

# Ashford Borough Council: Notes of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group Wrap Up meeting – 11<sup>th</sup> January 2022 (Budget Scrutiny 4)

## Present:

Cllr. Ovenden (Chairman);

Cllr. Ledger.

## Apologies:

Cllr. Chilton, Harman.

## Also Present:

Cllrs. Blanford, Burgess, Clokie, Shorter, Wright.

Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Head of Finance and IT, Accountancy Manager, Development Partnership Manager, Compliance and Data Protection Manager, Policy and Scrutiny Officer, Member Services Officer.

## 1 HRA Business Plan

- 1.1 The Accountancy Manager introduced this item, following a request by the Task Group Members to review the plan.
- 1.2 In response to a query regarding Other Appropriations and Appropriated Out figures on Page 39, this related to repayment of borrowing and affected the revenue element, so observed repayment of debt.

### Recommendation:

**The Task Group noted the report.**

## 2 Wrap Up & Recommendations

- 2.1 The Policy and Scrutiny Officer gave a presentation that summarised the key points discussed at each Budget Scrutiny meeting, and listed six recommendations that the Task Group would recommend to Cabinet, and one recommendation for the O&S full Committee.
- 2.2 The item was opened up to the Task Group and the following responses were given to questions/comments:-

- The Deputy Chief Executive discussed the issue of Stodmarsh, and he

explained that ABC had identified the need to deliver approximately thirty hectares of wetland to allow the continuation of planning approvals. The Head of Corporate Property & Projects had been trying to identify sites in the Borough and negotiate with landowners, but had not yet been successful in acquiring any land. The Project Green scheme with an area of land near the Designer Outlet had been identified as a potential location. The problem with procurement of this type of land was that there was not an established market, and therefore prices for land for nutrient neutrality were an unknown, and prices could consequently fluctuate quite drastically. Another complication was that farmland could often be held in family or commercial trust, so the process was often long and drawn out. A number of Members met routinely to monitor the delivery of the mitigation land. The Development Partnership Manager added that the Minister for Housing had been made aware of the Stodmarsh situation and the topic was expected to feature on BBC South East today in the coming weeks.

- A Member highlighted the imminent commissioning of the Planning IT system and the prospect of potential mitigation to that risk. The Chairman agreed but explained that the Head of Planning had stated in his presentation that the new IT system would not deliver the £100k savings outlined in the report. He had gone on to say that some opportunities would arise to create revenue, which would go some way to provide savings, but there was still a shortfall of unidentified savings. This raised concerns that there was a hole in the Planning budget going forward. The Chairman's view was that Planning should have some leeway, although he understood that this could be deemed unfair on other Departments, therefore the recommendation was that the Task Group note the concerns, and note that it was a monitoring budget.
- The Chief Executive mentioned the Senior Staff restructure proposals that were currently out for consultation with staff. This looked at potentially making changes, only once feedback had been received from staff. The Consultation Paper would then have to go to Joint Consultative Committee, Cabinet and then Council, so it was still in the very early stages. It was intended that there would be only minimum pressure on any budgets, and particularly not on the 2022/23 budget resulting from the structure review. Further budget pressures could possibly be felt owing to incremental salary increases, which was often the case in other Local Authorities. The final report would be available for the O&S Committee to review.
- The settlement figure from Central Government had been received, and Ashford had not been awarded any additional funding, but in effect had received a real terms reduction. The Government confirmed that it would compensate for NI contributions, but by compensating for the £200k cost, they had then lowered the Lower Tier Grant, which cancelled out the £200k compensation. As a consequence, ABC now had a pressure on the budget of £500,000 which was proposed to be funded from reserves, since it was a one off pressure for this year only. Ashford

had received more New Homes Bonus (NHB), but this was still within the core spending power, so effectively had just been moved from grants into NHB. No NHB was placed into the budget, and the Leader of the Council agreed this funding be split between the Carbon Reduction Project, and Corporate Projects. ABC would respond to the Consultation to state that they, along with some other Kent Authorities, felt penalized and felt that a number of factors should be considered including the EU exit and introducing the Inland Border Facility, the Syrian Refugee Settlement Scheme and Stodmarsh.

- 2.3 The Policy and Scrutiny Officer confirmed the next step was to write the Final Report, which would be submitted to the next O&S Committee Meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2022, and then be submitted to Cabinet on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022.

### **Resolved**

**That the Recommendations be submitted to the next O&S Meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2022.**

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

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