

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 30 March 2023 at 7:30pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Langton (Chair), Crane (Vice-Chair), B.Black, Bloore, Botten, Caulcott, Cooper, S.Farr, Hammond, Jones, Pursehouse and Sayer (substitute in place of Gillman)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Allen, C.Farr and N.White

ALSO PRESENT (Virtually): Councillor Moore

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillor Gillman

278. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THE 31ST JANUARY 2023

These minutes were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

279. REGULATION OF INVESTIGATORY POWERS ACT REPORT

The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) defined how Councils could lawfully deploy surveillance measures as part of their investigations. A report was submitted with proposed amendments to the Council's RIPA policy and officer guidance, including:

- new designations of 'authorising officers'
- website links to Home Office codes of practice
- additional guidance regarding online covert activity
- clarification regarding the duration of authorisations for directed surveillance and the use of juveniles as Covert Human Intelligence Sources (CHIS)

The report also referred to RIPA training delivered by specialist external providers since 2020. In that respect, the Chair commented that such training should be as succinct as possible, focusing on the key issues.

Arising from the debate, it was confirmed that the Council had not exercised surveillance activities under RIPA powers to date. However, in the event of any such activities being pursued in the future, it was agreed that the Leader of the Council should be informed of the circumstances, with provisions to that effect being added to the policy and officer guidance.

Officers also clarified that the use of drones to conduct surveillance would fall under the provisions of the Civil Aviation Act and there was currently no Council policy to cover this. It was acknowledged that drone operators had to be licensed with the Civil Aviation Authority and that the Council would need to undertake due diligence to ensure that any operators acting on its behalf possessed the necessary credentials

Finally, the Committee considered that its decision should be 'to approve' the policy and guidance, as opposed to just noting them.

ACTION:		
Action	Responsible Person	Deadline
RIPA policy and officer guidance to be further amended by the addition of provisions requiring the Leader to be notified of any surveillance activities being undertaken by the Council	Lidia Harrison	14.04.23

RESOLVED – that:

- A. the content of the report be noted; and
- B. subject to the addition of provisions requiring the Leader to be notified of any surveillance activities being undertaken by the Council, the updated RIPA policy and officer guidance be approved.

280. QUARTER 3 2022/23 BUDGET MONITORING

An analysis of forecast expenditure against the Council's overall revenue budget of £11,351k, as at the end of December 2022 (Month 9) was presented. A £394k overspend was forecast, split between the four policy committees as follows:

Community Services: £294k overspend
Housing (General Fund): £8k underspend
Planning Policy: £126k overspend
Strategy & Resources: £12k underspend
corporate items: £22k underspend

This represented a £53k improvement from Quarter 2. Given the availability of contingencies of £484k, a balanced outturn and a contribution to reserves was expected.

In response to matters raised during the debate, Officers advised that:

- although the Development Management team largely comprises permanent, in-house staff, all Planning Policy Officers are currently interims
- a new performance monitoring regime was about to be introduced whereby Members would receive regular reports about performance against KPIs to enable them to monitor the delivery of services under the remit of their committees
- the financial viability of continuing to offer a cesspool emptying service was being assessed
- future reports would refer to the occupancy and any further investment need in Quadrant House (Croydon Road, Caterham)

In response to Members' requests, Officers agreed to:

- supplement future budget monitoring reports with information about the level of vacancy factor

- provide a breakdown of the different sources of parking income shortfalls (e.g. in terms of off-street and on-street)

ACTIONS:		
Action	Responsible Person	Deadline
Include vacancy factor in subsequent budget monitoring reports.	Mark Hak-Sanders	For the June 2023 committee cycle
A breakdown of the different sources of parking income shortfalls be sent to Committee members.	Mark Hak-Sanders	14.04.23

RESOLVED – that the revenue and capital budget positions as at Quarter 3 / M9 (December) 2022 be noted.

281. FUTURE TANDRIDGE PROGRAMME

The Chief Executive gave an update on the wider Programme, namely:

- the process for enabling the Council to adopt a new Corporate Plan (to replace the current Strategic Plan in the summer of 2024) which would align with annual budget setting and underpin the approach to commissioning and service planning
- organisational development initiatives, including the Leadership Development Programme, establishment of a Key Officer Forum and the return of staff appraisals from 2023/24
- preparations for commissioning services, including liaison with the Local Government Association and other Local Authorities; the need to review workforce skills requirements and to address gaps; and plans for a Members' workshop in June 2023.

