

Overview Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 22 November 2018

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr John Burden (Chair)
Cllr Sara Langdale (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Leslie Hills
 Samir Jassal
 William Lambert
 Shane Mochrie-Cox
 Makhan Singh
 Jenny Wallace

Stuart Bobby Director (Corporate Services)
Nick Brown Director (Environment & Operations)
Daniel Killian Assistant Director (Operations)
Martin Wates Horticultural Services Manager
Chris Wakeford Committee Services Officer (Scrutiny)

85. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Lee Croxton; Cllr Shane Mochrie-Cox and appeared as his substitute.

86. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held 18 October 2018 were signed by the Chair.

87. Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were made.

88. Scrutiny Review of Grass Cutting & Horticulture - Draft Report

The Director (Environment & Operations) and Horticultural Services Manager presented Members with the Grass Cutting & Horticulture Scrutiny Review Report for consideration, approval and subsequent submission to Cabinet.

The membership of the sub-group for the review was as follows

Cllr John Burden (Chair) Labour
Cllr Lyn Milner Labour
Cllr Gary Harding Conservative

Cllr Sara Langdale

Gravesham Independent Conservative

The terms of reference for the review focused on the following objectives:

- Review and understand which areas of land are GBC's responsibility for horticulture and grass cutting and which are KCC's responsibility including the removal and replanting of trees.
- Investigate different horticultural practices to manage some grass areas across the borough in different ways to increase biodiversity such as wild flower areas or wildlife strips.
- Undertake a review of the resources and equipment currently used and determine whether these meet the expectation of the service.

Two comprehensive meetings of the sub-group were held in October and November 2018 in order to progress the review and identify possible recommendations or options for consideration by Cabinet.

The draft report for the review, attached at appendix two to the report, sets out the recommendations for consideration by Cabinet, as summarised below:

Grass Cutting & Horticulture Review Recommendations

1. Improved training for all horticultural operatives on machinery usage techniques – Timeframe: 3 months
2. Review current tree operating procedure - Timeframe: 6 months
3. Planning guidance on appropriate trees and shrubs - Timeframe: 3 months
4. Explore additional sites where the practices of 'set-aside' areas or wildflower meadows can be adopted and to ensure clear explanatory signage is used to detail why an area has been set-aside or a wildflower meadow has been established - Timeframe: 2 Years
5. A new two person grounds maintenance team should be set up to carry out increased levels of grounds maintenance on Housing owned sites especially sheltered housing communal areas to improve the local environment for residents - Timeframe: April 2019

Following questions from the Committee, officers highlighted the following:

- Extra resources are required for shrub beds to ensure they are properly maintained; the council needs to be selective when considering the schedule of grass cutting & horticultural work.
- The review recommendations relating to the new two person grounds maintenance team covers the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) owned estate only and funding will therefore come from the HRA budget.
- There will definitely be enough work for the new two person grounds maintenance team throughout the year.

- The improved training for all horticultural operatives on machinery usage techniques will include instruction on the correct way to angle a strimmer to avoid grass spraying onto property windows.

Resolved that the Committee approved the topic review report and recommendations and agreed to the submission of the report to Cabinet for further consideration.

89. Balancing the Budget - Additional Budget Initiatives

The Director (Corporate Services) provided the Overview Scrutiny Committee with details of an additional suite of savings/income generating suggestions, in order to meet the additional budget gap for the council.

The Director (Corporate Services) informed Members that the Council's Medium-term Financial Strategy 2016-17 to 2019-20, set out an identified funding gap by 2019-20 of £2.5 million. The identified gap increased to £2.9 million at budget setting 2017-18, primarily driven by changes to the design of the New Homes Bonus Scheme. The strategy incorporated a number of workstreams that would be put in place to 'bridge the gap' in funding that the Council was facing at that time as detailed in the report.

Over recent years, officers had been working to deliver those savings required against each of the identified activities and have made significant progress; approx. £800k was still required in order to meet the full £2.9 million and work was continuing to deliver those initiatives.

Over the course of the past two years, however, there have been a number of further changes which had culminated in the need to identify additional savings/income generation initiatives to deliver at least a further £1 million in order to balance the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan:

- Base rate increases from Bank of England – the investment returns from residual cash-flow balances of the council have not increased as quickly as anticipated due to the Bank of England not raising the base rate as quickly as was anticipated.
- The pay award in 2017-18 and the introduction of the Living Wage have resulted in increases to employee costs within the MTFP which are excess of the levels originally budgeted for.
- The council has not met the 'dead weight' level for new homes which was introduced by the Government and as such, has received less income from the New Homes Bonus initiative than originally estimated.

