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OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR RESOURCES

16 JUNE 2015

Present: Councillors Webb (Chair), Howard , Batsford, Sinden, Roberts, Beaver and Pragnell

Lead Members in attendance Councillors Cartwright, Chowney and Forward

1. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

The following Councillors declared an interest in the minutes:

Councillor	Minute Number	Interest
Pragnell	3	Personal – he is employed by the Department for Works and Pensions

2. **MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 12 FEBRUARY 2015 AND THE JOINT BUDGET OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 29 JANUARY 2015**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 12 February 2015 and the Joint Budget Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 29 January 2015 be approved as a correct record

3. **CORPORATE PLAN PART III - YEAR END PERFORMANCE INFORMATION AND TARGET SETTING 2015/16**

The Director of Corporate Services and Governance presented the report which outlined year-end performance against the targets and milestones set out in part II of the corporate plan for 2014/15, the report also set put actions that would be taken in 2015/16 to address any areas of shortfall. The committee's views were sought on the proposed performance indicators for 2015/16.

The Assistant Director for Finance provided an update on the customer first and efficiency service reviews for revenues and benefits. The revenues review had been completed and the recommendations implemented. The benefits review, which was being undertaken by Shelter, had begun in January 2015. The complexity of the review and unforeseen staff absence at Shelter had created delays in the original timescale and it was now anticipated that Shelter would present their recommendations in September 2015.

The Assistant Director for Finance advised that the expenses audit, which was due to be completed as part of the annual audit plan, had been substituted for a more comprehensive review as part of the council's wider transparency agenda.

Discussion took place regarding the implementation of the Hastings and St Leonards Anti-Poverty Strategy Action Plan. The Deputy Leader of the Council and Housing, Communications and Equalities Portfolio Holder advised that the revised draft action plan was due to be submitted to the Local Strategic Partnership at its July meeting, presentations would also be given at the meeting on efforts to tackle family poverty

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and health inequalities. The Director of Corporate Services and Governance added that the council aimed to consider how all of its activities and decisions could help address anti-poverty issues.

The committee welcomed the update that the council had received an unqualified audit opinion for the annual statement of accounts.

Members commented that a high standard of presentation on the council's industrial estates was key to maintaining high levels of occupancy in the units. The Assistant Director for Finance replied that the council was responsible for maintaining the car parks and grass verges on its industrial estates, however, the highways were largely the responsibility of East Sussex County Council. He added that members could highlight any areas where they felt presentation could be improved on the industrial estates to him by email.

The committee considered the impact of the rollout of the Universal Credit scheme in Hastings. The Assistant Director for Finance advised that Universal Credit had been introduced for single people living in Hastings and Rother on 20 April 2015. To date, the impact of the scheme had been limited as the Department for Work and Pensions intended to introduce the changes incrementally. One housing benefit and council tax claimant living in Hastings had transferred to Universal Credit and a further ten housing benefit claims had been closed. Members noted that housing benefit payments were now made directly to claimants, except in exceptional circumstances, and considered the safeguards in place to protect vulnerable residents. The committee discussed how the introduction of Universal Credit might impact the council's grant settlement. The Assistant Director for Finance said that the grant the council receives to administer housing benefits may be reduced in the future, once a more significant number of claimants had transferred to Universal Credit.

Members expressed concern that; since the council's in-house Fraud Service had transferred to the Department for Works and Pensions, this may dilute the emphasis on tackling fraud locally. The Assistant Director for Finance said that he had written to the Department for Works and Pensions regarding this matter and to ensure that the requirements of the council's service level agreement with the Department for Works and Pensions were met.

The committee congratulated the East Sussex Procurement Hub for the high quality service they provided in supporting the council to achieve best value from its procurement processes.

Members welcomed the continued good performance in the collection of council tax and non-domestic rates. The Assistant Director for Finance explained that the average number of days to process a change to a housing benefit claim had increased since 2014; this was partly due to the increased number of quality checks the council was applying, which provided a useful training opportunity for staff and also helped to ensure accurate data was produced.

The committee considered the transition to Individual Electoral Registration. The Director of Corporate Services and Governance highlighted the importance of Members encouraging residents to register online as early as possible. The process

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of Individual Electoral Registration is more complex than the previous registration system, and it was therefore more difficult for electors to register in the run-up to an election. A canvass of electors would take place in the autumn to help maximise the number of residents on the register of electors.

Discussion took place regarding the impact of the Future Cities project, which had supported climate change adaptation activities. Members considered how learning from the project could be used to support broader improvements to the housing stock in the town. The Assistant Director for Finance added that the council would continue to explore options to improve the stock in Hastings, particularly by drawing on examples of good practice from other areas.

The committee considered the activities of the council's legal service. Between 20 and 25 prosecutions per quarter had been carried out across all the council's enforcement powers. The Director of Corporate Services agreed to update the committee on the number of cases that had not been defended in this period. Members noted that the arbitration in respect of Hastings pier had been adjourned until the Supreme Court made a decision on this matter, the council would continue a rigorous defence of this claim.

Following an earlier request by the committee, information on the proportion of working days/ shifts lost due to sickness was now divided into short and long term cases. Members noted that the levels of staff sickness absence had reduced significantly over recent years, and efforts would continue to minimise this further in the future.

Members thanked staff in the community contact centre for dealing with a range of complex enquiries in a sensitive and professional manner.

The Director of Corporate Services and Governance updated the committee on the council's ongoing organisational transformation. She explained that the digital by design project was the first of a series of work packages which would comprehensively overhaul the council's working practices. The changes would help to ensure that the council remained a customer focused organisation that could deliver services efficiently into the future. Alongside this process, Overview and Scrutiny Members would consider new ways of presenting performance information.

RESOLVED (unanimously) that:

- 1) The Overview and Scrutiny committee thank staff for their hard work in achieving the targets set out in the corporate plan;**
- 2) The comments of the Overview and Scrutiny committee on the proposed performance indicator targets for 2015/16 be referred**
- 3) to the Cabinet meeting on 6 July 2015, and;**
- 4) The Overview and Scrutiny committee assist the council pilot new ways of presenting performance during 2015/16**

The reason for this decision was:

To assist with the approval process for the corporate plan and assist Overview and Scrutiny Members to undertake their performance management role.

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(The Chair declared the meeting closed at. 7.27 pm)