

Notice of Meeting

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date: Wednesday 6 March 2024

Time: 5.30 pm

Venue: The Annexe, Crosfield Hall, Broadwater Road, Romsey, Hampshire,
SO51 8GL

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Legal and Democratic Service

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The recommendations contained in the Agenda are made by the Officers and these recommendations may or may not be accepted by the Committee.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SCHEME

If members of the public wish to address the meeting they should notify the Legal and Democratic Service at the Council's Beech Hurst office by noon on the working day before the meeting.

Membership of Overview and Scrutiny Committee

MEMBER	WARD
Councillor I Jeffrey (Chairman)	Mid Test
Councillor J Neal (Vice-Chairman)	Andover Millway
Councillor G Bailey	Blackwater
Councillor C Borg-Neal	Andover Harroway
Councillor K Brooks	Andover Romans
Councillor D Cattell	Andover St Mary's
Councillor S Gidley	Romsey Abbey
Councillor A Gillies	Andover Winton
Councillor L Gregori	Andover Harroway
Councillor N Gwynne	Romsey Cupernham
Councillor S Hasselmann	Anna
Councillor R Hughes	Andover Harroway
Councillor M Leech	Andover Millway
Councillor S MacDonald	Mid Test
Councillor L Matthews	Andover Winton
Councillor J Parker	Romsey Tadburn
Councillor A Warnes	North Baddesley
Councillor S Yalden	Ampfield & Braishfield

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 6 March 2024

AGENDA

The order of these items may change as a result of members of the public wishing to speak

- 1 Apologies
- 2 Public Participation
- 3 Declarations of Interest
- 4 Urgent Items
- 5 **Minutes of the previous meeting** **5 - 9**

To approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2024.
- 6 Call in Items
- 7 Urgent decisions taken since last meeting
- 8 **Presentation from the Recycling and Environmental Services Portfolio Holder**

To receive a presentation from the Recycling and Environmental Services Portfolio Holder
(Councillor Drew, Recycling and Environmental Services) (45 minutes)
- 9 **Cost of Living** **10 - 18**

To review the approach taken by the Council and its partners reflecting on lessons learnt and the impact this support has had on people and communities
(Head of Housing and Environmental Health and the Community Manager) (20 minutes)

10 Update on outcomes of the Communications Panel 19 - 25

To provide a 12 month update on the outcomes of the review that was reported to Committee in April 2023
(Head of Strategy and Innovation) (20 minutes)

11 Updates on Panels

Lead Members to update the Committee on the progress of their Panels (10 minutes)

12 Programme of Work for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee 26 - 36

To enable Members to keep the Committee's future work programme under review (10 minutes)

ITEM 5 Minutes of the **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**
of the **Test Valley Borough Council**
held in Conference Room 1, Beech Hurst, Weyhill Road, Andover
on Wednesday 7 February 2024 at 5.30 pm

Attendance:

Councillor I Jeffrey (Chairman)

Councillor G Bailey

Councillor C Borg-Neal

Councillor D Cattell

Councillor S Gidley

Councillor A Gillies

Councillor L Gregori

Councillor J Neal (Vice-Chairman)

Councillor N Gwynne

Councillor S Hasselmann

Councillor S MacDonald

Councillor L Matthews

Councillor J Parker

Councillor A Warnes

Also in attendance:

Councillor Z Brooks

Councillor M Flood

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Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors K Brooks, Hughes, Leech and Yalden.

438

Public Participation

There was no public participation.

439

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

440

Urgent Items

There were no urgent items.

441

Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 3 January 2024 were proposed by Councillor Jeffrey and seconded by Councillor Neal.

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 3 January 2024 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

442

Call in Items

There were no call in items.

443

Urgent decisions taken since last meeting

There were no urgent decisions.

444

Improvement and Sustainability to Listed Buildings

Consideration was given to a report of the Head of Planning and Building who explained that the Government had commissioned a report to look at the issues related to listed buildings and premises in conservation areas regarding the potential to improve the energy performance of historic buildings and generation of low carbon energy. This report entitled “Adapting historic homes for energy efficiency: a review of the barriers” was published in January and linked these matters back to reaching carbon neutrality by 2050. The report highlighted a range of areas which constrain the ability of property owners to improve the energy performance of their premises and generate green energy. Planning controls and resources were one area highlighted.

The report noted that there is a lot of guidance some of which is helpful and some less so (they do not all align). There are also resource and funding issues around this sector particularly in relation to skills shortages in knowledge of how to deal with works to historic buildings.

A consultation by Historic England, mentioned in the Government report, called ‘Climate Change and Historic Building Adaptation’ is being developed with the intention of consolidating guidance to support decision making in this sector in relation to works to historic buildings including on what should and what should not need listed building consent and what types of alterations should generally be acceptable.