It was confirmed that Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council had been identified as having pursued a similar commissioning model and could assist in sharing its experiences with TDC.

The Chief Finance Officer summarised progress against the £1.7m savings target for 2023/24, including the fact that work to deliver £0.63m had been completed. Of the remaining £1.1m, £0.96 had an amber risk-rating with work in progress to transfer the balance to green. He confirmed the need to release the remaining £250k resource investment from capital receipts to ensure the delivery of the programme (Appendix D to the report refers – the first £250k tranche had been agreed by the Committee in September 2022). Members made suggestions for revising FTP analysis in future committee reports.

The Chief Finance Officer also presented proposals for a shared approach to delivering Revenues & Benefit services with Reigate and Banstead Borough Council. This followed an external review of future service delivery options (jointly funded by the two authorities) and aspired to culminate in a joint Centre of Excellence. It was confirmed that RBBC's Members supported the initiative and that the Committee's endorsement of the direction of travel was now requested, pending the submission of a detailed business case to its September 2023 meeting. In response to the debate, the Chief Finance Officer confirmed that monitoring service standards for Tandridge residents remained a priority and would be tracked via the KPI regime and performance monitoring. Such monitoring would need to be incorporated within the legal agreement underpinning any future joint service with RBBC. The debate concluded with Members supporting the direction of travel with a view to it providing much needed resilience for the service and an example of the type of joint working being sought to supplement the emerging commissioning model.

The Head of Transformation and Business Support presented a business case for modernising the way in which residents etc can contact the Council through the introduction of customer accounts, a 'chatbot' facility and other improvements. This section of the FTP report included an analysis of existing communication channels by service; the key future requirements of TDC's customer facing services and associated funding proposals, timelines and risks. The business case identified the need to define a customer contact strategy and favoured the further development of the Council's current case management platform (Salesforce). The strategy would be developed following engagement with Members and other stakeholders and would include measures for identifying and prioritising the most vulnerable residents (e.g. by making 'telephony' and 'face to face' channels more accessible for them via a greater take up of digital alternatives by others). It was confirmed that a Digital Lead officer had been appointed to deliver this transformation project. In response to Members' questions, Officers confirmed that:

- the issue of whether the new customer contact modes would 'go live' for all services simultaneously, or phased in on a service-by-service basis, would be informed by the implementation partner
- innovative customer contact methods deployed by other Councils had been identified for good practice purposes and could be tested from a user perspective
- the 'go-live' date would be after the May 2024 District Elections, probably in July of that year, and the project plan sought to ensure that the Council would have sufficient in-house staffing resources and expertise for the effective delivery and on-going development of the new customer contact strategy.

It was also suggested that Members should be involved in User Acceptance Testing.

ACTIONS:			
		Responsible Person	Deadline
1.	<p>Future FTP analysis for S&R to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cross reference previous relevant decisions made by other committees regarding their services (to enable Members to reconcile such decisions within the Council-wide FTP updates) • include a top-level milestone plan to enable Members to track overall progress at future S&R committee meetings, including the transition of savings targets from 'amber' to 'green' • monitor the spending of the resource investment from capital receipts for delivering the FTP against the forecast at Appendix D to the 30.03.23 S&R report 	Mark Hak-Sanders	29.06.23 S&R Committee
2.	The business case and draft legal agreement for sharing a Revenues & Benefits service with Reigate & Banstead Borough Council (to be submitted to the Committee's September meeting) to include contingency arrangements should either Council wish to terminate the joint working initiative.	Mark Hak-Sanders	28.09.23 S&R Committee

RESOLVED – that:

in respect of the wider Future Tandridge Programme:

- A. it be noted that Officers will continue to update their business cases where these are required to achieve the target savings and will bring these for Committee approval where necessary over the coming months;
- B. the progress being made on the Corporate Plan; Organisational Development and Commissioning; and the proposed next steps be noted;
- C. the remaining £250,000 resource investment from capital receipts required for the Future Tandridge Programme (set out in section 6 and Appendix D to the report) to continue the delivery phase of the programme and the delivery of the £1.7m savings forecast for 2023/24 be approved.

in respect of Revenues and Benefits:

- D. the development of shared services for Revenues and Benefits with Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, as set out in Appendix B to the report, noting the intention to create a Centre of Excellence across the two Councils, be noted;
- E. it be noted that a full business case, setting out the detailed proposals, will be brought to the Committee for future approval;

in respect of Digital Customer Contact:

