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OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

26 JANUARY 2022

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

96. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies received from Councillors Edwards, Fernando and Turner.

97. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor	Item	Interest
Pragnell	3.& 4.	Personal- Works at the Department for Work and Pensions
Chowney	4.	Prejudicial- Has parking permit for Grande Parade

98. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Councillors raised an issue in the previous meeting minutes which indicated that Universal Credit had increased. They believed that Universal Credit had only decreased. It was advised that the uplift had ended causing a decrease but the work allowance had gone up causing an increase. The previous meeting would be checked to see if the increase or decrease was referenced.

RESOLVED- Pending the above amendment that the minutes of the meeting held on 9 December 2021 be approved as a true record.

99. DRAFT BUDGET AND CORPORATE PLAN UPDATE CONSULTATION 2022/23

The Chair welcomed and introduced the next item. The Chair advised that the item would be discussed in 2 separate parts. The meeting would first discuss the corporate plan update followed by a discussion about the draft budget. The committee would be invited to ask questions on each separately.

Corporate Plan update

The Managing Director reported on this item. They advised that the draft budget and corporate plan update are two very important council documents. They agreed how the council will operate in the forthcoming year. The corporate plan sets out the council's priorities and work programmes for the year and the budget sets out how the activities will be paid for. This will be agreed and finalised by all Councillors at the Budget Full Council in February. Overview and Scrutiny committee are always invited to consult and look in forensic detail at the proposals and plans. The consultation also engages with a whole range of groups from the community and wider public. The consultation runs from 14th January to 9am on

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

26 JANUARY 2022

the 7th February 2022. Any comments received after the publication deadline for the Budget Cabinet meeting will be summarised and tabled at the Cabinet meeting.

The Continuous Improvement and Democratic Services Manager advised that in 2020 the Council agreed to a 4-year corporate plan 2020 to 2024. Each year this is updated and the Overview and Scrutiny committee monitor the current version of the corporate plan.

The majority of the corporate plan remains unchanged. The corporate plan updates include changes to the data available under the 'Our Borough' and 'Your Council' sections and the annual update is set out in appendix A of the report. The report also contains a timetable of next steps. It was advised that the meeting with Hastings Community Network has not yet happened as indicated in the covering report and would be occurring tomorrow.

The Chair thanked Officers for their introduction and their work and invited the committee to ask questions and give comments for the consultation.

Is the timeline in the report still on schedule?

The Continuous Improvement and Democratic Services Manager confirmed that it was other than the delayed meeting with Hastings Community Network.

The update includes the reporting of 80 homes adapted through Disabled Facility Grant funding in 2022/23. What are the hopes concerning this figure?

The Leader of the Council would hope to see the number of homes adapted increased. Currently the council is looking at ways to increase this to ensure funds are released more quickly to enable people to stay in their homes. The Deputy Leader added that they were in discussions with housing providers to see how they can help people quickly access the funds for this. It is hoped next year that the figure is much higher.

Under the section 'Making best use of our land, buildings, public realm and cultural assets' it states 'Others TBD Museum'. Can this be elaborated on whether this has a time scale.

The Deputy Leader advised that the museum is currently using a Arts Council Revenue Grant. The museum is currently looking at all services that it provides. The service is more focused on trying to reach all communities in town, even the ones that don't visit the museum building. They are currently looking on how to improve the building to make it more attractive. They will have the results of an architects work on this by summer. The museum is also making further capital funding applications to Arts Council and Heritage Lottery Fund. They are hoping to see the results of this in 2023.

There have been proposals for the Conquest Hospital to lose some specialist units to Eastbourne. Could the corporate plan mention that the council will do all in their power to keep as many specialist units at Conquest Hospital as possible.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

26 JANUARY 2022

The Leader responded that it was important for the council to lobby and protect services in Hastings for his residents. The corporate plan would be a good place to reflect that intention as it there are already references to activities such as the COVID vaccination programme. The Leader did attend a virtual presentation for the proposals about the changes. There was no clinical reason for Eastbourne to have the specialist units over Hastings. There was concern that given the levels of deprivation in the town that many residents wouldn't be able to afford the travel to Eastbourne. There was also concern from councillors that only a handful of Hastings residents have responded. Councillors would like to see the consultation published more to gain more Hastings respondents so it wasn't just weighted in Eastbourne's favour.