Members felt that this was a complicated area and that they would like something more specific instead of links to Government and other guidance and would like more details which includes the environmental impact. The Head of Planning and Building explained that this was a complex area and some of this can be looked at corporately in relation to the wider action the Council is taking in response to the Climate Emergency.

It was felt that some of the guidance is too technical and not easily understood by residents. Guidance could be more practical for residents to be able to make their buildings more sustainable. It is understood that there will be some Pathfinder local authorities and funding for training will be extremely helpful. The Head of Planning and Building responded that with the right additional resources being identified it would be possible to deliver bespoke training for owners of listed buildings, Parish Councils and Councillors.

A Member asked about the impact of any changes on planning applications and what help and support Councillors will get when approving or not approving applications. The Head of Planning and Building explained that conservation officer advice is provided for applications which affect historic buildings/conservations areas to assist with decision making and there are some changes to buildings that do not require permission. The draft note by Historic England will also give advice to the Council regarding what should and what shouldn't require consent.

The draft Local Plan (Regulation 18) is out for consultation and will provide policy against which applications would be assessed in future. There is training already scheduled for Councillors on historic buildings and conservation and the Head of Planning and Building will also investigate whether a specialist could attend or organise a sperate session to give some advice and training specifically regarding this area.

Additional resource will be required to deliver specialist training and support and possibly provide a bespoke guide for Test Valley, relating to the scope to carryout improvements to listed buildings, as some other Local Authorities have done.

In summary there are themes associated with guidance and training for applicants, Councillors and officers regarding enhancement to historic asserts and it would be useful to link this to wider corporate work around the climate emergency programme.

There is concern that passing it over to the Climate Emergency Working Group will delay the process and suggested that officers follow up on the actions in parallel with passing the actions to the Climate Emergency Working Group and report back to a future meeting.

The recommendation as set out below was proposed by Councillor Jeffrey and seconded by Councillor Neal. Upon being put to the vote the motion was carried.

Resolved:

- 1. That the key issues and comments from this meeting be forwarded to the Climate Emergency Working Group for further consideration.**
- 2. That the Head of Planning and Building reviews the actions raised and brings back an update to a future meeting.**

445

Council Tax Support Scheme 2025/26

Councillor Flood, Finance and Resources Portfolio Holder introduced the report and explained that the Government had abolished Council Tax Benefit in 2013 and asked Councils to produce their own scheme, which was done and mirrored the previous scheme. The Council has reviewed its scheme annually to take into account other benefit increases. The proposal is to consider options that could make the scheme simpler and easier to understand.

The Revenues and Welfare Manager explained that the current Council Tax Scheme is complicated and based on old rules and now is a good time to review the way our support is calculated. He explained that housing benefit and Council Tax Support is calculated at the same time. Housing benefit is being abolished and households are being transitioned to Universal Credit. As this progresses, there will be fewer housing benefit applicants, reducing the need to keep the two calculations on the same basis.

It was recommended that a small panel of OSCOM members be established to help develop options for any new scheme.

The report contained a timeline for how a new scheme could be implemented for 2024/25 and it was noted that there was a very short timeline for the panel to report back to the Committee. The timetable sets out a report to the June meeting to agree recommendations to Cabinet in July for a draft scheme to consult on. He explained that in 2019 a panel was established to review the Council Tax Scheme and requested the Committee to set up a similar panel. The Head of Finance and Revenues suggested that the panel could consider the impact on the Council's budget when considering a new scheme.

It was agreed that a panel will be set up to look at the options for the 2025/26 scheme and interest will be requested from the Committee members.

The recommendation as set out below was proposed by Councillor Jeffrey and seconded by Councillor Macdonald.

Resolved:

That a panel be established to develop options for any new scheme.

446

Updates on Panels

Regeneration Panel – Councillor Gwynne, Lead Member explained that the first meeting will take place virtually on Friday at 7pm.

Budget Panel – Councillor Neal, Lead Member reported that the Budget Panel had met on 11 January 2024 to discuss the position of the budget for the next financial year, the provisional Local Government financial settlement and updates on various budget. Overall progress was good and a balanced budget has provisionally been made. The panel also discussed the proposed increase to the Council Tax charge for the coming year.

447 **Programme of Work for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

The Chairman requested the Committee to consider an Away Day in 2024. Dates will be circulated in due course.

The Chairman took the Committee through the work programme and the Head of Strategy reported that the new Corporate Action Plan is due to go to Cabinet in April and the Leader is keen to give a briefing to the Committee prior to going to Cabinet. Dates and times will be discussed.

