

TANDRIDGE DISTRICT COUNCIL

STRATEGY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Minutes and report to Council of the meeting of the Committee held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Station Road East, Oxted on the 26th March 2024 at 7:30pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Langton (Chair), Crane (Vice-Chair), Black, Bloore, Cooper, Hammond, Alun Jones and Pursehouse

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Allen and Nicholas White

ALSO PRESENT (Virtually): Councillors Botten, Chris Farr, Sue Farr and Gaffney

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors Damesick, Gray and Sayer

276. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THE 30TH JANUARY 2024

These minutes were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

277. QUESTION SUBMITTED UNDER STANDING ORDER 30

A question was submitted by Councillor Cooper, a copy of which is attached at Appendix A to these minutes, together with the response from Councillor Langton as Chair of the Committee.

278. QUARTER 3 2023/24 BUDGET MONITORING

An analysis of forecast expenditure against the Council's overall revenue budget of £11,935k as at the end of December 2023 (Month 9) was presented.

A £521k revenue overspend was forecast, split between the policy committees and corporate items. A balanced outturn (without the need to draw from general reserves) was still anticipated due to corporate contingencies of £721k. While the final quarter was being carefully managed to deliver the best possible year-end position, risks remained regarding costs associated with inflation, temporary accommodation and planning appeals.

The forecast variance was detailed as follows:

- Community Services: £85k underspend
- Housing (General Fund): £26k overspend
- Planning Policy: £533k overspend
- Strategy & Resources: £6k underspend
- corporate items: £53k overspend

The Planning Policy Committee was forecasting a £71k use of Planning Reserves. i.e.:

- £69k from the Planning Policy & Local Plan Earmarked Reserve to fund the salaries overspend associated with a full year use of interims and seconded officers to manage the Planning Policy team function; and

- £2k from the Neighbourhood Plan Reserve to fund the overspend associated with the Tatsfield Neighbourhood Plan.

The budget for corporate items had increased by £85k to distribute a savings target and align management budgets following the organisational restructure in 2023. Virements of the £85k were recommended as follows:

- £45k to Community Services – rationalisation of management across Operational Services and Environmental Services.
- £40k to Strategy & Resources – rationalisation of management across services in the Resources Directorate.

The capital programme was forecasting £93k of net slippage, comprising £941k General Fund and CIL schemes, offset by an acceleration of £847k expenditure on Housing General Fund items.

Regarding the salary overspend due to the on-going engagement of contractors and seconded officers, concerns were expressed at the implications of failing to attract permanent staff, especially for certain senior positions. In response to the debate, the Chief Executive undertook to submit a report to the Committee's 27th June 2024 meeting to inform Members about the Council's recruitment processes and measures being pursued to create a more stable, in-house workforce, especially for the Planning Policy team.

The Director of Resources responded to questions about the extent to which the cost of contract staff was offset by savings associated with other vacant posts not being filled. In doing so, he explained that committee budgets (with the exception of Planning Policy) incorporated a 4% staff vacancy factor. However, this did not represent a target and managers were expected to seek to fill vacancies as quickly as possible.

Actions	Responsible Person	Deadline
<p>To identify and implement actions at the earliest opportunity to improve staff retention and recruitment (including via consultation with the Member Reference Group and Planning Policy Working Group) and to submit an associated report to the Strategy & Resources Committee on 27th June 2024 to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'issues and challenges'; • benchmarking against other Authorities if possible; and • progress of the actions referred to above. <p>Officers to provide an interim update at MRG prior to Full Council. (For the Chair to deliver as a verbal update at Full Council upon moving the reception of the minutes of the meeting.)</p>	<p>David Ford Mark Hak Sanders</p>	<p>Work to commence forthwith, culminating in a report to the 27th June 2024 meeting of the Committee, to be published on 19th June 2024.</p> <p>17th April 2024</p>
<p>To explain how the Council generates a 'scrap metal income' (referred to in the revenue commentary for the Community Services Committee).</p>	<p>Mark Hak Sanders</p>	<p>15th April 2024</p>

RESOLVED – that:

- A. the forecast revenue and capital budget position as at Quarter 3 / Month 9 (December) 2023 be noted; and
- B. budget virements totalling £85k between the Community Services Committee, Strategy & Resources Committee and Corporate Items to realign budgets to the current management structure, as set out in Paragraph 17 of the report (i.e. £45k to Community Services and £40k to Strategy & Resources) be approved.

279. QUARTER 3 2023/24 KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS - STRATEGY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE

An analysis of performance against the Committee's key indicators for the third quarter (October to December 2023) of 2023/24 was presented along with 'committee' and 'corporate' risk registers.

The report identified that three Key Performance Indicators had not met their targets for the quarter, i.e.:

- SR4: Days to process housing benefit and council tax changes was off target at 15.33 days (the target being 12 days). The target had not been met due to an issue in the NEC system, which had since been fixed.
- SR5: The number of working days / shifts lost due to sickness absence (long and short-term) was just off target by 0.83 days at 7.93 days.
- SR10: The percentage of calls answered within 60 seconds by Customer Services was off target at 63.6% (the target being 80%) although this was an improvement on Q2.

