

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

11 September 2023

Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at the Town Hall, Bexhill-on-Sea on Monday 11 September 2023 at 6:30pm.

Committee Members present: Councillors P.N. Osborne (Chair), Mrs V. Cook (Vice-Chair), J. Barnes (MBE), Mrs M.L. Barnes, S. Burton, C.A. Clark, B.J. Coupar, C.A. Creaser, T.M. Killeen (MBE) (remote), C.R. Maynard and S.B. McGurk.

Other Members Present: Councillors A.E. Biggs (remote), R.A. McCourt and C.J. Winter.

Advisory Officers present: Chief Executive, Interim Deputy Chief Executive, Director – Place and Climate Change, Head of Housing and Regeneration and Democratic Services Officer.

Also present: 10 members of the public via the live webcast.

OSC23/17. **MINUTES**

(1)

The Chair was authorised to sign the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 10 July 2023 as a correct record of the proceedings.

OSC23/18. **APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTES**

(2)

An apology for absence was received from Councillor M.C. Legg.

OSC23/19. **DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS**

(4)

Declarations of interest were made by Councillors in the Minutes as indicated below:

Burton	Agenda Item 6 – Personal Interest as her son held a licence agreement with Rother District Council to provide Temporary Accommodation at a premises.
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OSC23/20. **REVENUE BUDGET AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING AS AT QUARTER 1 - 2023/24**

(5)

Members received and considered the report of the Interim Deputy Chief Executive on the Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Monitoring as at 30 June 2023. The report contained details of the significant variations of the Revenue Budget and updated Capital Programme and included a brief update on the Collection Fund performance.

Since the detailed budget had been approved by Cabinet in February 2023, there had been one reportable virement regarding the internal service restructure.

The Revenue Budget indicated a deficit of £0.516m against the approved budgeted drawdown from Reserves of £2,035m, resulting in a forecast reserve drawdown of £2.55m. The main reasons for the variations were detailed in the report, which included increased staffing costs, costs of the Council's district elections, temporary accommodation (TA) costs, additional car parking income and unrealised anticipated savings from the Financial Stability Programme (FSP).

The forecast deficit in respect of TA of £540k was a significant concern and officers had been reviewing options to address this. The issue was being exacerbated by the amount of rent that the authority could offer private sector landlords and it had been proposed to Cabinet at their meeting on 4 September 2023 that payments increase. Paragraph 8 in the report demonstrated the cost savings to the TA budget should market rent be paid to landlords, resulting in a net annual saving of £169,125. If agreed, the impact on the forecast deficit position would be a reduction of £85k to reflect the forecast saving for the remainder of this financial year; Cabinet had agreed to this approach.

The Capital Programme comprised a range of strategic projects that spanned more than one year and many operated for several years or had recurrent investments. Projects that had not spent all their allocation in the year of inception had the remaining funding carried forward into future financial years, profiled based on the anticipated expenditure for the project. The Interim Deputy Chief Executive was working with Heads of Service and elected Members to undertake a fundamental review of capital schemes which currently amounted to more than £155m as reported in the 2022/23 outturn report.

The Capital Programme showed expenditure of £2.4m – (8% of revised 2023/24 budget) incurred during the first three months of the financial year. A further £0.66m had been spent on capital projects. The revised 2023/24 budgets had been derived from reviewing project cashflows and assessing the expected position at the time; up to £27.7m was forecast to be spent. Continued monitoring would be undertaken by the Finance department and Heads of Service.

The forecast impact on Reserves was a drawdown of £2.551m which was £0.516m higher than the planned use of £2.035m and £0.260m for capital which was £74,000 higher than the planned use of reserves.

The Collection Fund was 30.02% of the collectable debit, which was 0.21% higher than the corresponding figure in 2022/23. The budgeted yield was 30.65% which was 0.3% lower than the same period in the previous year. Business Rates Collection Fund was 29.38%, which

was 0.11% higher than the previous year. Collection rates had held up well despite the cost-of-living crisis and COVID-19 pandemic.

The forecast outturn at Quarter 1 was a deficit of £2.11m which was £0.59 higher than the approved planned use of Reserves. The Capital Programme was forecast to outturn at £27.7m with £8.2m being re-profiled into future years of the Medium Term Financial Strategy. The Interim Deputy Chief Executive would work closely with Heads of Service and Members to reduce areas of overspend and the impact on reserves.

