

Ashford Borough Council: Notes of a Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group – 20th December 2021 (Budget Scrutiny 2)

Present:

Cllr. Ovenden (Chairman);

Cllrs. Chilton, Harman, Ledger.

Apology:

Cllr. Shorter

Also Present:

Cllrs. Bartlett, Blanford, Burgess

Head of Finance and IT, Head of Service Port Health, Head of Planning, Port Health Manager, Accountancy Manager, Policy and Scrutiny Officer, Member Services Officer.

1 Declaration of Interest

1.1 Cllr Bartlett declared an Interest since he lived close to the Inland Border Facility.

2 Port Health Presentation

2.1 The Head of Service Port Health gave a presentation to the Task Group, which outlined the purpose of the Border Control Post (BCP) and provided detailed information on the types of products checked, fees set, calculation of charges and IT systems in place.

2.2 The item was opened up to the Task Group and the following responses were given to questions/comments:

- The Chairman asked how long the Government subsidy funding was expected to be available for. The Head of Service Port Health confirmed that they were beholden to government, who were promising to underwrite all of the funds. The lease for the BCP building had been agreed with a peppercorn rent and a bid had been submitted for another funding round. The risks to budget were more probable in years 2 and 3 when the BCP would be fully operational. A reserve had been built into the budget.
- The Official Controls Regulation (OCR) provided the opportunity to set charges on a sliding scale between low tonnage up to 44 tonnes. The intention was to encourage hauliers to be more efficient and load to the full 44 tonnes. The timeframe for decanting the Lorries had been accounted for and had no cost implications, only breaking the freight could result in

extra costs. Extra time would be required for sampling but the goods would then be released away from Sevington under a Customs Bond, and the owner would be responsible for arranging the transport in that situation.

- In response to a query regarding an upcoming plastic tax on all imported goods, it was confirmed that the checks for this would come under HMRC Customs Control.

2.3 The Chairman thanked the Head of Service Port Health and Port Health Manager and said that he was confident that there was no current risk to this year's budget from the Service.

Resolved:

That the points discussed above be considered further in formulating the Task Group's final report on its Scrutiny of the Council's Budget for 2022/23.

3 Finance

3.1 The Accountancy Manager introduced the three Finance Reports – Reserves Position & Forecasting, Savings Identified and Recharge Methodology. He gave a brief run through the papers and stated that the Reserves were in a good position and offered protection from different aspects of risk.

3.2 The item was opened up to the Task Group and the following responses were given to questions/comments:

Reserves Position & Forecasting

- The Section 31 Grant showed a decreasing balance by the end of the financial year. A Member asked whether this should be increased in light of possible further Covid restrictions and it was confirmed that more contribution was expected into that reserve at year-end, as Government distribute relief and further Section 31 Grant. This was different to statutory relief that offered exempt business rates periods. The Accountancy Manager said that Reserves were sufficient and would be reviewed in March 2022, and it was helpful to remember that the Council shared responsibility with Government for collection rates.

Savings Identified

- The Accountancy Manager highlighted a possible concern within the savings report - £640,000 was still to be identified. The approach had been agreed that the Council would remain ambitious so inevitably this encompassed risk, and it was felt appropriate to leave it on the budget report as some savings may not necessarily be delivered as originally intended.
- In response to a query asking whether cuts may be necessary in light of the savings for 22/23 having not been met, it was explained that a large portion of the target savings had already been met in 2021/22. Some projects had been delayed owing to Covid and so Management Team had been asked

to look at ways in which they could make shorter-term savings, some of which may roll across different years. In addition Cabinet had made formal recommendations to monitor progress against the savings.

- A Member said that it was important for the Task Group to note that the saving target had not been met and that looking ahead it was inevitable that the Council would need to look at setting reasonable targets, and making additional savings. The Head of Finance added that within the MTFP, no Government grants had been included, so they were confident that from 2023/24 the Council would no longer be reliant on Government funding.
- The Chairman queried what impact not meeting the savings would have. The Economic Resilience Reserve held approx. £9 million set aside to fund the pressures within the MTFP. In addition, plans and ideas for making savings had already been considered by Heads of Service and would be put into action as and when necessary. It would form part of the quarterly budget monitoring reports.
- In response to a query regarding a change to the senior structure of the Council, the Chairman advised that a briefing could be arranged after Christmas for the Task Group.

Resolved:

That the points discussed above be considered further in formulating the Task Group's final report on its Scrutiny of the Council's Budget for 2022/23.