It was also confirmed that six risks within the corporate risk register were flagged as red.

During the debate, it was suggested that embedding effective people management throughout the leadership team was key to addressing the human resourcing elements of the performance report and certain issues raised within other items on the agenda. In response, the Chief Executive highlighted new 'personal development' aspects of the 2024/25 staff appraisal process which sought to:

- focus on 'how' individuals' objectives were being delivered; and
- increase accountability for people management and scrutinise issues of under-performance more effectively.

However, the identification of a metric(s) to measure the delivery of these new management objectives was still a 'work in progress'.

RESOLVED – that the Quarter 3 (2023/24) performance indicators and committee / corporate risks be noted.

280. FUTURE TANDRIDGE PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Committee considered an update report which comprised:

- a summary of current progress and next steps towards meeting the target outcomes of each FTP workstream;
- position statements in respect of the organisational development; grounds maintenance; digital transformation (including the successful implementation of the new telephony system); commercialisation; continuous improvement / commissioning; corporate plan and housing voids projects; and
- progress towards the savings delivery plan (£990k of savings were complete; £263k were rated 'green' with clear delivery plans in place; £255k were rated 'amber' with some risks to delivery or with delivery plans still being developed; while £146k of savings targets would not be achieved in 2023/24).

Delivery of the FTP would remain a key focus of management activity until the outstanding programme activities were completed and savings targets delivered. Preparations for the next phase of improvement activity and service planning would also continue as part of the 2025/26 budget setting process.

The Chief Executive advised that the delivery of the FTP was making good progress and looked forward to the Transformation Programme Director (Ricky Fuller) taking up post in April.

The Chair referred to his recent discussion with the Chief Executive and Director of Resources regarding the use of consultants. He was satisfied that their use was strictly limited to areas where there was no suitable in-house resource to deal with the work in question.

RESOLVED – that progress to date on the following matters be noted:

- (i) delivering the Future Tandrige Programme, the direction of travel for the Service Reviews and associated savings targets for 2023/24;
- (ii) developing a commercial strategy and activities to support commercial opportunities; and
- (iii) developing a consistent approach to continuous improvement and commissioning across the Council.

281. SUMMARY OF DEBT WRITE OFFS 2023-24

The Committee considered a report regarding ongoing work to improve the Council's approach to debt management alongside the annual position for write-offs completed during 2023/24.

The report confirmed that, by virtue of the £50k made available via the debt improvement plan approved in June 2022, a fixed-term staffing resource was in place until October 2024 to assist with debt recovery. A Corporate Debt Manager post had also been established (following a Revenues & Benefits restructure) to provide a more cohesive approach to debt management across the various income streams across the Council. The report also outlined various improvements throughout the Exchequer Services, Finance, Legal and Corporate Debt teams during 2023/24, together with further initiatives planned for 2024/25.

1,442 debts of under £10k during 2023/24, totalling £648k, would be written off. A further 6 debts totalling £76k required Committee approval for write off due to their values exceeding £10k (Minute 282 refers). The report presented a breakdown of the debts concerned, categorised according to housing benefit overpayments, Housing Revenue Account debt, council tax, business rates and sundry debts. These debts had accumulated over many years and were therefore disproportionately high for 2023/24. The report explained that write-offs are decisions of last resort, taken in the best financial interests of the Council when further recovery work would be uneconomical. The above-mentioned improvement work illustrated a more disciplined approach to the Council's debt position and recovery practices, and confirmed the intention to further limit the number and value of future write-offs.

In response to Members' questions, the Director of Resources:

- advised that it would be premature to speculate on the potential write off value of the few historic debt cases which remained, although the Council's debt recovery activity should revert to 'business as usual' status in 2024/25;
- explained the complexities associated with the attempted recovery of housing benefit overpayments and the circumstances in which such debts were reimbursed by the government; and
- confirmed that, while Surrey County Council had funded elements of debt recovery work, it had not expressed a willingness to contribute to direct costs incurred by the Districts / Boroughs in reducing Council Tax arrears (i.e. via 'gain sharing arrangements') but that the matter would continue to be pursued.

RESOLVED – that the following be noted:

- (i) the continuing positive steps being taken and improvements made in the recovery of outstanding debt; and
- (ii) the write-offs individually less than £10,000 of £648k.

282. PROPOSED DEBT WRITE-OFFS REQUIRING COMMITTEE APPROVAL

The press and public were excluded from this item in accordance with Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) on the grounds that:

- (i) the item involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 1 and 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act; and
- (ii) the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

RESOLVED – that a write off for the six debts detailed at Appendix A to the report, amounting to £76,118.68 in the Council's 2023/24 accounts, be approved.

Rising 9.04 pm