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OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

9 DECEMBER 2020

Present: Councillors Davies (Chair), Levane (Vice-Chair), Battley, Beaney, Bishop, Cox, Edwards, Lee, Rankin, Turner and Webb

58. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None.

59. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

60. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

RESOLVED- (Unanimously) that the minutes of the meeting held on the 24 September 2020 be approved.

61. FINANCE UPDATE

This item was moved up the agenda at the committee's consent.

The Assistant Director, Finance Service and Revenues provided an update about the council's current financial status to the Overview and Scrutiny committee.

The Mid Term Financial Strategy update to cabinet in October gave a projection and forecast of the councils finances up to 2023/24. COVID-19 has had a huge impact on income streams such as from car parks and cliff railways. It has also had an impact on collections from Council Tax and Non-Domestic Rates. There has also been a huge increase in the costs of homelessness. These and other factors have meant that the £1.2 million shortfall predicted at the Budget Council in February now looks to be £2.7 million. There has been additional funding from the government to cover additional costs, but this do not cover this shortfall in full. These additional costs will impact the council's finances in the future.

There has been financial savings through the council's capital investment programme. In terms of investment returns, the performance was better than estimated. The interest rates are still at historically low levels but there was a 1% hike in borrowing rates in October 2019 for the PWLB (Public Works Loan Board).

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The council has also been administering the government issued COVID-19 support grants for local businesses and £21 million has been distributed through this scheme. As part of the funding for this the council receives a new burden grant to help with the covering of costs. The scheme has influenced other parts of the councils work as officers have had to prioritise this work over other agreed projects.

Overall whilst COVID -19 has hugely impacted the councils finances they were none the less under control and the council is surviving financially this year.

The Chair asked if the activities highlighted in the Corporate Plan needed to change due to the increase in the council's deficit?

The Corporate Plan would need to be reviewed as a result of changing costs. The deficit is now higher than predicted at the February Budget council meeting. This could change if the government gives further assistance towards the council's costs.

Councillors asked questions about the substantial amounts of money the council has received already from the government to assist with the COVID-19 crisis. Most of the monies received were for individual financial assistance. The council does get to retain a small amount of for administration of these schemes.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director, Finance services and Revenues for his report and update.

62. COVID-19 UPDATE

The Managing Director gave an update on the COVID-19 situation within the town and the impact on the council's work. There has been a sharp increase in cases of COVID within the town and worryingly it looks like the infection period was during the second lockdown. A bigger communications strategy has been planned to reinforce the protective social distancing measures people need to undertake in order to remain safe.

It was recognised that this was a particularly challenging time for people who are having to go out for various reasons such as work and education. There is a strong need to follow the rules in order to protect each other, local businesses and the NHS.

There are plans in place for Christmas cover that range from providing emergency food to having officers on call for COVID-19 safe rest centres.

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Officers have been directed to work from home but despite this measure 3 senior task force members have caught COVID. Other Officers have been re assigned to other services in order to support key areas such as the community hub and the cemetery & crematorium. The council is still looking at retraining officers in case there is a need to divert resources. There are officers working with local businesses and the council now has in place COVID compliance officers to help with this.

There are now COVID testing sites for residents to use and as a council we are encouraging people with even the mildest symptoms to get tested. The council recognises that the vaccine rollout won't be a quick process and will be happy to help in any way needed.

The council continues to plan for recovery and events such as the forthcoming elections and the impact of Brexit.

Despite COVID-19 impact there are still lots of positive things occurring within the council. The Town Deal and the Local Plan are just a few examples of forthcoming projects that will impact residents positively.

The Chair thanked the Managing Director and invited questions from the committee.

Councillors asked questions about the COVID-19 testing centres and whether residents should book tests even if they are asymptomatic. This is currently not a government strategy, but we do know that COVID-19 transmission has occurred by asymptomatic people. The council is encouraging residents even with the mildest symptoms to get tested.

