

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

20 NOVEMBER 2023

Present: Councillors Patmore (Chair), Sinden (Vice-Chair), Carr, Cooke, Foster, Hilton, Turner and Pragnell

Officers: Jane Hartnell (Chief Executive), Kit Wheeler (Chief Finance Officer)

Members of Cabinet Present: Councillor Barnet and Batsford

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies received from Councillors Bacon, Roberts and Hay (Substituted by Cllr Pragnell)

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING 18/10/23

RESOLVED - That the minutes of the meeting held on 18th October 2023 be approved as a true record.

4. BUDGET SAVINGS PROPOSALS

Councillor Barnett as the Leader of Hastings Borough Council explained to the committee it makes sense to have the principles of the budget agreed now that its prudent, realistic and sensible to bring the budget planning forward to December. There is a £4m deficit for 24/25 and this budget planning looks to find saving to meet that deficit. The shared service plan will be to look for partners locally and nationally, where we can work together and deliver a decent standard of service. Councillor Patmore asked what public responses have been received. Councillor Barnett answered that the responses sent directly to him have been mostly positive.

The committee asked questions:

How can you state that the restructure retains the ability to grow through income generation and grant funding when there will be no capacity to do either?

The Chief Executive explained this is related to the economic development and regeneration area and capacity and if government provides appropriate funding for management of initiatives, we can grow a team to deliver them.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

20 NOVEMBER 2023

Can you clarify role of Customer Services Officer and their possible relation to signposting residents to emergency housing advice?

The Chief Executive answered that not filling the post that is proposed is because of the introduction of the Citizen's Access online system, which means residents can upload documents and not all will need to come to Muriel Matters House to hand them into officers who currently upload them.

Councillor Hilton suggested a report after 6 months to review Citizens Access.

Councillors Pragnell asked regarding the vacant Planning post and if it will have an impact on service? The Chief Executive answered that all vacant posts will reduce quality of services across the organisation.

The report states that a 'service delivery model transformation' team will be established. Will these be new members of staff and where is the funding coming from? 40% saving in first year is very ambitious. Will you be establishing basic levels of performance and quality of service that needs to be achieved by these shared services?

The Chief Finance Officer answered that the right team needs to be put in place and there is some funding available from Government. Costs will be shared where they can.

Councillor Turner asked regarding the shared services and the Chief Finance Officer explained governance and pay structures will have to be reviewed with the partners.

Councillor Pragnell asked regarding the confidence in the projected savings from sharing services. The Chief Executive explained the difference now is that many more partners are looking to share services as a means of coping with less funding.

Councillor Foster asked regarding the process mapping and if this work is completed with other partners and what is the time scale? The Chief Executive explained process mapping has been completed for several years. The Chief Finance Officer answered that if the right approach is taken then the proposals are achievable.

Councillor Hilton asked to have a sensitivity analysis included as only 80% of savings were achieved on saving last year. This will be included in the revised document.

Councillor Cooke asked if other councils shared services programmes have been reviewed. The Chief Executive answered that there are various models of sharing services, and it would be for Councillors to agree at Full Council what level of integration is followed.

Councillor Carr asked what would happen if a Council in a shared service entered a section 114? The Chief Finance Officer answered that Hastings Borough Council would still have a legal obligation to still provide those services.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

20 NOVEMBER 2023

Councillor Hilton asked if AI has been considered? The Chief Executive explained it is on the agenda but there is not the capacity to explore opportunities for developing AI at this time, but by being part of a larger team we may be able to find that capacity.

Councillor Patmore asked are there are quick wins possible? The Chief Finance Officer gave an example of Internal Audit service which is currently being provided by Orbis. This has been successful in terms of quality of service, staff development opportunities and cost efficiency.

Councillor Patmore asked whether the proposals would result in redundancies. The Chief Executive explained that to meet the extent of the saving some redundancies will be unavoidable.

Councillor Carr asked regarding White Rock Theatre and if it will be put into a cultural trust? Councillor Batsford answered that hasn't been discussed at this moment and the new arrangement for leasing of the theatre was shortly going to go live. Councillor Pragnell asked about how repairs to the theatre would be funded. The Chief Executive explained there will be a contribution of up to £50k towards the maintenance of the White Rock Theatre retained in the budget.

Councillor Carr asked if events will be charged more for using Hastings Borough Council's assets. Councillor Batsford answered that feedback has been received and noted regarding fees and charges and meetings are progressing with events holders regarding becoming self-sustaining.

Councillor Foster asked regarding alternative funding for tackling anti-social behaviour. The Chief Executive answered it is hoped funding could come from safer streets and the endowment fund announced which has a focus on town centre.

Councillor Hilton suggested the Overview and Scrutiny committee review the restructure proposals when they are further progressed including new performance indicators.

Youth Council. What assessment has been made of the success or otherwise of the youth cabinet since it moved to EFT. Have you spoken to the current youth council about these proposals and what they would see as a better approach? Who is leading on this important conversation?

