councillors Patmore (Chair), Jobson (Vice-Chair), Foster, Hay, Webb and Carr

119. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies received from Councillors Arthur, Cannon, Pragnell, Roberts and Turner

120. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

RESOLVED - That the minutes of the meeting held on 7th September 2022 be approved as a true record.

121. MEET THE LEADER QUESTIONS

The Chair explained how Questions have been submitted and these were sent to the Leader last week.

The Chair invited the Leader, Cabinet members and Managing Director to speak to the committee.

Q: What does the Leader think of the O&S work plan?

A: The subjects that you've chosen are all important subjects and I think it's great that you're looking at Equalities. I think it would be a very positive piece of work. Finance is another key area to look at, when the demands of our services is increasing, and that's happening faster now isn't it than ever before. Living Environment is an area that is often brought up by residents on the doorstep. The other subject you're reviewing is the follow up and it's good that you're looking at an example of a decision that has been made, and whether it's been carried through on in terms of the motions review

Q: Shortly, the lease on St Mary-in-the-Castle is due to be surrendered to the Council. As a listed building, requiring constant maintenance and other legal requirements, what effect will this have on your budget planning? Have you an estimate of annual running/maintenance costs yet? Do you have an idea of what may have to go in order to meet the Council's obligations?

A: The Leader explained that the Council feels the great importance of St Mary-In-The-Castle. We are very clear that we want to find a positive future for the building as

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a cultural facility for the town. The short term costs of maintaining the building is thought to be £16k. The next plan is for a pack to go to all those interested in using the building. The Council is prepared to lease or sell the building for the correct use.

Q: What opportunity's do we have with Southern water now they have a £2 billion investment plan?

A: The Leader explained he was with Southern water last Friday. He asked them regarding the permanent fix to deal with rainwater. Southern Water plan to have it complete by next summer. It feels like Southern water are in emergency response mode. The infrastructure in Hastings has been left for over 100 years. A group has been planned to be set up with residents, but this has not happened and will be chased up. There is a new Chief Executive at Southern water now, who might have a more positive attitude to listening to the community than his predecessor.

The group discussed forming a group with other District Councils and ESCC

Q: With reference to: "Delivery of our major regeneration schemes:"

What is the current progress on the delivery of:

- **Year 2 of the Connecting Hastings and Rother Together programme?**
- **Progress with plans for the development of West Marina? Specifically updating the committee on:**
 - **Developer undertakes technical and survey work and consults local groups (quarters 1-2)**
 - **Developer commences master planning (quarter 4).**
 - **Progress with plans for the development of Bohemia?**

A: The Leader answered that CHART is coming to an end and finishes at the end of the year. It has been a very complicated scheme. 50% of the output for the last 2 years has been met mainly due to COVID. The leader will ask for the evaluation report to be a public report.

The West Marina developers have agreed a new formula with the Environment Agency to complete a flooding investigation. The land has not been sold. Residents will be consulted but it's thought any building is years away.

Bohemia plans were paused because of COVID and Town Deal. There are now pieces of work being done which are including Bohemia. One discussion is weather to have a swimming pool in the town centre or Bohemia. The Leader confirmed the development of Bohemia will stay in the Corporate Plan.

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Q: With reference to: “Identifying and implementing learning from the pandemic”

Is Muriel Matters House fit for purpose in a post-covid, hybrid working environment or is it too large?

A: The Leader explained there is no new normal. People have reevaluated their lives. The Managing Director explained there was a consultation with staff. 70% requested to work hybrid. One floor has been rented out externally. Averagely 63.5 staff a day have been working in the office over the last 10 days. Other areas of the building are rented out including the Council Chamber.

Q: What is the progress on the Corporate Plan commitment to: “Review our council tax reduction scheme by November 2022”?

A: The Leader answered it hasn't started yet due to the financial crisis

Q: In a climate where the Council need to make the best of its assets, and there is a current acute shortage of housing, and with reference to: “Maximising the delivery of new homes through the planning system, development of our limited land and property assets and partnerships with housing providers.”

What is the corporate reason for not pursuing the creation of a new football stadium and much needed leisure and fitness facilities in Tilekiln, which in turn would give an opportunity for redeveloping Pilot Field into much needed housing?

Is this plan dead in the water or is there any possibility of this going ahead, especially now both schemes have been granted planning permission?

A: The Leader explained that we shouldn't be building on green spaces. There is a particular lack of green space in the poorest communities. A joint study with Rother has been set up to look at how many playing pitches are needed within the borough. We're now actually going back to the government and saying can we talk to you about investing in Baird ward and creating more green space particularly in and around Broomgrove. But I would like to see some of that investment on Pilot Field and the adjoining firs site as well, which is the green lung at that end of Baird. I don't want to see that built on.

The Leader was asked if Pilot Field is a Brownfield site? The Leader explained it is protected playing fields. The Leader was asked why a hotel is being built on the Cornwallis St Car Park site as that had been marked for housing? The Leader explained the Council decided to use the site as there is a need for a hotel in the Town and it is a Council owned site.

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Q: Could the leader of the council please explain how the council will maintain newly acquired buildings like the Hastings Contemporary at a time when the council is in financial difficulties and looking to sell assets? The high cost of maintenance and day to day running of these amazing buildings is clear to see, but it is imperative that they are kept in a good state of repair to prevent them falling into a poor state.

A: The Leader explained the legal process is still going through and hasn't been transferred to the Council yet. Once the transfer is complete it will be leased to the charity who successfully run the Gallery now. There are plans to have a reduction in the admission charge for local people.

Q: 80 homes are scheduled to be adapted by the disabled grant funding 22-23. Is this figure going to be achieved?

A: The Leader updated that so far 35 have been completed with 47 being planned. There is a review being completed by the Housing department to see if we can react faster and help residents.

Q: Is there an update on the Harold Place toilets regeneration?

A: The Leader responded the planned scheme for a restaurant was scrapped. The Harold Place site is now in the plan for the Garden Town Project.

Q: Can we have an update on the COVID preparations for this winter?

A: The Leader explained that 1 in 65 people have COVID. There are 76 people in East Sussex Hospitals. The levels are going up fast. The Managing Director answered that front line staff are encouraged to have flu jabs. Staff are requested not to come into the office when they are not feeling well. Meeting will be reviewed if needed.

Q: Battle Road Arches. Is there an update?

A: The Leader explained we are working hard to make this work. At this time, we do not know what the final bill will be. ESCC will be approached again regarding the traffic flow.

Q: Is the Hotel in Cornwallis car park still financially viable?

A: The Leader explained it depends on the tender analysis. We're out to tender at the moment and when we get the tender analysis back we'll be able to take a view.

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Q: Would the Leader have a committee system instead of a Cabinet

A: The Leader explained a committee system ties Councillors up for long evenings discussing to great detail and as a result things happen incredibly slowly. One of the reasons for bringing in the Cabinet way of managing things was to try and inject some pace into local government and it certainly does that here. I would really worry if we changed that system. We would go back to a snail's pace again.

Q: What opportunities and challenges is the Council is facing going forward?

A: The Leader explained whatever the political arrangements the Council needs to be run with partnerships. It's not going change my view that the way to run Hastings is a collaborative one, it has to be. That's inside the council and then outside the council as well.

Q: Would the Leader consider not replacing the now to vacant posts in the Cabinet

A: The Leader answered we've all got to think hard about how much commitment we all are prepared to make and how we can fit that in with our personal private commitments outside the council. This varies of course from person to person, and it will mean thinking hard about whether we can double up treble uptake on that extra bit of work.

(The Chair declared the meeting closed at. 7.56 pm)