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JOINT BUDGET OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

29 JANUARY 2015

Present: Councillors Howard (Chair), Davies, Scott, Charman, Batsford, Cooke and Webb

Apologies for absence were noted for Councillors Fitzgerald, Turner, Edwards, Lee, Roberts and Sinden

15. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

The Senior Corporate and Democratic Services Officer invited nominations for the appointment of Chair for the duration of the meeting.

Councillor Webb proposed that Councillor Howard should take the Chair, which was seconded by Councillor Cooke. This was supported by the remaining Members of the committee.

RESOLVED that Councillor Howard be appointed as Chair for the duration of the meeting

16. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following Councillors declared an interest in the minutes:

Councillor	Minute Number	Interest
Webb	17	Personal – Member of East Sussex County Council

17. DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN 2015/16 - 2017/18

The Head of Corporate Services presented the draft corporate plan 2015/16 – 2017/18. She explained that the format of the plan had been revised to clearly set out the council's vision and values, as well as providing details of key projects the council would be undertaking. The performance indicators associated with corporate plan targets were also under review, and Members would be advised of this at their quarter four committee meetings. Members views were sought on the draft corporate plan.

The committee welcomed the new layout of the corporate plan and commented that it set the council's targets out in an accessible way. Discussion took place regarding the council's values which were described at the front of the document. The council continued to seek opportunities for economic regeneration, which would narrow the gap between deprived communities in the town, and between Hastings and the rest of the South East. The Head of Corporate Services said that the council's values would be addressed through all the actions set out in the corporate plan.

Discussion took place regarding opportunities for community engagement. Councillor Chowney responded that a range of community organisations had been consulted on the draft corporate plan. It had also been subject to an online consultation. He added

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that Members had an increasingly important role in communicating the council's vision for the town to residents, as previous models for community engagement were no longer affordable. The Head of Corporate Services noted that effective delivery of services would illustrate the council's vision for a customer-first organisation.

Consideration was given to the council's ability to influence external service providers, particularly in respect of health care provision. Councillor Chowney explained that the council had appointed representatives to East Sussex County Council's Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Health and Wellbeing Board. Overview and Scrutiny Members would also have the opportunity to consider key issues affecting quality of life for residents when planning their annual work programme.

Discussion took place regarding efforts to ensure the council remained a customer focused organisation. The Head of Corporate Services explained that service reviews were being undertaken across the organisation, which included process mapping activities to ensure they met the needs of service users. Following a request from Members, the Head of Corporate Services agreed to re-word part a) of the target for efficient and customer focussed services.

Members noted that economic exclusion was sometimes a barrier to residents accessing council services online. Efforts to improve digital inclusion would therefore continue in the future. The Head of Corporate Services added that face to face advice and support would also be available from the Community Contact Centre.

Consideration was given to the council's ongoing organisational transformation. Members discussed the scope of the workforce development project, given the current economic conditions facing the council. The Head of Corporate Services explained that measures would be put in place to assist the organisation with succession planning and proactively address potential skills gaps, to prevent loss of expertise. She agreed to re-word part b) of the target to clarify this intention.

RESOLVED that the comments of the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the council's draft corporate plan for 2015/16 – 2017/18 be referred to the Budget Cabinet for consideration

The reason for this decision was:

To ensure the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee comments can be considered by Budget Cabinet, prior to final recommendations being made to the Full Council.

18. CONSULTATION ON THE REVENUE BUDGET 2014/15 (REVISED) AND 2015/16, PLUS CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2014/15 TO 2017/18

The Head of Finance presented a report to consult Members on the revenue budget and capital programme, as part of a wider consultation process. The draft budget reflected a 13.6% reduction in government grant to the council, and the use of reserves to produce a balanced budget. The Head of Finance commented that the council would need to continue to identify efficiencies in order to achieve a balanced budget in future years.

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The committee supported the increase of 1.9% in the borough's part of council tax, proposed in the draft budget. The Head of Finance noted that it was likely the other precepting authorities would also seek to increase their share of council tax.

Members acknowledged the challenges in aligning the council's priorities and objectives, as set out in the corporate plan, with the capacity and budget of the organisation. The Leader of the Council said that Overview and Scrutiny Members would need to continue to be mindful of this when carrying out their performance monitoring role over the coming year. The committee considered options to revise the layout of the budget and corporate plan documents, to enable Overview and Scrutiny Members to monitor progress across the year.

Discussion took place regarding the projected savings from the digital by design project. The Head of Finance explained that much of the savings would be achieved through changes to working practices and the increased use of electronic communication.

Members noted that the council's fraud team had transferred to the Department of Works and Pensions. The Head of Finance explained that the council had proactively engaged with other authorities to bid for funding to support its remaining responsibilities to investigate fraud, and that it continued working in partnership with Rother District Council on remaining fraud referrals.

The committee noted that the council would continue to administer discretionary housing payments but that the figure for 2015/16 was still awaited, as was the figure for disabled facility grants. The Head of Finance explained that council had developed good practice by drawing on previous experience from administering the payments; this was likely to mean that the fund was fully committed within the required time.

Discussion took place regarding potential income generation opportunities. The Leader of the Council highlighted that the council would continue to explore opportunities to increase its income. He noted that some initiatives, such as the social lettings agency, had the potential to become self-supporting as well as providing a social value to the local community. The council had also pursued a number of investments to save initiatives to support its activity in the future. The Head of Finance supported this and added that the council would need to continue to monitor any changes in legislation, which may broaden the scope of its ability to generate income.

RESOLVED that Members comments be reported to the Budget Cabinet on 16 February 2015

The reason for this decision was:

Members views are sought as part of the consultation process.

(The Chair declared the meeting closed at 7.50 pm)

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