In order to take a step towards addressing the additional budget gap of at least £1 million, officers had been working to identify potential budget savings initiatives and income generating ideas in order to bridge the gap. The exercise produced a list of options, detailed at appendix two of the report, which were considered viable at the present time. The initiatives amount to just under £1.3 million. Given the risks outlined at section 1.4 of the report, it was considered prudent to consider options that deliver more than the identified budget gap.

The Director (Corporate Services) drew Members' attention to section 1.4 of the report and advised that in respect of the introduction of the International Financial Reporting Standard 9 (IFRS9), it had been announced, following the recent consultation, that local authorities were able to mitigate the impacts of the introduction of this new accounting standard from the original three years to five years.

It is suggested that update reports on these new initiatives, together with the residual actions remaining from the agreed service review options, be presented back to Cabinet and the Overview Scrutiny Committee in November 2019.

Following questions from Members, the Director (Corporate Services) highlighted the following:

- Under the new rules (IFRS9) you have to account for the gain or loss on an annual basis but this is unrealised cash, so there is a risk that money could be spent when it hasn't actually been received. This puts real pressure on the Council's revenue account and means the Council will need to set aside sufficient funds in working balances to offset the loss.
- Current calculations for the budget gap do take into account the £255,000 underspend for the current year.

Cllr Leslie Hills (Leader of the Conservative Party) expressed his concern over some of the proposed balancing the budget initiatives, namely; reducing the expenditure associated with Mayoral allowances by £5,000 and the increase in parking charges. Cllr Hills felt that reducing the Mayoral allowances was petty and unnecessary and increasing parking charges would be detrimental to the town as it would discourage people from coming to the town / reduce footfall which would be bad for businesses. Cllr Hills requested that these comments be fed back to Cabinet.

The Director (Environment & Operations) advised the Committee that Gravesham does have some of lowest car parking fees in Kent and fees haven't increased since 2015. This proposal retains the element of free parking for 2 hours on Saturdays and the Council also has discount schemes. The Council can certainly look at other models but thorough investigations have already been completed and taken into consideration. Other authorities haven't increased their prices yet but increases are expected and Gravesham will probably still be one of the lowest.

The Chair requested that the Director (Environment & Operations) circulate, to the Committee, the original commitment / pledge by the Conservative Party regarding free parking in the town centre and provide a breakdown of the associated costs.

The Vice-Chair requested that the cost of using the bus service to come into town be circulated to the Committee.

Cllr Leslie Hills also queried why the Council had lost one Assistant Director and gained two new Assistant Directors.

The Director (Corporate Services) explained that the two new Assistant Director posts involved the upgrading of two existing Service Managers.

The Committee discussed the proposal to look to accelerate development opportunities within Gravesham. Members highlighted various stalled sites in the Borough and the need

for the Council to take a more pro-active approach to progressing development in the Borough. The Committee discussed Section 106 agreements and the need to re-consider the Councils approach in this area to aid development.

The Director (Corporate Services) highlighted the following:

- The Council has a team of officers who are trained to carry out process reviews. The team will be conducting a review of the Planning Department imminently.
- The Council's Management Team has been discussing the possibility of a Peer Challenge at GBC in autumn next year with a focus on the planning process and stalled sites.
- The Council is also investigating its powers under compulsory purchase order to take control of stalled sites on the borough.

The Director (Corporate Services) explained that he would be happy to meet Members outside of the meeting to discuss stalled sites in the Borough which can be used as case studies for the process review.

Following a question from a Member on long standing staff vacancies, the Director (Corporate Services) explained that where posts have not been filled for 12 months or longer; those posts should be removed as the Council is already operating without them and this delivers an underspend in budget but this must be coupled with need to reconsider if it is required.

Following a question from a Member on the 2017/18 Pay Award being highlighted as a risk, The Director (Corporate Services) advised that he would provide the Committee with some feedback on pay assumptions outside of the meeting.

Resolved that the Committee noted the report and the initiatives that are set out in Appendix Two.

90. Scrutiny Review of Proposed Council-endorsed Trading Companies - Draft Report

The Chair advised the Committee that following a discussion with officers; he had taken the decision not to have the draft Scrutiny Review report on Proposed Council-endorsed Trading Companies at tonight's meeting. The Chair thought it was more prudent for Members to have the briefing on Local Authority Trading Companies from the Legal Team first; this will take place on 4 December 2018. The draft Scrutiny Review report on Proposed Council-endorsed Trading Companies will then be presented to the Overview Scrutiny Committee at its next meeting on 17 January 2019.

Resolved that the Committee noted that the report for the Scrutiny Review of Proposed Council-endorsed Trading Companies will be presented to the Committee on 17 January 2019.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.40 pm