

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 18 January 2021

Present: Councillor Chris Woodward (Chairman)
Councillors Thomson (Vice-Chairman), Atwood, Chapelard, Hayward, Morton,
Ms Palmer, Pound, Scholes and Stanyer

Officers in Attendance: Jane Clarke (Head of Policy and Governance), Lee Colyer (Director of Finance, Policy and Development (Section 151 Officer)), Ian Hirst (Head of Digital Services and Communications), Gary Stevenson (Head of Housing, Health and Environment) and Mark O'Callaghan (Scrutiny and Engagement Officer)

Other Members in Attendance: Councillors Bailey and Dawlings

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

OSC68/20 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bland and Neve.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

OSC69/20 There were no disclosable pecuniary or significant other interests declared at the meeting.

NOTIFICATION OF PERSONS REGISTERED TO SPEAK

OSC70/20 Mr Adrian Thorne was registered to speak at OSC73/20.
 Councillor Bailey was in attendance as the Portfolio Holder presenting at OSC73/20.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING DATED 23 NOVEMBER 2020

OSC71/20 Members reviewed the minutes. No amendments were proposed.

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting dated 23 November 2020 be approved as a correct record.

ITEMS CALLED-IN

OSC72/20 There were no items which had been called-in.

PORTFOLIO HOLDER UPDATE - SUSTAINABILITY

OSC73/20 Councillor Bailey (Portfolio Holder for Sustainability) introduced the report set out in the agenda, comments included:

- Covid-19 had an impact on environment issues. Waste volumes increased sharply owing to lockdown restrictions and high levels of staff absence at the contractor.
- The pandemic also put strain on the Environmental Health staff team at the Council, with them being involved in track and trace system, ensuring businesses are covid-19 safe and investigating covid-19 related complaints.
- Friends of the Earth state Tunbridge Wells is already one of the greenest areas in the country, but the Council was committed to doing more. The relatively new kerbside recycling scheme helped

increased recycling rate up to 50 per cent, one of the highest rates in Kent.

- Progress was being made towards the Council's aim of becoming carbon neutral by 2030. A detailed audit had been conducted on our emissions rate and modelling work had been produced on various ways to reduce emissions. A report was due to be submitted to Cabinet in the March cycle and a draft report would be discussed at the next Climate Emergency Advisory Panel (CEAP) meeting.
- Other works undertaken included second phase of public realm work completion.
- Work was ongoing to improve air quality in the borough. Later this year the Council would introduce 'no idling' zones to dissuade motorists from leaving their engines running in areas of high congestion which would complement similar work the Council had already undertaken around schools.
- The Council was always looking to improve communication with residents and utilised social media to do so. A new electronic newsletter has been launched, delivering customised updates based on postcodes with targeted information such as planning, waste services, consultations and content relevant to subscriber's immediate local area.
- A redesign of Local magazine should also be ready for Spring edition. Local magazine was important for residents without internet access. The magazine was still a very cost-effective way of delivering news at 9 pence per issue to produce and deliver. The net budget per year for this was £18k excluding officer time, which was estimated at a couple of weeks of work.

Mr Adrian Thorne had registered to speak, comments included:

- The Council had agreed to establish a Citizen's Assembly 18 months ago in response to the climate emergency. The declaration called on the Council to include young people ensuring they have a voice in shaping future by setting up a citizen's assembly as a way of involving businesses and residents in the process.
- Since then there had been no Citizen's Assembly with CEAP meetings being conducted behind closed doors and difficulty obtaining minutes. Residents have been reliant on local news for updates which were often unreliable.
- There had been eight months prior to covid-19 to take action.
- CEAP had been run in a poor manner with the outcome being a poor result for residents.
- Residents were promised a voice in shaping the future which had not been delivered. The Committee should seek an explanation.

Discussion included the following matters:

- CEAP was cross party and not controlled or led by one party. It had been democratically within the group that meetings would be private but a public report for Cabinet to be made in due course.
- Primary focus had been on the carbon plan but also it has been looking at the prospect of running a Citizen's Assembly, but it should be noted that this process is expensive with a national one on climate change recently having a budget of half a million pounds.

