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OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

24 JUNE 2021

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

74. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies received from Councillor Beaney, Roark

75. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None received.

76. **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

RESOLVED (unanimously) – that the minutes of the meeting held on 10th March 2021 be approved as a true record.

77. **PERFORMANCE MONITORING QUARTER 4 (2020/21) UPDATE**

The Managing Director thanked officers who developed the new performance monitoring system. Since publication on the Hastings Borough Council website, positive public feedback had been received in praise of detailed and systematic reporting.

The Continuous Improvement and Democratic Services Manager gave a brief overview of the functionality of the performance management report, which is available online at: www.hastings.gov.uk/my-council/performance/

Councillors thanked the council officers for their hard work. They shared their appreciation for meeting most of the targets despite difficult circumstances caused by the pandemic.

Councillors wanted to know the reasons behind the staffing problems in the planning department and why there was significant spending on external consultancy. The Managing Director explained that the problem is not unique for HBC. Other councils in the area and nationwide are struggling to fill up planning posts in recent years. A significant number of jobs is available in the private sector that HBC cannot compete with financially. Moreover, the work in the council can be more challenging than in the private sector. The jobs have been advertised but has proved difficult to find qualified and experienced specialists to fill those positions. In the meantime, HBC must use additional external resources to manage the workload and meet the targets.

Meeting agreed that there is enormous pressure on the planning department that may lead to further loss of officers. They discussed the shortage of planning enforcement officers and possible solutions to keep the officers in post. The Managing Director confirmed that some members of staff recently left

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the council for various, not only financial reasons and solutions like apprenticeships and staff training are considered to support the department. Unfortunately, there is also an urgent need for specialists to deal with ongoing big projects and developers and external consultants are needed on occasions to meet demand. The council uses all tools to understand and mitigate further staff losses, including exit interviews, salary matching and performance monitoring.

78. **FINANCIAL MONITORING QUARTER 4 (2020/21) UPDATE**

The Assistant Director, Financial Services and Revenues, informed the meeting that the financial report is delayed due to the amount and complexity of work in terms of pandemic response. Officers are currently processing significant amounts of additional funding and successful grants applications which require a meticulous approach. The draft report is now in the review stage and will be ready shortly. The last year's deficit is hoped to be balanced through the underspent from the grants received.

Additional recovery funding from the government is helping to mitigate loss of income this year. The most affected income streams at the beginning of the financial year included seafront car park, cliff railways, non-domestic rates, and council tax. The financial position this year is still challenging, with a significant deficit. The outcome of the settlement with possible additional assistance from the government is expected to be confirmed by December.

It is challenging to clarify the starting position for this year before last year's accounts are closed by the external auditors. A full report will be presented at the following Overview and Scrutiny meeting.

Councillors wanted to know if there is any inclination from the government of the continuous support during this financial year. The Assistant Director, Financial Services and Revenues, explained that the Tax Income Guarantee (TIG) scheme is to fund up to 75 percent of our losses from council tax relief and benefits given. Additional money is expected out of the TIG as well as assistance from sales fees and charges income. More support for businesses is to be announced in due course.

Councillors asked about the possibility of moving the £280,000 underspend from leisure support funding to the next financial year. The Assistant Director, Financial Services and Revenues, confirmed there was significant underspend last year as the Freedom Leisure managed to mitigate the loss. He explained that the discussion is ongoing, and the current financial situation is monitored by the HBC chief accountant.

Councillors discussed the reasons behind the delay in delivery of last year's audit report. The Assistant Director, Financial Services and Revenues, explained that the external audit provider was affected by significant staffing issues. Homeworking also slowed down their services. There were no issues raised about the report, but additional tests are needed due to staff losses. The report is expected to be completed by the end of June/early July.

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

The Continuous Improvement and Democratic Services Manager discussed the Overview and Scrutiny work programme for 2021/22, which will be agreed at the Annual committee meeting on 28th July 2021. Scrutiny Steering Group will be working to develop the ideas submitted by members.

(The Chair declared the meeting closed at. 6.45 pm)

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