4 Planning and Development

- 4.1 The Head of Planning gave a presentation to the Task Group which covered the four main issues they had highlighted for review, which were risks around recruitment & administration, cost of consultants, digitalisation & the new planning system and major appeals.
- 4.2 The item was opened up to the Task Group and the following responses were given to questions/comments:
- A Member questioned if savings within the Planning budget were realistic, given the challenges that the service had, and still faced. He acknowledged that improvements to the department e.g. the new Planning IT system would take time to bed in before results could be measured.
 - Planning application fees set by Central Government had recently risen. The Head of Planning was keen to focus on the fees that ABC could control for non-statutory parts of the application process, in terms of application and pre-application work, but was mindful that the service to customers also had to improve in line with the fee increase.
 - The enhanced graduate scheme was agreed to be a good scheme for the Council. The aim being that within a couple of years, candidates would be ready to progress up into vacant posts as they became available.

- A Member asked whether the removal of consultants and their fees would enable a higher salary to be paid to permanent staff in the hope of retaining them at ABC. The Head of Planning explained that it was important to acquire the right balance between showing Ashford as a desirable place to live and work, in concurrence with a respectable salary. From a budget perspective, he said that removing Consultants from the equation too soon would only serve to put extra pressure onto the Service and exacerbate the problem of staff retention. He acknowledged that the salary scale did contain limitations, in particular with the ability for senior Officers to progress into higher roles. The Chairman highlighted this concern and identified that this was an ABC wide issue that could be reviewed by the wider O&S Committee in the coming year.
- The cost of training for the new Planning IT system had already been factored in to the whole cost, and training would be made available for all.
- A Member spoke about how the experience of quality of service stayed with the public, and she asked whether there were ways that the workload could be streamlined, to ensure better time management. Part of the approach to open up capacity had already been implemented and some functions had moved across to the Business Support Team; they now had responsibility for validating applications, which freed up time for Planning Officers.
- In response to a question about graduates, the Head of Planning agreed with Members that Officers already working within the Council often already held the local knowledge about the Borough that was so valuable, and he himself had worked his way up to Head of Service. Sourcing the right opportunities for Officers was vital, and retention was just as important as recruitment. The idea of a central pool of graduates across several LA's was suggested, which would increase opportunities and there would be more chance of someone being available for LAs when a position arose.
- Projects could sometimes place a strain on staff, and so it was important to choose involvement wisely. Officers were currently involved with the digital mapping project led by Central Government and had received funding to work on this. The capacity for staff to be involved in all projects was not available, and therefore ABC had to decipher what they would gain from each project before committing to it. Additionally though, it was beneficial to be on the 'inside' of projects to gain knowledge and insight.
- It was confirmed that legal costs, including situations where external legal advice was sought, were re-charged back to Planning.
- The Chairman asked whether there was a maximum number of cases that Officers could have open at any one time, in relation to utilising Consultants to support with everyday work. The Head of Planning advised that it was a delicate balancing act, but an average of fifty cases would be deemed manageable. The Chairman added that it was prudent to continue to use Consultants until the backlog had been cleared and Officers were handling a more manageable range.
- The Chairman highlighted the savings figure in the Planning budget and asked whether this was realistically deliverable. The Head of Planning confirmed that it would be difficult to deliver those savings in the short term. The Service needed to get back on its feet and that would necessitate time and funds, but once this

position was achieved then the opportunity would arise to make savings and grow income, hopefully beyond the budget expectations. The Chairman noted that the savings figure within the budget papers was £100k, and other savings (listed as income generating) totaled around £60k. He deduced that the savings were unlikely to be met and asked the Head of Planning whether he thought the budget (without the savings) was sufficient to get the Department back on track and maintain the service at the level it was currently being delivered at. The Head of Planning responded that a slower build was necessary, and he wanted to reach the point where the Service could be reviewed with the new structure in full operation, to be able to ascertain whether further work was required, and budget amendments were required. The Head of Accountancy added that service contingency was available, and it was to the Head of Planning's credit that he had considered alternative ways that savings could be delivered, in line with the current targets. Removal of those targets could run the risk of them being lost for the future, so he felt it better to keep them within the budget to keep them on the radar. The Chairman agreed with the points made, but said that it was important to recognize that there was not always scope to make savings.

Resolved:

That the points discussed above be considered further in formulating the Task Group's final report on its Scrutiny of the Council's Budget for 2022/23.

5. Final Meeting

- 5.1 The Policy & Scrutiny Officer advised that she would compile a slide show for the final wrap up meeting. The Chairman suggested an extra short session would be beneficial, and this could also incorporate the senior staff restructure that had been mentioned earlier in the meeting.

Post Meeting Note: This is now confirmed for Tuesday 11th January 2022 at 6pm.

Councillor Ovenden (Chairman)
Overview & Scrutiny Task Group – Budget Scrutiny