- It was agreed with the consent of the Leader of the Council that the group would present several options regarding an assembly which would be presented to Cabinet and to Full Council thereafter. CEAP agreed to meet quarterly but would soon meet for eight times in this 12 month period.
- A green audit had been run and modelling already produced with a report being ready on this in a matter of weeks.
- Details on CEAP's work have been provided at a number of Cabinet and Full Council meetings to date providing some form of update.
- Regular public updates could be provided in order to better update and inform.
- The content of CEAP meetings was often commercially sensitive and these parts were redacted from the minutes. There was always a balance required between decision making and public interest so it depended on what was being discussed.
- All carbon reduction strategies, bar one, required carbon offsetting costs to be paid with no net return. Discussion on this was planned for the next CEAP meeting and, as members hadn't seen draft report, detailed comments could not be made. Discussions had commenced with the Director of Finance, Policy and Development and the approach for investments in energy saving projects using traditional methods of financial analysis would pay for themselves and therefore reduce carbon footprint.
- In the event of paying carbon footprint offset payments after 2030 if zero emission carbon targets are not reached, investment models need to account for this and this work is ongoing.
- Regarding ongoing initiatives and resources available for ongoing climate change issues, the Council was left with open ended liability for maintaining remaining assets. Key decisions would need to be made regarding the Council's assets. In the short-term, the reduction in the council's reserves weaken its ability to respond to the climate emergency but in the medium to long term there is significantly more liability to maintain existing asset base and their emissions.
- The last residents' survey was carried out in 2015. Any consultation with residents is valuable. There were newer ways of consultation which needed to be investigated, for example political parties had been running online polls for residents.
- There was a budget for the residents' survey, reasons for not being undertaken since 2015 are unknown. There was existing and up to date framework for consulting and the decisions on the logistics of consultations were subject to the teams involved.
- The Communications and Engagement Strategy was last updated 2013/14. There were measures in place to ensure all consultation was accessible and inclusive. It was kept under review and if direction changes it could be revised accordingly.
- An interim Five Year Plan was going to Full Council in February. It was hoped that consultation on the new plan would be held in early 2020, but this was put on hold due to the pandemic but it was hoped that this will be revisited later this year.
- It had been noted by a number of residents that food waste was being disposed of in general waste, a general complaint picked up on social media platform Nextdoor as well as other social media. Under the contract Urbaser were meant to carry waste separately.

- Food waste was measured and weighed at depot therefore significant amounts of food waste was definitely being delivered separately but there are still a number of complaints about it being mixed. In some cases residents are seeing the 'slave bin' being utilised, which was kept on the back of the lorry and used to collect waste en masse and this is being misinterpreted.
- Food waste weighing was done per load or per day depending on type of vehicle on their return to the depot. This was looked at monthly and there would be some fluctuation. However, the issue does not seem to be systematic.
- There appeared to be an issue of plastic pollution at St. Greggs playground, bordering onto Reynolds Land, where heavy rainwater cascades down the drain with plastic pellets from 4G pitches. The Environment Agency, who are responsible for pollution into water course, would be notified so they can investigate.
- There were still issues around layout of roads around Mt Pleasant Avenue and safety of pedestrians. Monitoring was ongoing in collaboration with KCC. The previously planned works in the last Five Year Plan were complete but a Town Centre Area Plan was being developed as part of the new Local Plan. This would look at the town centre layout in terms of change in working patterns and changes of use as a result of the pandemic.
- The public realm works already undertaken have made the town centre more pedestrian friendly and had a positive impact.
- A number of resident complained about a lack of street cleaning and leaf clearing which results in blocked drains. Enforcement on private land was possible but difficult, particularly during lockdown when businesses were closed. In Rock Villa Road specifically, there was a lot of private land but unless there is a public health concern action would not be taken, a survey can be carried out to determine this.
- Leaf clearing was carried out regularly and this had continued this year.
- Litter fines were still in force though less enforcement officers have been out on the streets due to redeployment. Southborough and Tunbridge Wells commons were not managed by the Council.
- Litter issues may be related to behaviour changes in lockdown, for example, an increase in use of takeaway cups in open spaces. Cleaning standards had not been reduced.
- Additional electric vehicle charging stations in supermarket car parks and some form of incentivisation could promote usage.
- Shops should be discouraged from selling goods in single use packaging. The Council's remit only covers internal use. Therefore, aside from lobbying, this is a national issue. The Council's authority do not extend to external use.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

BUDGET 2021/2022 AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY UPDATE

- OSC74/20 Lee Colyer (Director of Finance, Policy and Development) introduced the report set out in the agenda, comments included:
- The budget has been developed over a nine month period with three separate reports going to Cabinet via the Advisory Boards and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