Members had the opportunity to ask questions and the following points were noted during the discussions:

- In 2021, the net budget for TA was £0.6m and the outturn for 2023 was estimated at £1.9m. This represented 11% of the net revenue budget and was therefore a significant pressure on the Council's finances;
- the Financial Stability Programme (FSP) needed more realistic, achievable and phased proposals. Devolution should not be underpinning the FSP, but should be seen as a windfall when agreed;
- Members raised concerns that the overspend on the district elections appeared in the report to be unexpected and suggested that funds could be set aside each year in anticipation. A grant would be received for the Police Crime and Commissioner elections the following year and the iPads used for the first time in 2023 in polling stations were borrowed from the Council's IT systems supplier;
- Members suggested that more funding should be set aside to acquire new housing stock to be used as TA;
- the Council needed to move away from a programme of financial stability and move to one of financial resilience; and
- the Council needed to now look at how discretionary services were delivered, if any could be stopped, more innovative approaches and how best to use its assets, technology and staff in terms of workforce planning, in a 'Fit for the Future' programme.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

OSC23/21. **ROTHER DISTRICT COUNCIL OWNED / LEASED ACCOMMODATION POLICIES**

(6)

Members received the report of the Head of Housing and Regeneration that outlined the proposed Rother District Council (RDC) owned / leased accommodation policies for implementation.

In 2020, RDC became a Registered Provider (RP) of accommodation and thus far, had 33 units of accommodation that it owned and one unit of accommodation that was leased and managed by the Council. The number of units of accommodation owned and leased by the Council

was set to rise further as the scale of the Temporary Accommodation Support Scheme (TASS) and leasing scheme was increased.

As a RP, the Council had to ensure it had a suite of policies in relation to its accommodation, tenants and staff/contractors, in order to comply with Housing Ombudsman, Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 and duties as a landlord. The six proposed policies applied to RDC tenants of temporary accommodation (TA) and leased properties only and would apply to all activity undertaken by Council staff or contractors that may be involved in property management and support of tenants. The six policies, namely: Unacceptable Behaviour Policy; Anti-Social Behaviour Policy; Recharge Policy; Compensation Policy; Domestic Abuse Policy; and Window Restrictors Policy were attached to the report at Appendices A-F.

It was a requirement of the Housing Ombudsman, Social Housing (Regulation) 2023 and Domestic Abuse Act 2021 that the Council had the policies listed in the report.

The Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Housing, who had been invited to the meeting, explained that the policies complied with legislation and included details of best practice across the sector. Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were happy to recommend that Cabinet consider the adoption of all six policies, for onward recommendation to full Council.

RESOLVED: That the following Rother District Council Owned / Leased Accommodation Policies be recommended to Cabinet and full Council for adoption:

- Unacceptable Behaviour Policy;
- Anti-Social Behaviour Policy;
- Recharge Policy;
- Compensation Policy;
- Domestic Abuse Policy; and
- Window Restrictors Policy.

(Councillor Burton declared a personal Interest in this matter as her son held a licence agreement with Rother District Council to provide Temporary Accommodation at a premises and in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct remained in the meeting during the consideration thereof).

OSC23/22. **HOUSING DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY TASK AND FINISH GROUP**
(7)

Members received the report of the Head of Housing and Regeneration which recommended the formation of a Housing Development Strategy Task and Finish Group (HDS T&FG), to inform the shape and direction of the Council's Housing Development Strategy and action plan.

The Council currently had a Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy that was due to expire at the end of 2024 and one of the three main aims of the strategy was to increase the supply of all forms of housing within the district. In order for the Council to continue to achieve its ambition to increase the supply of housing effectively, it required a stand-alone Housing Development Strategy, separate from the Homelessness Strategy.

The draft Terms of Reference (ToR) for the HDS T&FG were attached to the report at Appendix A for Members' consideration. Members were requested to establish the HDS T&FG to hear from community stakeholders and statutory partners to lead in the development of a stand-alone strategy and action plan to achieve its housing development ambitions and better meet the needs of its residents.

Councillors J. Barnes (MBE), A.E. Biggs, C.A. Creaser, T.O. Grohne, T.M. Killeen (MBE) and C.J. Winter had put themselves forward to be considered for membership on the HDS T&FG and Members of the Committee were happy to agree. Members also agreed to the ToR but requested that the HDS T&FG consider them in more detail. Members were advised that the HDS T&FG could not amend the ToR; any suggested changes would have to be brought back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for approval.

RESOLVED: That:

- 1) a Housing Development Strategy Task and Finish Group be established, comprising of Councillors J. Barnes (MBE), A.E. Biggs, C.A. Creaser, T.O. Grohne, T.M. Killeen (MBE) and C.J. Winter, to lead in the development of a stand-alone strategy and action plan to achieve its housing development ambitions and better meet the needs of its residents; and
- 2) the Terms of Reference at Appendix A to the report be approved.

OSC23/23. **RAIL TICKET OFFICE CONSULTATION**
(8)

Members received the report of the Chief Executive which gave an update on the proposed changes to ticket office services at train stations within the Rother district.