For the council to survive and thrive in the future, has the possibility of becoming a unitary council in the future been looked at.

The Leader responded that the council would do what was needed to meet the needs of the people of Hastings and at this moment this is done best by a local council. The Leader would like to see Hastings Borough Council having more responsibility for local services. Changes to government legislation would more likely cause significant changes to local governance.

The Chair brought the corporate plan discussion to a close and reminded the committee that the corporate plan needed to be treated as a living document and the council needs to adapt the needs of residents regularly.

The Chair then moved the committee on to discussions about the draft budget

Draft Budget

The Chair invited the Assistant Director, Financial Services and Revenues (Chief Finance Officer) to introduce the draft budget. The report presents the revised revenue budget for 2021/22 and a budget for 2022/23. The report shows a budget with a deficit for £2.172 million that uses the reserves to cover this. The deficit increases in future years to £2.654 million in 2023/24, £2.674 million in 2024/25 and £2.665 million in 2025/26. The level of government funding and revenue from income streams isn't enough to meet annual increases in costs from factors such as inflation and pay increases. Homelessness costs for temporary accommodation continue to be a disproportionately huge cost to the council.

The use of reserves to cover these costs will result in them falling below the minimum recommended level. The council must make further savings without delay and, if delayed, will need to make even more savings to restore the reserves. The Council, as a priority needs to be undertaking the reviews identified in the report.

The draft budget seen at the meeting is not the final one as some figures are still provisional. The final grant settlement figures have not been received from the government (expected early February) and details of some other grants are awaited. Most of these will be updated e.g. business rates, in time for the Budget

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

26 JANUARY 2022

Full Council but some figures will remain as estimates e.g. Disabled Facility Grants due to not receiving final amounts until well into 2022/23.

The Chair invited questions from the committee.

Is there any chance to recuperate the additional monies spent on repairing the reservoir and cliff works from the government such as coastal risk management funding?

The Chief Finance Officer advised that funding for these works did not form part of the final grant settlement and the council does not receive additional funding for this. Both the Leader and Senior Managers have written to the government requesting additional funding. This has so far been unsuccessful and the Council will need to make further representations as part of any forthcoming fair funding review.

Looking at the high expenditure on temporary accommodation its in the council's capital programme to buy accommodation to offset these costs. Do we need to buy even more property than already proposed?

The Chief Finance Officer responded to this. £5.4 million has been spent on buying accommodation to offset the costs. It has helped to slow down the rising costs but it hasn't made a difference to lowering them. There is more purchasing of housing planned through schemes such as those ran by Homes England. There is a further review proposed in the budget strategy to look at the most effective way of reducing the costs which is needed given rising costs. The Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates are still staying fixed which means that the council must make up the increasing difference in costs between rent payable and the benefits payable (at LHA rates). In addition costs are increasing given the amount of time people are spending in temporary accommodation. A solution for the council could be to acquire low cost housing for individuals or look to buying a bigger property with housing units that meet the most frequent needs of our homeless residents such as families and individuals. The Leader added that the issue of homelessness in Hastings isn't just a question of finances but also about a persons right to a secure home and recognising the impact on individuals when they don't have this.

As the deficit continues to increase over the next few years how do we make the necessary savings but also bolster our reserves?

The Chief Finance Officer responded that undertaking the reviews identified in the draft budget report should be a priority to help identify savings. The council also needs to work within a reasonable time frame to build the reserves back up. The council would also need to identify further expenditure risks in the future such as cliff works and make provisions for this. The council should also be aware of any additional government funding that may reduce up the deficit i.e. funding that meets some or all of the costs of the staff employed. The council will need to urgently consider the sale of major assets to help with reducing future borrowing costs on an ambitious Capital programme.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

26 JANUARY 2022

There are full time officer posts previously paid for by the council now being funded by the Town Deal. When the town deal finishes will these posts be made redundant and will the council cover these costs?

The Managing Director responded that there is no assumption that these posts will be made redundant and the staff affected will continue to work in the council after the Town Deal finishes. This is a way to fund resources whilst keeping the skills within the council. What it does mean is that the staff now working for the Town Deal have less availability for other work. This does mean having to reprioritise work. In the future there will be more of a reliance on external funding for these posts working on major schemes.