- F. it be noted that the business case is built around the evidenced principle that savings generated will at least cover the cost of improvement;
- G. subject to the recommendation below regarding the necessary addition to the capital programme, the 'digital investment' (set out in Appendix C to the report) be approved, with total costs over 5 years set out in the 'Implementation Options and Costs' section and the revenue costs of £35,950 in 2023/24 to be met from Future Tandridge Programme resources set out in section 6 of the report and resolution C above;
- H. it be noted that timing differences between initial costs and subsequent savings from 2024/25 onwards will be built into the wider Council's budget process.

COUNCIL DECISION

(subject to ratification by Council)

RECOMMENDED – that the sum of £295k to be added to the Capital Programme (£221,250 in 2023/24 and £73,750 in 2024/25) to cover the capital element of the digital investment.

282. IT LAPTOP REPLACEMENT

The Committee considered a proposed plan for replacing staff laptops. This reflected the fact that the current laptops would reach the end of their vendor support dates throughout 2023/24. Although the budget had already been approved, Members had requested a more detailed justification for the replacement programme.

Information was therefore provided regarding the age profile of the devices (all would be over 5 years old by the end of 2023/24); the declining reliability of the current stock; the increasing demands of cloud-based applications upon laptops; the need for the Council to upgrade to Windows 11 and the advantage of combining this with a new laptop roll-out. The IT team would identify three potential replacement models followed by a procurement exercise in accordance with Contract Standing Orders. It was also intended to employ a temporary member of staff for up to five weeks to facilitate the new laptop roll-out.

In response to Members' questions, it was confirmed that:

- Microsoft would retire its Windows 10 operating system in October 2025 (not June 2024 as stated within the report)
- the new laptops could be used to make telephone calls
- the introduction of a dedicated on-line IT support service for Members was being considered.

The total estimated cost of the laptop replacement project was £209,500, based on 230 devices with 5-year extended warranties and the above-mentioned temporary staffing appointment. It was agreed that this cost figure should be incorporated within the resolution.

RESOLVED – that the replacement of the endpoint hardware during 2023/24, at a cost of £209,500, be approved as follows:

- replace 90% of laptops currently in circulation
- upgrade RAM specification from 8GB to 16GB to support increased usage of Software as a Service (SaaS) applications
- roll out Windows 11 with the device replacement
- purchase extended warranty to cover the devices for 5 years
- use of a temporary resource for asset tagging and device build.

283. DEBT IMPROVEMENT PLAN AND SUMMARY OF DEBT WRITE-OFFS

The Committee considered a report which updated Members on progress towards improving the Council's approach to debt management, together with a summary of write-offs during 2022/23. The report advised that:

- despite repeated attempts, it had not been possible to recruit a suitable temporary staffing resource to progress Phase 1 of the Debt Improvement Plan, and the possibility of utilising the associated £50k provision (agreed at the Committee's 30th June 2022 meeting) for alternative debt management measures now being pursued
- joint working was underway with Surrey County Council and neighbouring Districts / Boroughs to establish measures to improve collection rates for business rates and council tax
- various improvements to debt collection processes had been introduced across the exchequer, finance, legal and corporate debt teams, with further improvement initiatives planned for 2023/24.

The work undertaken during 2022/23 had identified the accumulation of historic debt on the balance sheet. To prevent recurrence, Officers intended to submit annual reports to the Committee towards the end of each financial year to allow scrutiny of the write-offs and to ensure that unrecoverable debts are not allowed to persist on the balance sheet. Although the value of debt written off in 2022/23 was significant, the majority was not General Fund related, and a bad debt provision mitigated any detrimental impact on the revenue budget.

RESOLVED – that the Committee notes:

- A. the positive steps being taken and improvements made in the recovery of outstanding debt;
- B. the write offs individually less than £10,000 of £238k, the majority of which relate to debts over 5 years old, with some in excess of 15 years old; and
- C. that two write offs over £10,000, totalling a further £33k, require committee approval (Minute 284 refers).

284. HOUSING BENEFIT DEBTS - PROPOSED WRITE-OFFS

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 involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act; and
- ii) the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

RESOLVED – that a write-off for the two debts detailed in Appendix A to the report, amounting to £33,562.06 in the Council's 2022/2023 accounts, be approved.

Rising 9.54 pm