

Ashford Borough Council: Notes of a Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Budget Task Group – 11th December 2023

Present:

Cllr. Bell (Chair for this Meeting of the Task Group);

Cllrs. Bartlett, Chilton, Ledger, Michael.

Also in Attendance:

Cllrs. Betty, Harman, Ovenden, Walder, Wright.

Also Present:

Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Corporate Director of Housing, Customer, Technology and Finance, Service Lead Finance, Senior Accountant, Assistant Director of Environment, Property and Recreation, Head of Policy and Performance, Scrutiny and Partnerships Manager, Member Services Officer.

Prior to the commencement of the meeting, there was an 'All Councillor Briefing on corporate Finance'.

1 Minutes of the Last Meeting

- 1.1 The Task Group agreed that the Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group Meeting on the 12th January 2023 were an accurate record.

2 Draft Budget Report 2024/25

- 2.1 The Draft Budget report was introduced, this had been presented to Cabinet on 30 November 2023 and included a summary, budget pages (including service specific budget pages), income, risks and the HRA account. Members were invited to identify any areas they felt required extra detail and/or clarification at subsequent meetings, these were:

- Planning Enforcement was raised as an area that took up considerable Councillor time, further detail on the level of enforcement activity within the Borough and the resourcing available to this activity was requested.
- Members noted the turnaround time of small householder applications and felt that these should be dealt with promptly. There was an issue with a backlog of applications, this coupled with the change in the time in which applications should be determined and Stodmarsh meant that there were risks that needed to be looked at.

- Understanding and ensuring that the work on the Local Plan to 2041 would be resourced accordingly. In particular the staffing requirements, and how each site would be assessed. There were concerns raised that there would be significant fees in relation to consultants – this may be appropriate but Members felt that a ‘deep dive’ into this would be appropriate.
- There were a number of areas that were discussed as part of the medium term financial plan, during which assumptions were made about those areas, including parking charges, the monitoring centre, economic development and grounds maintenance – whilst all of those areas may not be fully covered it felt appropriate to have detail on the areas of risk and the assumptions being made. Members were advised that in respect of the function of the monitoring centre, a task group had been established to look at the functions of community safety and the conclusions from that would be put to Members – that would be a decision for the future, it was not a decision for this budget. The only item that had been actioned for this 24/25 budget was the increase in parking charges that had already been considered by both Cabinet and Council. All of the other items would be subject to working groups and it would be wrong to pre-empt that work.
- There was some discussion around the Council’s reserves policy and whether the current levels required adjusting. It was noted that the previous year had seen the reserves ‘dipped into’ and it was likely that the same would occur for the upcoming budget year. The resilience of the reserves was questioned, along with whether any had been earmarked for future plans.
- It was questioned whether a stock review of commercial units had been done or would be done to explore where the revenue was being generated. Garages and light commercial industrial units were performing well and it was deemed prudent to consider how to maximize income of the Council’s commercial holdings.
- Prior to the meeting a Member of the Task Group sent a number of questions to the Service Lead Finance, including requesting details on contingency, maintenance requirements and the key assumptions regarding various income streams. In respect of the move to International House – it was questioned whether there would be budget pressures and assurances were sought that there would be uninterrupted levels of service. The questions would be answered in a paper to the Task Group for review.
- A Member raised the issuing of IT equipment for Councillors and whether that required reassessing. A number of Councillors had returned their own devices and opted to use their own – should more Councillors wish to do this, this would be accommodated.
- There was some discussion regarding further potential savings at senior management level and whether there were other options available by a further restructure taking place. Whilst this was not a matter for the Task Group to consider during the scrutiny of the budget, the appropriate method for considering such matters would be reported back following legal advice.

- A risk assessment was included as part of the budget report and it was felt that it would be worthwhile spending time reviewing this, with Members views being added to those risks. As part of this homelessness was also raised, and a paper would be presented to the Task Group to ascertain whether this needed more work.

2.2 The Chair of this Meeting of the Task Group welcomed the large number of areas that had been suggested by the Task Group for review as part of the budget scrutiny process. He advised that he, along with the Vice-Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, would spend time with Officers to rationalise the areas for review.

Recommendations

It was agreed that the Task Group would review the following areas:

Meeting 1 – Wednesday 10 January 2024	
<u>Service</u>	<u>Topics</u>
General for information Items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response to Cllr Michael questions • Homelessness – Copy of report presented to SLT to determine if further review needed. • Advice from Monitoring Officer on O&S involvement in Structure
Environment, Property and Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate property, asset condition and asset maintenance programme. • Commercial property portfolio risk

Meeting 2 – Monday 15 January 2024	
<u>Service</u>	<u>Topics</u>
Planning and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing the Local Plan, use of consultants, and impact on existing resource. • Planning fees and charges, how are we managing new regulations and ensuring we hit appropriate time scales?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Planning enforcement resources
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Meeting 3 – Tuesday 16 January 2024	
<u>Service</u>	<u>Topics</u>
Risks & Reserves	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reserves, how much, purpose, risk and policy• Significant financial risks, including key income streams,(risk assessment approach)
Wrap Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Presentation of findings and discussion over draft recommendations.

Councillor Bell (Chair for this Meeting of the Task Group)
Overview & Scrutiny Task Group – Budget Scrutiny