Will the council look to holding 4 yearly elections as this will save on costs and huge amounts of officer time?

The Leader advised that all expenditure has been looked at several times and this will be considered again moving forward. The main reason for continuing the 2 yearly election cycle is it is people getting to vote more often which the Leader finds more democratic.

Can we have a more clearer and concise budget for next year as the current version is difficult for both councillors and members of the public to understand.

The Leader advised it is an ongoing ambition to make all councils documents accessible to the public and this is something officers are agree and are working towards. To help with this the website contains a presentation as part of this consultation which helps to try and make the information more accessible. The Chief Finance Officer also agreed with wanting the budget more accessible and was hoping this years would be. This hasn't been possible due to issues such as the reporting system, staff absence, delays from external auditors and the impact of processing the various COVID support grants.

Part of the asset sales identified is the sale of civic silver/regalia at an income of £30,000. There has been public concern about this. Would it be possible to get a list of items to make sure they are not of historic value to the borough?

The Chief Finance Officer advised that these items were identified as part of a review conducted with a previous Mayor. These items had been stored in a vault for many years. The museum had reviewed the items a number of years ago, lead members and the Mayor at the time of the review didn't identify any historic or other interest with these items. A list can be circulated to councillors.

A larger and more significant review of Civic Regalia is being proposed that would be subject to a full report and a Full Council decision.

The draft budget seems to indicate the collection of less business rates, is this the case?

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

26 JANUARY 2022

The Chief Finance Officer advised that due to the business rate relief schemes announced in each of the last two government budgets such as the forthcoming one next year for the hospitality sector, business rate collection is down. Some of the reductions have been reimbursed through government grants (termed Section 31 grants), but some business have continued not to pay. Other factors such as delayed court proceedings have also contributed to a lower rate of recovery.

The move bringing in house services such as the waste cleansing was meant to be saving us money. Do we expect to be seeing these savings in the next few years?

The Chief Finance Officer advised that savings on work brought in-house would be made going forward provided. It was considered vital that the initial specification was right in order to minimise start up costs. There are potential savings in many service areas and reviews of contracts are currently ongoing.

Parking income was reduced significantly due to the impact of COVID. In the first part of the pandemic the council received government compensation with this. Has the council received additional compensation for further parking income losses?

The Chief Finance Officer advised that the council has received some compensation and other claims are still pending. Lost parking income is currently estimated at £178,000 for 2021/22. Councillors asked if the NHS was providing an income for using the car park as a COVID testing site. They were advised the NHS was not renting the car park but they were renting out space in the town hall for the vaccination centre. Councillors were also reminded that on average the government have compensated 75p for every £1 lost (after a 5% headline deduction) in 2020/21 and for the first 3 months of 2021/22.

Are there going to be further government grants and schemes to help support residents with the impact of COVID as many are still struggling financially?

The Chief Finance Officer advised there were still a number of schemes running to help businesses, such as the one recently launched i.e. the Omicron hospitality and leisure Grant. The Additional Restrictions Grant was again open and the Covid Additional Relief Fund (CARF) was due to open shortly. Other grant programmes e.g. Test and Trace, Household Support Fund were continuing but most looked as if they would be closed by the end of March for applications. The reporting, assurance and fraud check for these schemes would take additional time to complete and could take as long as a further 2 years. This takes up a lot of officer time in the audit and finance teams.

Councillors asked if we would get government money to support these activities, they were advised a small element of the grant is allocated to these activities which so far the council have managed to retain to offset the wider budget deficit. Should this become a long-term activity, resources would need to be looked at as it impacts heavily on other activities. Councillors recognised how hard all officers had been working in supporting the councils activities during the pandemic.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

26 JANUARY 2022

Is there a possibility of working with other organisations and local authorities to share resources to help with financial costs?

The Deputy Leader responded that a new approach to regeneration was needed. All options would need exploring and looking for ways to do things potentially different. This could include working with other local authorities, health service and other organisations to gain better services and results for local people.

The Chair thanked Councillors and Officers and closed the meeting.

(The Chair declared the meeting closed at. 7.30 pm)

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