

Finance & Resources Policy Development Advisory Group
15 JANUARY 2024

Present: Councillors: Mark Baynham (Chairman), Tony Bevis, Paul Clarke, Mike Croker, Len Ellis-Brown, Anthony Frankland, Warwick Hellawell, Tony Hogben and Richard Landeryou

Also Present: Emma Beard, Claudia Fisher, Victoria Finnegan, Joan Grech and Roger Noel

22 **NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The notes of the previous meeting were received.

23 **ANNUAL PLAN 2024/25**

The Head of Finance and Performance introduced the Annual Plan for 2024/25 which sits under the Council Plan 2023-2027 and outlines the projects and workstreams that the Council aims to achieve within the financial year.

Throughout the year the Annual Plan will be reviewed and monitored against set performance indicators to ensure they match the needs set out in the Plan.

The projects set out in the Plan were categorised under four main themes which are: Supporting people and communities, Inspiring greener futures, Building a thriving economy and Always listening, learning and improving.

Under each category, subheadings were included which contained key areas of work the Council will focus on from now until March 2025.

The PDAG were keen to gain further information on how net zero was being defined and referencing the Net Zero Strategy 2050 in the current Annual Plan. Discussion also included air quality, housing, roof top solar schemes and water off setting measures.

Members were pleased that there was improved rural digital access and felt that as part of building thriving local economies- villages within the district should also be supported.

It was also felt that one potential missing key performance indicator was looking into planning applications and if these are resolved in time to meet statutory requirements or require time extensions. This area would be feedback and considered.

The Annual Plan would be considered at Cabinet on 25 January and Council in February.

24 **FLETCHERS CROFT CAR PARK STEYNING - MAXIMUM STAY CHANGE**

The Parking Manager discussed the report he had circulated to the PDAG which proposed an amendment to extend Fletchers Croft car park's maximum stay from 4 to over 8 hours. It was also proposed to adjust charges during specific hours to accommodate visitors to Steyning without time constraints.

Steyning currently has three short-stay car parks, and it was identified that there was a need for a long-term parking option to take stress away from parking on nearby roads and to support parking for various community events. Consideration was also being given to extend the maximum stay to 4 hours at Fletcher's Croft car park for parking disc users.

The PDAG thanked and supported the Parking Manager for listening to feedback and proposing changes. It was agreed that proposals would be taken to Cabinet and Council.

25 **2024/25 BUDGET AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY**

The Director of Resources and The Head of Finance and Performance gave a comprehensive summary to the PDAG on the 2024/25 Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy to 2027/28.

Key points highlighted to the PDAG were:

- Net expenditure has increased by £0.8m from 2023/24. A £14.5m budget will be set.
- A one-off temporary grant income of £0.6m will be used to fund net expenditure
- Council Tax will have an overall rise of 2.99% which will generate approximately £345k
- The second year of two, the Provisional settlement is as expected with a core funding increase of 4.9% inclusive of the Council Tax increase.
- Council tax base band D equivalents are up by 381 which is lower than some years due to a reduction in house building due to water neutrality issues.

It was highlighted that there is significant uncertainty in the medium term with the risk of a gap growing in the Medium-Term financial strategy moving forward.

Further detailed information was presented to the PDAG on expenditure, income, Government funding, reserves, operational cost and income changes, Medium-Term financial Strategy assumptions and capital commitments.

Numerous risks were identified and consideration of plans and options for the future.

Members acknowledged that net expenditure was increasing at a faster rate than funding being received, and the Council must be cautious and prudent delivering services.

Information had recently been received from Government on the mandatory domestic food waste collections to come in force by March 2026. Although some on-going revenue funding would be received from Government, this would not provide enough funding to cover all costs which could result in a considerable short fall for the Council.

Members also discussed the timescales of Mowbray Cemetery which had been delayed due to water neutrality and increased cost of Leisure Centres. The Chairman acknowledged that prudent management was required moving forward and there was a commitment to ensuring this happened.

26 **LOCAL AUTHORITY HOUSING FUND - ROUND 3**

The Director of Resources briefed the PDAG on the Local Authority Housing Fund Round 3.

On 5 January 2024, Government had invited local authorities to express their interest in increasing their delivery of the Local Authority Housing Fund in 2023/24.

The Council has applied for an allocation of up to £0.76m from Government and will add £1.02m of its own funding to provide up to 2 large resettlement homes and up to 2 temporary accommodation homes by 29 March 2024.

Should the Council be unable to meet the tight deadline, any unspent funding could be returned to Government.

The PDAG were positive about the proposal, acknowledged the time frame was tight and although reserves would be reduced the Council would gain an income.

The report and recommendations would be considered at Cabinet and an Extraordinary Council meeting on 25 January.

27 **COUNCIL TAX PREMIUMS - LONG-TERM EMPTY PROPERTY COUNCIL TAX PREMIUM AND SECOND HOME COUNCIL TAX PREMIUM**

The Director of Resources updated the PDAG on Council Tax Premiums where Councils can now charge higher Council Tax on properties that are defined as long-term empty homes and properties that are only occupied occasionally (second homes).

This additional charge is intended to encourage owners to bring properties back into use and also support the supply of available homes to rent or buy in Horsham, which would support local people.

It was recommended that the premiums would be introduced from 1 April 2024 for empty properties where an additional 100% council tax premium would be charged after one year (twice the current Council Tax amount).

Second Homes; dwellings with no resident and substantially furnished will be charged 100% Council Tax premium from 1 April 2025 (twice the current Council Tax amount).

Members acknowledged the considerable pressure on housing and hoped that this would improve available housing stock moving forward. It was discussed that the Council needed to carefully consider reasons for exemptions, why properties were empty and accurate figures to support this.

The PDAG were generally in favour of the recommendations, and these would be considered at Cabinet in January and then Council in February.

28 **COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION AND HOUSING BENEFIT MODIFIED SCHEMES 2024/25**

The Director of Resources briefed the PDAG on the current Council Tax Reduction scheme provided by Horsham District Council which provides financial support for people on low incomes to help them afford their Council Tax payments.

The Council also has a local modified scheme which disregards war disablement pension and war widow pension from the housing benefit calculation.

It was advised that no changes were required for both schemes for 2024/25. Review work showed the schemes currently remain affordable for the Council and provide a good level of support to less well-off residents.

The PDAG were supportive of this decision.

Both schemes are reviewed annually and considered by Cabinet and Council.

29 **BUSINESS RATES - DISCRETIONARY RATE RELIEF 2024/25**

The Director of Resources briefed the PDAG on the Business rates discretionary rate relief the Council provides to charities and not for profit organisations under s47 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988. The current scheme grants charitable relief up to 100% for eligible residents.

The scheme is reviewed annually, and it was proposed that the current scheme would remain unchanged for 2024/25 and considered at Cabinet and Council.

The PDAG were in support of this decision.

30 **FORWARD PLAN EXTRACT FOR THE FINANCE & RESOURCES
PORTFOLIO**

The Forward Plan Extract for the Finance & Resources portfolio was noted.

The meeting closed at 6.55 pm having commenced at 5.32 pm

CHAIRMAN