On 3 October 2022, Cabinet had considered a report regarding possible changes to the rail ticket office arrangements in the district and it was agreed that the Chief Executive would write to the train operating companies asking that the Council was kept informed of any proposed changes. It was also agreed that should information be received that changes were planned, the matter would be referred to the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) with a recommendation that representatives from the rail operators were invited to attend a OSC meeting at the earliest possible opportunity, to discuss future plans for staffing at railways stations across Rother.

Rail operators were seeking views on proposals to improve and modernise the experience for passengers, by moving staff out from behind the ticket office screens and onto station concourses and platforms. By making staff more visible, rail operators hoped to provide support to passengers where they most needed it and help to those who could not or did not want to use contactless or digital tickets. The industry was currently at local public consultation stage and each train company had produced its own proposals.

There were two train operators within Rother that would be affected by the changes; Southern and Southeastern. Southern Rail had set out how proposed changes would affect Bexhill, Cooden Beach, and Pevensey and Westham stations. A public consultation on the proposal ran from 5 July 2023, with an initial deadline of 26 July 2023 that was extended to 1 September 2023. Passengers were invited to contact transport watchdog, Transport Focus, with any comments. Southern advised that no stations that currently had staff would become unstaffed and station opening hours would remain the same.

Southeastern rail had provided an overview of proposed changes, which were detailed for Members' information in the report. Southeastern started the first phase of public consultations on 40 ticket offices in the Metro area; this period ended on 1 September 2023. Proposals for changes at a further 90 stations, including Stonegate, Etchingam, Robertsbridge, Battle, and Crowhurst would be updated in detail and consulted on in a future phase, likely the end of 2023.

On 26 July 2023, the Chief Executive wrote to Southern Rail following engagement with Bexhill Rail Action Group (BRAG) and the Equality and Diversity Steering Group, details of which were outlined in the report.

Members had the opportunity to ask questions and the following points were noted during the discussions:

- Members noted that the Hurst Green station shown in the table of proposed changes in the report was not in Rother but in Surrey;
- As many residents of Rother relied on station staff, Members would welcome robust engagement in the consultation process;
- Members were concerned that proposed changes would not protect vulnerable residents; and
- Members raised concerns that although staff were needed in railway stations, the cost of travel must be kept as low as possible, therefore the railway operators needed to be creative, rather than just cutting staff numbers.

The Council would continue to monitor and feedback updates on the ticket office consultations. Depending on the timing of the next phase of consultation, the Managing Director of Southeastern Railway would be invited to attend the next meeting of the OSC or a Member's Briefing.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

OSC23/24. **WORK PROGRAMME**
(9)

Consideration was given to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Work Programme. Members were reminded that any Councillor could make a request for an item to be placed onto the Council's Scrutiny Committee Work Programme.

Members suggested that when the report from the Community Safety Partnership was brought to the March meeting, more detailed information about Domestic Abuse reporting statistics could be included; this would be taken back to the relevant officers.

RESOLVED: That the Work Programme at Appendix A be agreed.

CHAIR

The meeting closed at 7:35pm

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WORK PROGRAMME 2023 – 2024

DATE OF MEETING	SUBJECT – MAIN ITEM IN BOLD	Cabinet Portfolio Holder
16.10.23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medium Term Financial Plan 2024/25 to 2028/29 • Digital and Customer Services Strategy Presentation • Discharge of Homeless Duty into Suitable Private Sector Policy • Allocations Policy • Council Tax Reduction Scheme 	Jeeawon Byrne McCourt
20.11.23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance Report: Second Quarter 2023/24 • Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Monitoring – Quarter 2 2023/24 • Climate Strategy 	Jeeawon Field
22.01.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft Revenue Budget Proposals 2024/25 • Key Performance Targets 2024/25 • Local Plan Consultation Draft (Reg 18) 	Jeeawon Prochak
18.03.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crime and Disorder Committee: to receive a report from the Community Safety Partnership • Performance Report: Third Quarter 2023/24 • Revenue Budget and Capital Programme Monitoring – Quarter 3 2024/24 	Field Jeeawon
22.04.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call-in and Urgency Procedures • Draft Annual Report to Council • Review of progress against the recommendations of the Health and Well-Being Task and Finish Group 	Coleman

ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION

- Regeneration inc. Leisure Centre, Fountains, Skate Park and Accessibility of Green Spaces across the district
- Review of the Economic Regeneration Strategy
- Litter Strategy
- Review of the Tourism Strategy and the impact of Airbnbs
- Impact of Airbnb and second homes in Rye/Winchelsea/Camber
- Review of the Financial Stability Programme
- Update report from the Local Strategic Partnership
- Update report from the Health and Well-Being Board
- Review of progress against the recommendations of the Health and Well-Being Task and Finish Group (Year 3)
- Development of new Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy
- Development of new Corporate Plan
- Update report from the Climate Change Steering Group

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