Councillor Barnett answered a meeting is planned with Connected Futures to review how best to engage young people's voices at the table of strategic meetings where key decisions affecting the town's future are made. Councillor Carr highlighted her disappointment at the decline in the Youth Council and the loss of the dedicated Hastings Borough Council Officer. Councillor Batsford explained the need for young person's voices to be heard is vitally important.

Cashless operations – how are you going to address the risk of digital exclusion?

The Chief Executive explained that the cash collection contract is mostly pays to collect cash from our car parking machines . Data suggests that most people who use

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

20 NOVEMBER 2023

car parks have mobile phones or contactless debit cards. There are a few other areas where the council still accepts cash – these will be reviewed and where possible alternative options promoted. The Chief Finance Officer explained the cash collection contract is up for renewal soon so the decision needs to be made very soon.

Councillor Carr asked if the age friendly group has been consulted. The Chief Finance Officer explained that in order to achieve the savings then there would be no cash collections. Councillor Carr asked how cashless toilets would work? Councillor Batsford answered that would have to be part of the review. Councillor Patmore asked regarding the cost of updating the parking machines. The Chief Finance Officer answered that the cost would be repaid through fees and charges.

Councillor Carr asked if the CCTV control room reopening has been reviewed? The Chief Executive answered that the costs to re-open would be significant (at least four posts were deleted when the original savings were taken). Councillor Barnett added that this may be reviewed next summer when there maybe funding from Government to assist with tackling anti-social behaviour in the town centre.

Asset sales – what level of asset sales would result in a saving of £500,000 on the MRP per year? Assume this level of sales needs to happen every year of the three years to continue to achieve this saving?

The Chief Finance Officer answered that asset sales would be used to reduce borrowing costs. Capital spend needs to be reduced and asset sales will assist with this.

Councillor Patmore asked if assets can be switched. The Chief Finance Officer answered that the data and full cost model is not available at present.

Councillor Carr asked if the Asset Management review will be available before December Full Council? Councillor Barnett answered the report has been delayed to January 2024.

Councillor Hilton asked if tighter figures will be available in February? The Chief Finance Officer answered that getting clarity in terms of decision making from Councillors now will help going forward and by February there should be more details around shared services, but it will be on a case by case basis.

Councillor Cooke asked how much of asset saving is an estimate? The Chief Finance Officer answered that all figures are forecasts but that he is very confident of the figures.

The Councillors asked regarding the sale of beach huts and what area they are in. Councillor Barnett explained that unused assets should be reviewed and officers will bring forward a business case which will go into detail.

How has this centralised contingency been arrived at?

The Chief Finance Officer explained that the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive and himself have reviewed each departments line by line budgets and identified where

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

20 NOVEMBER 2023

centralising contingency budgets will help reduce spend as there will be more control of essential spend. Councillor Cooke asked if this is a saving. The Chief Finance Officer explained it is a saving and the departments budgets have been cut back but where essential spend is required that will be funded centrally.

Renewals and reserves changes. Is there more information on the way this funding will change and how it's managed. It's essential we don't let our assets deteriorate.

The Chief Finance Officer answered that a contribution from reserves to this budget is made each year, but the plan is for assets to pay for themselves in future by full cost recovery where possible.

Capital Project Costing. Is there more detail to True and Whole Costs?

The Chief Finance Officer answered that grant funding may have been missed due to paying capital costs from revenue funding.

Treasury Investment. A large increase, what basis is this built on? How will this relate to the long standing commitment to a responsible investment policy first committed to in 2017/18?

The Chief Finance Officer answered that the Council will not work outside of the agreed Treasury Management Policy. Short term investing has been completed recently and that next year's targets are achievable. Councillor Barnett explained the target in the proposal is less than achieved this year and explained how the investment with Barclays has been reduced and will be zero by next year.

102 New Homes bonus – more info required on where these 102 new homes are?

The Chief Finance officer answered that an exercise undertaken by a consultant working in consultation with the Housing department have identified new 102 homes for which the council will be paid additional money by the government.

Councillor Patmore highlighted the figures in the totals are wrong and requested the public document to be updated. This will be acted upon shortly.

Councillor Foster asked why the Council Tax review is next year and not now? The Chief Finance Officer explained that a referendum would be needed to increase Council tax above the government's limit. Councillor Barnett explained there would be a significant cost to holding a referendum.

Councillor Carr asked if the 100% Council tax reduction scheme is guaranteed. Councillor Barnett answered that a review will be undertaken but there are no proposals to change it for the 2024/25 year.

Councillor Patmore asked when the revised Housing savings would be available. Councillor Barnett answered that the new Head of Housing presented some

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

20 NOVEMBER 2023

information to the committee at its last meeting, and that since then targets have been reviewed and agreed and will be shared shortly.

Councillor Barnet gave his thanks for to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and asked for any further suggestions to be submitted. There is a public consultation day on November 28th at the Stade Hall from 13:00 – 19:00

Resolved (Unanimously)

That the views of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the draft budget proposals are referred to the Budget Planning Cabinet meeting on 4th December 2023.

Reasons

To ensure Overview and Scrutiny Committee's views on the draft budget proposals are considered by the Budget Planning Cabinet, prior to final recommendations being made to the Full Council.

(The Chair declared the meeting closed at. 7.55 pm)