Councillors commented on residents' complaints about the NHS 111 service as residents have not received the call backs promised. The councillors also why the initial vaccine rollout didn't include frontline workers which they felt was a mistake given the high risks this group was experiencing.

Councillors highlighted that there has been a great deal of change in the working arrangements for officers. Would any lessons be learned from this that could result in a new way of working or potential savings? The response from the Managing Director was that prior to the COVID-19 crisis there was a resistant to working online but now many officers have embraced it. There were still those that found working from home difficult for several reasons and the council would likely offer office working for people which make be temporary such as when new people join the organisation.

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There many positive reasons for working from home and the office space should be used for the most beneficial reasons. In the future the council can look at how much office space it needs and look to either selling or renting out the existing spaces it owns.

The councillors drew attention to the impact COVID-19 has had on education provision and quality for the pupils in the community. It was noted how many low incomes and BAME communities had been more effected by COVID than any other community. The council was looking at how it could immediately support communities and realised the broader impact that shutting schools had. Moving forward we would be looking at how we could be working together better on things.

63. PERFORMANCE MONITORING QUARTER 2 (2020/21) UPDATE

The Continuous Improvement and Democratic Services Manager introduced this item and drew the committee's attention to the new updated performance dashboard. This is on the website in the public domain and the aim is to allow residents to access the information about their council when they wanted to rather than wait for the quarterly meetings for updates. It is hoped that this will contribute to the council communicating better to residents.

This has been an accumulation of years of work by officers and this forms a tangible outcome for moving forward with the council's communication strategy. It is still a work in progress and will get better moving forward. Any feedback on the current format would be appreciated. It is hoping that the new performance dashboard will allow the Overview and Scrutiny committee to perform their monitoring of the council's activities more efficient.

The Chair led the discussions through the exceptions chart found on the performance dashboard.

The Chair highlighted how many councils' departments capacity is stretched and key teams such as the transformation team contracts are ending soon. With that in mind would the corporate plan be delivered and incorporate residents' expectations? The Managing Director advised that the ideal would be that the corporate plan would still be delivered but the impact of COVID-19 could see staff being moved away from these projects. They would be needed for the key priorities of running statutory services and supporting residents.

Councillors asked about future of live arts buildings. They referred to the White Rock Theatre that has received substantial funding over the years. They asked

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whether the future of these venues and performances would still be viewed physically or through new technology.

The Deputy Leader advised that there was still a contract for the theatre with the council. COVID-19 has impacted the live arts harshly and they need substitutes in order to survive the pandemic. Technology has changed how people interact with the arts, but people still have a desire to see performances live and this doesn't look to change. The future of live arts will be dependent on what they are able to put on and whether they are able to maintain their building.

Councillors asked about the use of the amber on the performance dashboard. The use of the amber colour would mean that something isn't finished surely this would mean that the target hadn't been met? The Managing Director responded that some of these targets were ongoing for the year. Some have been put on hold due to COVID-19 impact this year. At the end of the year reporting the amber could be taken out to make it clearer if the target had been met or not.

The homelessness targets had changed due to the government needing local councils to get all rough sleepers off the street. The government has given funding for this and officers continue to apply for funding. There are now 50-60 entrenched rough sleepers in temporary accommodation. There is still a high amount of people approaching the council for help with homelessness with 30-35 new cases a week.

The Chair thanked officers for their work on the new performance dashboard.

64. EQUALITIES UPDATE

Since the equalities motion had passed at full council work had already started on producing an equalities charter. Work had commenced on looking at updating the existing equalities policy and reviewing the current equalities impact statement. A small working group had been put together to look at this. Currently a document was being created for consultation and comment. Ideally the consultation would include the various groups within the borough that are helping to work towards equality within the community. The charter would be a framework for the whole community. Currently the development of this document includes getting the legal framework right and capturing the data that shows the community's needs. This will contribute to the shaping of the document. It is hoped that the Overview and Scrutiny committee will help with this due to their connections to the community and their insights.

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(The Chair declared the meeting closed at. 7.19 pm)