

## Policy and Performance Advisory Committee

Minutes of meeting held in Ditchling and Telscombe Rooms at Southover House, Southover Road, Lewes, BN7 1AB (TBC) on 26 January 2023 at 2.30 pm.

### Present:

Councillor Liz Boorman (Chair).  
Councillors Isabelle Linington (Deputy-Chair), Robert Banks, Nancy Bikson, Christine Brett, Roy Clay, Lynda Duhigg, Christine Robinson, Adrian Ross and Richard Turner.

### Officers in attendance:

Philip Brown (Property Lawyer), Luke Dreeling (Performance Lead), Homira Javadi (Director of Finance and Performance (Chief Finance Officer)), Nick Peeters (Committee Officer), Nathan Haffenden (Head of Development, Investment and Delivery), Gary Hall (Head of Homes First), Christopher Bibb (Specialist Advisor Green Consultancy (Projects)) and Jane Goodall (Environment Lead).

### 51 Minutes of the previous meeting 1 December 2022

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 December 2022 were submitted and the Chair was authorised to sign them as a correct record.

### 52 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Turner.

### 53 Declarations of Interest

There were none.

### 54 Urgent Items

There were none.

### 55 Written Questions from Councillors

There were none.

### 55a Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman referral

Gary Hall, Head of Homes First, introduced the report, which outlined the request from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, for the Policy and Performance Advisory Committee to consider the Ombudsman's decision regarding a complaint made against the Council's Housing Service. The report also outlined the actions the Council had taken to respond to the

points highlighted in the Ombudsman's decision. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- The audit of new homelessness cases was an action the Housing Team already undertook and was ongoing. Additionally, the reintroduction of a triage team and partnership working, post-Covid, provided additional support. The approach now adopted by local authorities was to promote opportunities for tenants to complain through the correct channels. As a result, it was expected that the level of complaints may increase.
- The family involved had presented challenges to the Housing Team in difficult circumstances and it was considered that the response from the Ombudsman did not take some of those circumstances and challenges into account. The family had distinct needs and there was not the availability of the type of stock needed at that point – the availability of stock continued to be an issue.
- Recruitment into the Housing Team and retention of staff had improved but the Team continued to face the issues experienced at a National level. Agency staff were being used and the overall costs of using them were higher. The flexibility available to workforces meant wider opportunities, with more attractive salaries, were available.
- The demand on the Housing Service were high, with elements such as: a required focus on damp and mould; meeting the demands of the cost-of-living crisis; and a decrease in the availability of private sector housing; and the impact of a cap on rent levels on the Housing Revenue Account. However, it was recognised that appropriate administration effective working procedures should continue to be provided within the Service.

**Resolved** to note the report.

#### **55b Report of the Scrutiny Emergency Climate Change Panel**

Councillor Ross, Chair of the Scrutiny Emergency Climate Change Panel, introduced the report, which updated Members on the work of the Panel to date and sought the view of the Committee on the terms of reference and direction of the Panel. There was no further discussion on the item.

**Resolved**

1. To note the report; and
2. That the Panel continues as a standing panel with the same terms of reference, but with reduced frequency of meetings, and report back for a review in 1 year.

#### **56 Requested reports due for consideration by the Cabinet on 2 February 2023**

The Chair confirmed that, as part of the call-over process, the following reports would be included for discussion by the Committee:

- 6(a) Portfolio progress and performance report quarter 3
- 6(b) General Fund Revenue Budget 2023/24 and Capital Programme
- 6(c) Treasury Management and Prudential Indicators 2023/24, Capital Strategy & Investment Strategy
- 6(d) Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Revenue Budget and Rent Setting 2023/24 and HRA Capital Programme 2022-26
- 6(e) Purchase of land at Landport Brooks
- 6(f) Reimagining Newhaven Programme - Project Update

