

## **Scrutiny Committee**

**Minutes of meeting held in Court Room - Town Hall, Eastbourne on 5 December 2022 at 6.00 pm.**

### **Present:**

Councillor Kshama Shore (Chair).

Councillors Steve Wallis (Deputy-Chair), Jane Lamb, Md. Harun Miah, Hugh Parker, Robert Smart and Robin Maxted.

### **Officers in attendance:**

Philip Brown (Property Lawyer), Luke Dreeling (Performance Lead), Ola Owolabi (Deputy Chief Finance Officer - Corporate Finance), Nick Peeters (Committee Officer), Parmjeet Jassal (Interim Head of Financial Planning), Leigh Palmer (Head of Planning First), Lisa Rawlinson (Head of Regeneration and Planning Policy), Seanne Sweeney (Strategy and Commissioning Lead for Community and Partnerships) and Mark Walker (Head of Financial Planning).

### **37 Minutes of the meeting held on 10 October 2022**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 10 October 2022 were submitted and approved and signed as a correct record by the Chair.

\* Members requested that updates on the following be provided:

- Further data on the carbon emissions from the Eastbourne Airshow.
- An overview on the work of the Customer Contact team.

### **38 Apologies for absence / declaration of substitute members**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Babarinde and Councillor Morris, Councillor Maxted attended as a substitute for Councillor Babarinde.

### **39 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPIs) by members as required under Section 31 of the Localism Act and of other interests as required by the Code of Conduct**

There were none.

### **40 Questions by members of the public**

There were none.

**41 Urgent items of business**

There were none.

**42 Right to address the meeting/order of business**

No requests were received.

**43 HMO planning policy and licensing update - verbal update**

Lisa Rawlinson, Head of Regeneration, provided an interim update to Members on planning policy and licensing for Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs). Members were advised that, due to the complex nature of collecting the data, particularly the difficulties in identifying the location of small non licensable HMO's, data collected was unlikely to provide a comprehensive analysis.

During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- The consultants engaged to collect the data had advised that identifying a sample of the HMO data would be sufficient to provide a robust analysis and avoid a challenge. The main issue was how the data was reported and that there was not a single point of information.
- The Council had datasets on licensable HMOs. The number of homes/dwellings that housed less than six people and were not licensed, were not known. Work was being done with the consultants to improve the quality of this data.
- The licensing of all types of HMOs was extremely difficult. One area the Council would focus on was a policy that controlled volumes of HMOs by street.
- Members felt that the proliferation of large HMOs in Eastbourne was of concern, with potentially vulnerable occupants with safeguarding needs. There was also an impact on local residents. Members asked that updated regulations and a policy be produced as a matter of urgency.

**Resolved** to note the update and request that a full report be provided to a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee, including further information on the sampling exercise being undertaken by the Consultants.

**44 Ombudsman referral**

Tim Whelan, Director of Service Delivery and Gary Hall, Head of Homes First, introduced the report which outlined a decision by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, regarding a complaint made against Eastbourne Borough Council's Housing service. The Ombudsman's recommendations included referral of the decision and the lessons learned outcomes to the Council's Scrutiny Committee. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- The Service had, historically, experienced a high turnover in staff, however, the importance of improved communication, both internally and externally, had been made a priority. The recommendations from the Ombudsman had been accepted.
- The Housing Needs team received a large volume of requests that included complex needs and did not refuse to support the requests. However, the major challenge faced by the Team was that the housing stock, both in the public and private sector, was not available to meet the needs requested.
- The front-end communications process had been improved to include a triage team that took calls straight away and assessed people that presented as homeless – providing early intervention.
- A homeless and housing prevention hub had been established in Eastbourne, which would work alongside statutory and voluntary agencies to ensure that practical, joined-up support was provided.
- A customer care workshop was being arranged in January for the Homes First leadership team, which would include focus on improved communications. Personal improvement plans had also been introduced for some staff.
- The Council had a low turnover of its own housing stock which meant the throughput of properties for those on the waiting list was low. This was also impacted on by homeless people housed in hotels and asylum seekers who sought housing.
- The complexity of the case had been noted and actions had been undertaken to address the issues raised by the Ombudsman. A review of the Council's letter of response to the Ombudsman would be undertaken to reflect more fully the steps taken by the Council.

**Resolved** to note the report and request that a top level analysis of the numbers of people on the housing waiting list and the types of more complex cases be provided to a future meeting of the Committee.

#### **45 Corporate performance - quarter 2 - 2022/23**

Luke Dreeling, Performance Lead, presented the report. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- The target of 22 days for the performance indicator (PI) 'Benefits: Average days to process new claims for housing/council tax benefit' was set by the Department for Work and Pensions. The types of information and the length of time customers needed to provide it, varied. The PI which impacted more on customers, was the 'Average days to process change of circumstances', following the award of benefits.

- In relation to the PI 'Customers: Increase the percentage of calls to the contact centre answered within 60 seconds', a number of the vacancies in the contact centre were a result of staff moving internally in the organisation and becoming specialists in other areas. Recruitment continued to be a challenge; however, the Team was being looked at and staff with skills/knowledge in areas such as housing or council tax/business rates were providing responses to those types of enquiries. Telephone, email and webchat were available for customers to contact the Council.
- Improvements in the PI for Housing: Average void relet time key to key (month & year to date) were expected through quarters 3 to 4. There were still challenges in sourcing building materials for repairs. Areas such as new kitchens and bathrooms had a longer lead-in time. A tenancy could be taken on prior to repairs being undertaken, however, in reality, there was normally work required in bathrooms and kitchens.
- The target for the PI for Housing: Number of Licensed HMO's Inspected per Quarter was based on a 'risk based' approach as not all the HMOs required inspection on an annual basis.

