

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held in Committee Room No. 2, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **14th February 2023**.

Present:

Cllr. Ovenden (Chairman)

Cllrs. Hayward, Howard, Ledger.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Burgess, Clarkson, Meaden, Mulholland.

In attendance:

Cllr Shorter

Deputy Chief Executive, Director of Customer, Technology and Finance, Head of Policy and Performance, Service Lead – Finance, Senior Governance & Data Protection Officer, Senior Member Services Officer.

Also in Attendance (virtually)

Cllr. Chilton (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs. Blanford, Harman.

Director of Place, Space and Leisure, Assistant Director of Planning and Development, Assistant Director of Environment, Property and Recreation, Digital Transformation Manager, Policy & Scrutiny Officer, Policy and Democratic Services Assistant.

297 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 8th November 2022 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

298 Report of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group

The Policy and Scrutiny Officer introduced the report that gave the final findings of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group. She advised that the Task Group had met four times during December and January to scrutinise the Council's draft 2023/24 budget and had made six recommendations to be made to the Cabinet and then to Council. Some of the particular areas of focus had been: - the Council's borrowing portfolio and expected interest rate increases; the HRA maintenance programme; homelessness and housing options; and risks around the maintenance of assets and the commercial property portfolio. Management Team had seen and supported the

recommendations and a summary of their advice was included at Paragraph 8 of the report.

The Committee considered that the Task Group had done a good job of scrutinising the budget as presented before Christmas, but given the information they had been made aware of at the pre-Committee briefing, there was a need to re-assess. There was also disappointment that this information had been introduced at a late stage. It was noted that any deficit for the upcoming year had been proposed to be supported by a one-off use of the Economic Resilience Reserve, and that position had not changed, neither had the issues, risks and savings targets identified within. However, there was concern about the newer proposal to not increase Council Tax by the maximum amount possible. Whilst it was agreed that residents should be supported, the actual amounts being talked about were pence per household, but would be significant for this Council in building budget stability going forward for future years. Therefore whilst the majority of Committee Members still considered the budget was sound and deliverable for 2023/24, it was questioned at what cost for the future? The Chairman said that the proposal on Council Tax was a purely political decision in the run up to an election and he did not believe it was in the best interests of Ashford Borough Council. Other Members agreed with this viewpoint.

A Member said he had had concerns throughout this process about “savings to be identified”. During the last budget cycle around of a third of the savings proposals identified had not been delivered and he therefore continued to disagree that the draft budget was “sound and deliverable”.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, IT and Digital said that with regard to the savings, the draft budget report had stated that there would be an exercise to identify savings for future years during 2023/24. That work had been programmed and planned and a large amount of work had already been done. Within that exercise Management Team had identified some clearly identifiable savings that could be delivered during the forthcoming budget year (approximately £200k). He acknowledged and agreed that in the past budget savings had been identified and not delivered, and he believed Officers had learned from that and the ability to deliver and monitor savings going forward would be improved.

There was a discussion around the investment strategy of the Council, which was originally brought in to compensate for reducing Government support grants. The Chairman considered that such commercial investments should be making a difference to the residents of Ashford, above and beyond basic Council services and this had to go hand in hand with the Council charging a level of Council Tax that covered the costs of the basic services it provided. Keeping Council Tax levels low may be admirable, but if they did not keep up with the real cost of providing those services, the Council was then relying on commercial investments, where income could go up as well as down, and this would pose a risk to the budget. He did not believe therefore that income from investments, or “windfalls”, should be relied upon to “prop up” the budget.

As a result of the additional information received at this late stage, the Committee agreed to make four further recommendations, in addition to those made by the Task Group.

Resolved:

That the Committee agrees the following recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Budget Task Group to the Cabinet:

- I. The Council's draft budget for 2023/24 is sound and deliverable (noting recommendation II).**
- II. The Task Group supports the proposal to use reserves to fund the 2023/24 deficit.**
- III. The Task Group notes that in order to mitigate against the challenges presented by the current economic climate, a savings strategy needs to be developed to bridge the budget gap.**
- IV. The Task Group note that work should be undertaken to assess the Council's estates portfolio to determine whether assets should be retained.**
- V. Resources should be allocated to ensure the Council continues to deliver more than the minimum requirement of 10% for fire safety checks in homes.**
- VI. A presentation is provided to the wider Council regarding the Housing Revenue Account.**

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee then wanted to make further recommendations to the Cabinet, namely that:

- VII. The Committee approve the findings of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group at the time of writing.**
- VIII. That consideration should be given to increasing the Council Tax levels in line with Government recommended levels to protect service delivery in the coming and future years.**
- IX. The Committee would like to monitor the delivery of the proposed savings identified on an ongoing and regular basis.**
- X. £500,000 is earmarked from the Economic Resilience Reserve to safeguard against expected income from the international development company not being forthcoming.**

299 Final Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group's Review of the Planning IT System Delivery

The Policy and Scrutiny Officer introduced the report which advised that last year the Committee had agreed to form a Task Group to review the lessons learnt during the project to deliver the new Planning IT System with Arcus Global. The Group also wanted to ensure that where issues had been experienced they were not repeated

for future transformation projects. The Task Group had made eight specific recommendations. Management Team had seen and supported the recommendations and a summary of their advice as an appendix to the report.

Resolved:

That the following recommendations from the Task Group be endorsed and forwarded to the Cabinet:

- I. Projects of a certain size or importance require a professional project manager and this role should not be in addition to normal duties.**
- II. Unnecessary and historic data should not be transferred to new systems and any data migration should be considered during the early stages of a project. A data retention policy should be agreed and adopted for implementation in the project.**
- III. Internal and external user testing should be thoroughly scoped, agreed through PMG and carried out for any future system implementation or upgrade.**
- IV. Detailed scoping of Officers time should take place when considering project resources.**
- V. Consultation with external customers should take place at the outset of a project to inform its delivery.**
- VI. PMG should determine the governance arrangements of future projects, including frequency of highlight reports setting out key risks and challenges.**
- VII. Portfolio Holders should be kept informed of project updates for key projects in their Service on a regular basis, which is defined from the outset of a project.**
- VIII. System rollouts should foremost be designed to improve the customer experience and processes need to be mapped with this in mind.**

300 Corporate Performance Report (Quarter 3 2022/23)

The Senior Governance & Data Protection Officer introduced this item which summarised performance against the Council's updated suite of KPIs reflecting the Corporate Plan 2022-24, for the Quarter 3 period 2022/23. The report pulled the necessary information from across Council services to reflect the quarterly KPIs. Representing these in the four themes of the Corporate Plan: - Green Pioneer; Caring Ashford; Targeted Growth; and the Councils underlying principles. In addition to the surrounding narrative for specific KPIs where available, the report also highlighted some of the key actions over the quarter where relevant to the aims and objectives of the Corporate Plan. Specific areas to note this quarter were the impact of the cost of living and inflation increases were having on residents and the

Council's budget, Town Centre vacancies, the focus on Housing, the awarding of a new waste and recycling contract and improved practices in Planning.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

301 Report Tracker

Resolved:

That the Report Tracker be received and noted.

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