**56a Portfolio progress and performance report quarter 3 - 2022-2023**

Luke Dreeling, Performance Lead, presented the report and appendix which detailed the Council's progress and performance in respect of service areas for the Third Quarter of the year (October-December 2022). During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- There had been an increase in the percentage of calls answered in 60 seconds in quarter 3. Historically, the third quarter showed improvements due to seasonal decrease in demand. 6 new members of the Team were currently receiving training and would soon be fully integrated. 13 applicants were due to be interviewed in next two weeks, for 10 vacancies.
- There were a small number of agency staff in the Contact Centre who supported low-level enquiries and the cost was lower than in other services, where specific knowledge/skills were needed. The turnover within the Contact Centre was internal and staff were staying within the organisation and moving to other services. Recruitment days were being held and it was hoped that the recent pay increase would widen the application base.
- The Sprint Solutions tool was utilised to support service improvements. It was an inhouse tool and would be expanded to look at a wider range of services.
- The Housing register review was an opportunity for tenants to update the Council on any changes to their household. It would identify who was on the list and any needs within the household in terms of housing. Members continued to express concern at the performance indicator for decreasing the average number of days to re-let Council homes.
- Members requested further detail on the levels of fly-tipping, including any prosecutions and the outcomes.
- A project manager had been identified for work to start on a full review of

the Council's website. It was anticipated that stakeholder engagement, including resident participation, would be part of the review and further details would be provided once available.

**Resolved** to support the officer recommendations in the Cabinet report, in full.

#### **56b General Fund Revenue Budget 2023/24 and Capital Programme**

Homira Javadi, Director of Finance and Performance, presented the report which sought agreement from the Council on the General Fund Budget 2023/24 and updated Medium Term Financial Strategy, together with the updated Capital Programme and Treasury Management position. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- The use of approximately £229,000 of reserves related to a one-off requirement for the forthcoming elections and included future contributions, which would be drawn down from earmarked reserves with a proposed annual base-budget of £100,000.
- The recommended 100% discretionary council tax premium on second and empty homes, would be subject to a consultation, and any comments received would be reflected in the Council's final policy.
- The recommended increase in council tax was included and reflected in the Council's 'spending power', which was determined by an increase in council tax of a minimum of 3%. This increase was the minimum uplift for the spending power in all authorities.
- The statement of the Council's reserves was included at appendix 7 to the report. When determining the level of its reserves the Council had to consider further exposure to income reduction, additional costs/demands. The use of the reserves was more appropriate for one-off costs, with an agreed repayment plan. Any reduction in council tax revenue lowered the budgetary baseline for future years.
- A number of Members felt that the increase in council tax would impact on residents who were already affected by the cost-of-living crisis and felt it should not be increased.

**Resolved** to support the officer recommendations in the Cabinet report, subject to the following amendment to recommendation 1.3 being considered by the Cabinet:

- 1.3 That the increase in the Council Tax for Lewes District Council of 1% (per annum) resulting in a Band D charge for general expenses of £204.10 (per annum) for 2023/24, be reduced to 0% and that should this be agreed, The Chief Finance Officer identifies other areas of the Budget where the required savings can be made.

**56c Treasury Management and Prudential Indicators 2023/24, Capital Strategy & Investment Strategy**

Homira Javadi, Director of Finance and Performance, presented the report which sought agreement from the Council on the General Fund Budget 2023/24 and updated Medium Term Financial Strategy, together with the updated Capital Programme and Treasury Management position. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- Interest rates had increased further over the previous several months but it was projected that there would be reductions in the latter part of 2024, with further reductions continuing in 2025. The Council had surplus funds available in its day-to-day transactions, which allowed offsetting of some of the increased costs.
- The profiling of borrowing for the Capital Programme was focused on internal resources and borrowing to fund the Programme, providing resilience until interest rates settled.

Further detail would be provided on:

- The Retrofit Loan Scheme in Lewes in Partnership with Lendology CIC, referred to in 7.10 of appendix A of the report.
- The main General Fund capital projects, referred to at 2.2.4 in appendix E of the report.

**Resolved** to support the officer recommendations in the Cabinet report, in full.

**56d Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Revenue Budget and Rent Setting 2023/24 and HRA Capital Programme 2022-26**

Homira Javadi, Director of Finance and Performance, presented the report which sought agreement from the Council on the General Fund Budget 2023/24 and updated Medium Term Financial Strategy, together with the updated Capital Programme and Treasury Management position. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- Members requested further details on the status of the Council's stock of garages. A number of Members expressed concern at the increase in housing rent and considered that an increase in the rental charge for garages was not beneficial to residents, or the Council.

- Officers confirmed that the Housing Revenue Account was ringfenced and could only be subsidised by rent income. The income from housing rents was a significant component of the Council's programme for increasing its housing stock and maintaining the standard of existing stock.