### **Corporate performance quarter 2, 2022-2023 Part B**

Ola Owolabi, Deputy Chief Finance Director, presented the report. During the discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- The Annual Settlement from Government was expected around the 21 December 2022.
- Further analysis of the £1,353,00 (Capital Financing) within table 2.1 of the report was requested.
- The discussion around the additional cost and final figure for a pay award took place prior to the setting of the 2022/23 budget. The award had been anticipated and included in individual service costs, however, an additional cost now had to be managed.

**Resolved** to note the report.

### **46 Local council tax reduction scheme**

Tim Whelan, Director of Service Delivery, introduced the report. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

An online income and expenditure form had recently been introduced and become 'live' which used 'open sourced' banking data volunteered by customers and allowing quicker processing and decision making

A session was held at the Town Hall, attended by 250 people with pensions, providing access to the Council Tax Reduction scheme. Software had been introduced which identified pensioners in Eastbourne who were eligible for the

scheme but had not made a claim.

As the scheme was not being changed, it did not require consultation or permissions from partner authorities. Moving the scheme to 100 % council tax liability from 80 % would incur an additional cost of approximately £1 million for East Sussex County Council and £160,000 for Eastbourne Borough Council.

**Resolved** to note the report.

#### **47 Council tax and business rate base 2023/24**

Ola Owolabi, Deputy Chief Finance Officer, presented the report. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- Members felt that the scope of the council tax and business rate base should be reviewed and whether the mix of property types was being fully considered. Members were advised that an understanding of the current discounts and exemptions that applied in the Borough and the options available could be reviewed.

Following a proposal by Councillor Smart which was seconded by Councillor Lamb, the members of the Committee **Resolved** unanimously to support the Officer recommendations to the Cabinet, subject to the following, additional recommendation being considered:

- IV. That the Cabinet consider a review of the scope of the council tax base, including the parameters for exemptions and discounts that currently apply to Eastbourne Borough, and innovative schemes adopted by other authorities.

#### **48 Cost of Living Crisis Fund Update**

Seanne Sweeney, Community Services Lead, presented the report. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- Once a grant was awarded, a reporting schedule was provided as part of the letter of acceptance, and the organisations distributing the funds were required to report on where the funds were spent and the level of uptake. A timescale for the funds was normally, also provided.
- Members were advised that a breakdown of the grants awarded and the remaining balance would be provided to Members.

**Resolved** to note the report.

#### **49 Update to the Local Validation List:- Information required to support/accompany planning applications**

Leigh Palmer, Head of Planning presented the report. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- Members noted and supported the recommendations in the report as they considered it would reduce the time planning officers would have to unnecessarily spend on planning applications.
- The list would be reviewed every two years. If there were only minor amendments, a public consultation would not be required.
- The House in Multiple Occupation Management Plan applied to properties with six occupants and above. The plan would support area such as anti-social behaviour.

**Resolved** to note the report.

## **50 Eastbourne Carbon Neutral 2030: Annual Progress Report**

Ian Fitzpatrick, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Regeneration and Planning, presented the report. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

The travel element of the Eastbourne Airshow had been the largest contributor of carbon emissions at the event, and it was recognised that this had been increased by rail strikes on the day. The report highlighted this and future work would include mitigation and addressing the volume of travel.

A number of areas nationally, including technology, supply chains and skills, with capital support, needed acceleration. A number of housing supply chains were looking at environmental, social and governance (ESG) strategies. There was also a transitional period from fossil fuels to other energy sources with transport nationally, a crucial area of focus.

The majority of actions within the Action Plan were on target.

**Resolved** to note the report.

## **51 Forward Plan of Decisions**

The Chair, Councillor Shore, introduced the Forward Plan of Cabinet decisions. Members requested that the following reports be included on the agenda for the Committee's meeting on the 6 February 2023:

- Corporate performance -quarter 3 - 2021/22
- General fund budget 2023/24 and capital programme
- Treasury Management and Prudential Indicators 2023/24, Capital Strategy &  
Investment Strategy
- Housing revenue account budget 2023/24

- Congress and Devonshire Park Theatres – Future Governance Arrangements
- Eastbourne & Lewes Community Safety Partnership – Annual Report (Eastbourne)

**Resolved** to note the Forward Plan of Cabinet Decisions.

## **52 Scrutiny Work Programme**

The Chair, Councillor Shore, introduced the Committee's work programme. The following items were requested for inclusion at future meeting:

An additional meeting to discuss Gatwick Airport Ltd's carbon neutral accreditation was confirmed for the 9 January 2023.

An overview of the Customer Contact team.

**Resolved** to note the Committee's work programme.

## **53 Date of the next meeting**

Resolved to note that the date of the next scheduled meeting of the Scrutiny Committee is Monday 6 February 2023, in the Court Room, Eastbourne Town Hall, Grove Road, Eastbourne, BN21 4UG, with an additional meeting scheduled for Monday 9 January 2023.

The meeting ended at 8.45 pm

Councillor Kshama Shore (Chair)