- The council tax threshold for this Council was likely to be increased by £5 per household for the coming year and the government had set out a provisional settlement with the final settlement to be confirmed by parliament in February.
- The final allocation of £454k of New Homes Bonus would be received which would help to reduce the use of reserves in balancing the revenue budget. In the spring this scheme would be replaced by government with a new scheme to incentivise local authorities for ambitious schemes for meeting housing targets.
- The Kent Business Rate pool would continue for another year. Latest financial impact from the pandemic on local government's major income is shown in the graph in paragraph 2.26. The impact was not likely to improve soon due to further lockdowns and restrictions being likely but unemployment and collection rates are holding up better than feared and are being assisted by national packages (paragraph 2.28).
- By using all New Homes Bonus, £1.935million will be required from reserves to fund the provision of local services in the next financial year, which is an improvement on the draft budget estimate that £3 million would be required (paragraph 2.32).
- The Council's assets continued to require significant funding with gross project funding of £2.8million required next year, in addition to rolling forward the current programme, due to additional requirements. This would result in reduction of reserves.
- Fortunately, the Council entered the pandemic in a sound financial position in a balanced revenue budget, low external debt and generating income from Business Rate growth.
- The impact of the pandemic would be that costs would rise but income would have decreased. The Council aimed to bring the revenue budget balance back without reliance on reserves from April 2022.
- The drain on reserves was further exacerbated by the unsustainable costs of existing property assets and a review would be carried out to identify those that had sufficient demand and purpose in which to continue to invest and those that should be sold.
- Reserves must be replenished as soon as is possible in order to provide further community support in the event of possible future national crises.
- A public survey had been undertaken to gain public response on budget strategy, responding to the emergency, council tax increases and asking residents how funding should be allocated. There were 575 respondents across the borough in which 91 per cent were in agreement to the temporary use of reserves and 74 per cent were in agreement of increasing council tax by £5.
- Reductions to services from April 2022 were identified as acceptable in all areas in order to balance the budget except the areas of public safety and public convenience where the public wanted funding maintained. The respondents significantly reduced services in the areas including committee, mayoral and member services, museums, planning and building control and property and maintenance of asset costs with support to sell property assets to reduce strain on the budget.
- 69 per cent of respondents supported service costs being set locally rather than being set by central government. There was

also support for making savings in the budget in order to tackle the climate emergency locally.

- Results of the budget survey were shown at Appendix C with a postcode map or respondents shown at Appendix D.
- There had been meetings with the local MP and Minister of Housing, Communities and Local Government about council tax caps being set which produced substantially less funding than in other boroughs but the Council was currently locked into an outdated system and of which it had no control to adjust.
- Government estimated that tax revenues increased every year but this was not the case currently. With single person occupancy and council tax allowance applications increased during the pandemic, the tax revenue had actually decreased.

Discussion included the following matters:

- Confirmation was sought that essential services were to remain protected. Better dialogue with residents was needed about what the discretionary and non-discretionary services are and what the Council was doing. Some of the services noted in the survey that could be reduced in the public's opinion are actually essential services. This suggested the need for more information to be given and the distinction made on these services before the survey question is asked.
- Fees and charges were not expected to recover to pre-pandemic levels, the main reasons being a reduction in car parking revenue and there being a number of property assets which would not hold the same value. This issue would need to be dealt with over the next year.
- Any money spent on property assets was money that could be spent on residents and this was recognised by them.
- The Council should be mindful about disposing of assets care needed to be taken so as not to impact economic development.
- Car parks, if not used as much in the future due to changes in working patterns and shopping habits, could be a viable reduction.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

POVERTY TASK AND FINISH GROUP: UPDATE

OSC75/20 Councillor Pound (Chairman of the Task and Finish Group) provided a verbal update, comments included:

- Since the previous Overview and Scrutiny meeting, two further Task and Finish Group meetings have been held with another scheduled for the day after this meeting and from then plan to be held fortnightly.
- The group was planning to bring forward an initial report in April.
- In the previous meeting, communications with residents on various initiatives and facilities in the borough were discussed. It has been concluded that it is impossible to address all seven elements of indices of deprivation identified but the group has resolved to settle on three principle areas which are those of employment, education skills and training and barriers to housing and services.
- Work was ongoing and good progress is being made in association with various officers and agencies such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and Nourish.

- It has been suggested that whilst it may not be possible for the Council to provide all services required to the communities affected in this regard, it can act as facilitator to identify gaps in service and instruct other agencies to act on it's behalf and with collaboration.

RESOLVED – That the verbal report be noted.

WORK PROGRAMME

OSC76/20 Comments relating to the Work Programme included:

- More targeted information would be helpful for future Portfolio Holder reports. The template would be amended and guidance provided to future presenters.
- With the Fusion contract coming up in March, it may be convenient to swap the next Portfolio Holder report to Culture, Leisure and Economic Development. This would be investigated outside the meeting.

URGENT BUSINESS

OSC77/20 There was no urgent business for consideration.

DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

OSC78/20 The next meeting was scheduled for Monday 29 March 2021.

NOTE: The meeting concluded at 8.35 pm.