**Resolved** To support the officer recommendations in the Cabinet report, subject to the Cabinet considering the following amendment to recommendation v).

v) That garage rents are not increased in 2023/2024.

## **56e Purchase of land at Landport Brooks**

Jane Goodall, Environment Lead and Christopher Bibb, Neighbourhood First Team Specialist Advisor (Green Consultancy), presented the report which sought approval from the Cabinet to buy land at Landport Brooks and provide an asset that would include biodiversity enhancements and stackable environmental benefits, including potential commercial returns. During discussion, the following points were highlighted:

- The agreement over the provision of pasture and grazing rights would form part of the discussion, as the scheme progressed. The process followed, including the making of an offer to the landowner, was normal practice and had been necessary in order to take the land off the market. The offer was subject to the normal contracts and searches that would be expected as part of land purchase.
- The footpath was the Environment Agency's asset and its maintenance would also be included as part of future discussions. It was confirmed that scheme was in its early stages and once within the Council's ownership, proposals for management and how best to promote environmental elements of the land, would be considered.
- Members felt that development of a business case, which demonstrated the viability of the land needed to be prioritised before any further work on the scheme was undertaken and prior to purchase of the land. A number of Members also expressed concern that an offer of purchase had been made by the Council without any prior scrutiny or consultation.

**Resolved** to support the officer recommendations in the Cabinet report, subject to the following amendment to recommendation 1a)

1a) To purchase the Land at Landport Brooks, subject to production of a satisfactory business case, to put Lewes District Council in a position to deliver a range of environmental, ecological, flood mitigation and health and wellbeing outcomes, subject to valuation, legal advice and the usual due diligence.

## **57 Exclusion of the public**

Resolved to enter into a private session for item 7(f) Reimagining Newhaven Programme - Project Update and (a) Reimagining Newhaven - Project Update - Exempt Appendix 1 only, as both items were likely to disclose exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 and would therefore need to take place in a private session.

#### **57a Reimagining Newhaven Programme - Project Update**

Nathan Haffenden, Head of Development, Investment and Delivery, presented the report which provided an update on the progress of the Reimagining Newhaven Programme, including proposals for new health, leisure, and wellbeing services.

Members discussed the proposals in the report and officers responded to questions asked.

**Resolved** to support the officer recommendations in the Cabinet report subject to amendments to the following recommendations:

- (2) To approve a new budget of up to £2.5m, subject to production of a detailed business case, to develop the proposals for 5-8 Newhaven Square as set out in Appendix 1 (Exempt);
- (3) To approve a new budget of up to £4m, additional to the existing co-funding and also subject to production of a detailed business case, to develop the extended proposals for 10 Newhaven Square as set out in Appendix 1 (Exempt);

and removal of the following recommendation;

- 4)
  - to make investment(s) of up to £250k in new renewable energy solutions, within existing approved sustainability budgets, to support the programme, also the wider objectives of the Council, including any opportunities for the acquisition of third-party company shares, subject to a business case, further legal advice, and full due diligence.

#### **57b Reimagining Newhaven - Project Update - Exempt Appendix 1**

This item was dealt with under minute 57a - Reimagining Newhaven – Project Update.

#### **58 Forward Plan of Decisions**

The Chair, Councillor Boorman, introduced the Forward Plan of Cabinet Decisions which detailed those items being considered at future Cabinet meetings. Members requested that the following reports be included at the Committee's next meeting on the 16 March:

- Eastbourne & Lewes Community Safety- Partnership – Annual Report

(Lewes).

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

## **59 Policy and Performance Advisory Committee Work Programme**

The Chair, Councillor Boorman, introduced the Committee's work programme, which detailed the items due to be considered at future meetings and provided an opportunity for Members to request any areas or issues they wished the Committee to look at in further depth.

- Members were reminded that the setting up of a working party/stakeholder group had been requested at the Committee's previous meeting to continue work with Southern Water. Members were advised that this would be included as an agenda item at the Committee's next meeting.

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

## **60 Date of Next Meeting**

**Resolved** that the next meeting is scheduled for Thursday 16 March 2023, 2.30pm at Southover House, Lewes.

The meeting ended at 5.45 pm

Councillor Liz Boorman (Chair)