Resolved:

- 1. The Committee is requested to approve the future work programme.**
- 2. That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agrees to hold an annual Away Day in 2024.**

(The meeting terminated at 6.46 pm)

ITEM 9 Lessons Learnt through the Cost-of-Living Response

Report of the Head of Housing and Environmental Health and the Community Manager

Recommended:

That the lessons learnt by the Council and its partners be noted.

SUMMARY:

A report to review the approach taken by the Council and its partners to support residents with the increasing cost of living, to facilitate a discussion at committee reflecting on lessons learnt and the impact this support has had on people and communities.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to set the context for a presentation and discussion at committee on the work partners have undertaken to mitigate the impact of the increasing cost-of-living on people living in Test Valley and in particular what the Council and partners have learnt about how best to continue to support people in future.
- 1.2 The Chief Officer of Citizen's Advice Test Valley, Ange Moon, will also be present for the discussion to share her insights on the impact on the work of her organisation and the clients they support.

2 Background and local context

- 2.1 Although the causes of the increased cost-of-living have been rooted in macroeconomics and global factors, the impact of that is very much felt at a local and household level. Whilst the Council and our partners may be unable to influence those external factors, we have approached the challenge with the logic that if impacts are felt at a local level, then it must be possible to mitigate, at least to some extent, at a local level too.
- 2.2 In early 2022, many of the organisations who focus on supporting vulnerable households were already seeing high numbers of people accessing their support. Foodbanks in particular, who had seen a significant increase in demand through the pandemic, reported that demand had increased even from those already high levels. By the summer of 2022, inflation had reached 10%, with energy price increases even greater than that.

- 2.3 Through the winter of 2022/23, many households in Test Valley faced significant challenges in making ends meet. Andover foodbank reported demand as much as 40% higher than the previous year and Citizen's Advice Test Valley were experiencing increasing numbers seeking support with debt and money advice.
- 2.4 Through 2023, the rate of inflation gradually declined and in September the Bank of England kept interest rates on hold for the first time in almost two years, after 14 consecutive rises since the end of 2021.
- 2.5 At around 4%, the current rate of inflation is still double the government target, although some analysts are now predicting it could drop below the 2% target later this year.
- 2.6 Nonetheless, cost of household gas and electricity remains high, as are rental costs and many mortgage payers who have renewed over the past two years will still be feeling significant impact of higher interest rates.
- 2.7 In February 2024, households on means-tested benefits have received their final cost of living payments, and the government has no plans to extend the scheme.

3 Community and Voluntary Sector Support to Residents

- 3.1 As we saw in the pandemic, the community and voluntary sector have been vital partners in the support offer to households in Test Valley. The ability of voluntary organisations to meet need at the most local and personal level has been key to support those households most affected. Test Valley Borough Council has supported the sector financially through the Cost-of-Living grant scheme, and through the support of the Community Team, but we know many more organisations have also made a key difference to the lives of our residents.
- 3.2 Romsey Foodbank reports that 2023 looked very similar to 2022, with over 22,000kg of food given out to local families (compared to 21,000kg in 2022). This supported 319 households with a combined total of 753 food parcels, providing around 6000 meals. They also saw donations remain around the same or slightly exceeding what they received in 2022.
- 3.3 They also report an increase in the number of complex cases and larger household units. However, they are seeing the benefits of a 'hub' model, whereby regular users of the foodbank are able to access wider support. They give particular credit to the model of having a Citizen's Advice Caseworker on site at the foodbank. In 2023, 274 people accessed support and advice via this service, with a total of £90,296 financial gains achieved for households.
- 3.4 Andover Foodbank has seen similarly little movement between 2022 and 2023, with total meals provided reducing slightly from 8000 in 2022 to around 7,500 in 2023.
- 3.5 The majority of those supported by the Andover Foodbank are solely in receipt of benefits (approximately 68%), with 15% a combination of benefits and earnings, 8% no income at all and 5% on earnings but no benefits.

- 3.6 The most common household structure of clients in Andover is single adult (38%), followed by single adult with children (24%) and multi adult with children households at 14%). Although they serve communities throughout Test Valley, Andover St. Mary's, Andover Romans, and Andover Harroway had the highest distribution rates.
- 3.7 None of the figures above include support provided to refugees and asylum seekers, or over 1200 Christmas gift boxes given out to local children.
- 3.8 Unlike Romsey, Andover experienced much lower levels of donations in 2023 than in 2022, describing their shelves as “worryingly empty” by late summer. They undertook significant promotional work to boost stock levels over Christmas, but their experience is still that people are donating fewer items and less frequently.
- 3.9 Our larger voluntary sector partners have played a key role too. Citizen's Advice Test Valley (CATV) have played an obvious and key role in the advice and support they give to residents facing financial difficulties.
- 3.10 Their figures show a significant increase in demand when comparing the period of September 2023 – January 2024 with September 2022 – January 2023, as illustrated by the table below:

Category	Sep 22 – Jan 23	Sep 23 – Jan 24	variance
New clients seen in period	2147	3043	+41.75%
Issues	5205	6893	+32.43%
Income Gains	£191,562	£218,935	+14.29%
Issues – charitable Support	606	789	+30.19%
Issues – utilities	563	610	+ 8.34%
Issues -Personal Independence payment (PIP)	298	492	+65.10%

- 3.11 They have managed this increase in demand through successful funding applications to improve and enhance the phone service they provide via Advice Line (a shared service with the other offices in Hampshire), which allowed them to employ two additional advisors for 20 hours per week each, targeted at periods of highest demand.
- 3.12 They also emphasise the value of the caseworker being based in the foodbanks and are forward planning for opportunities to extend funding for these arrangements in both Andover and Romsey.

- 3.13 They have seen a change in the how clients approach them for help, with a marked increase in e-mail and telephone enquiries since the pandemic. CATV opened for in person enquiries again last year, but numbers accessing support this way are still below pre-pandemic levels.
- 3.14 CATV also saw most of their clients coming from St. Mary's, Romans and Harroway; with Romsey Cupernham and Romsey Abbey the most prevalent wards in the south of the borough.
- 3.15 Unity secured funding for direct provision of a mobile community pantry and since September have been providing subsidised and surplus food at a low cost to support people in rural areas.
- 3.16 They report that demand for the food pantry is growing and that beyond food, people are also in need of hygiene and pet products. Unity has found that for people struggling financially, eating well is a secondary concern to eating at all, and when they are able to purchase food, they tend to focus on quantity rather than quality. The pantry supports the quality of their diet by providing quality, healthy and nutritious products.
- 3.17 Unity also reports that increasingly they are supporting households with double incomes, often with a mortgage rather than social rent, who are now struggling.
- 3.18 Unity's engagement with the wider voluntary sector generally suggests an increase in demand on services, particularly around poor mental health, dietary health and general wellbeing, linked to increased cost of living.
- 3.19 Since October 2022, the Council has provided over £80,000 in cost-of-living grant payments to organisations across the borough. These have funded a range of activities from breakfast clubs to school uniform projects; 'comfort cafes' to baby necessities schemes; CATV caseworkers to warm spaces.
- 3.20 However, the rate of applications reduced significantly following the winter of 2022/23, with a little under £60,000 being awarded between October 2022 and April 2023, and around £22,000 awarded in the period since. This was despite the grant scheme being 're-publicised' over the winter of 2023/24 and direct contact being made with previous recipients and other potential applicants.
- 3.21 Schools throughout the borough have been a key conduit between families and support available and have used their relationship with families to deliver well targeted support to those who need it most. This is reflected by many schools being awarded funding under the Cost-of-Living Grant scheme.
- 3.22 Several organisations in the borough also received funding from Hampshire County Council through one of the elements of the Household Support Fund. These have included Alabare, Andover Community Engage, Andover Parish, NotJust a Café, Unity and Yellow Brick Road.

4 Test Valley Borough Council Support to Residents

- 4.1 Test Valley Borough Council also supports residents directly, in particular through the work of our Benefits Team and our Housing Team.
- 4.2 The government's Household Support Fund has operated four phases since October 2021. Through this fund, DWP provided funding to Hampshire County Council who then distributed it locally. A proportion of funds went to the voluntary sector, both in grants as described in paragraph 3.22, and by distributing to agencies such as CATV and the Food Bank to provide financial support with utility bills and food provisions.
- 4.3 An element of each funding round was distributed to the Council, across the Revenues and Housing teams. The first phase was October 2021 to March 2022. TVBC received £97,000 and combined this with their allocation of Vulnerable Renters Fund (£78,000) and ran an open application for financial support for residents. This was open to anyone in any tenure if their circumstances met the remit of the funding.
- 4.4 The second phase was April 2022 to September 2022 and comprised two elements:
- Exceptional Housing Support: Managed by TVBC's homeless prevention service, they worked with customers and landlords to make payments directly to landlords to reduce rent arrears and prevent homelessness.
 - Food Voucher Scheme: managed by Revenues, targeting eligible individuals. £65 food voucher issued to each pensioner in receipt of Pension Credit and Council Tax Support and £30 to each household in receipt of Council Tax Support.
- 4.5 This scheme supported 4,636 residents with total award of £231,770.
- 4.6 The third phase was October 2022 to March 2023 and supported 5,032 households, with a total award of £161,080. As with previous phase, this comprised two elements:
- Exceptional Housing Support (Jan – Mar): A further £48,000 was made available, which supported 312 households.
 - Food Voucher Scheme: Managed by Finance & Revenues, targeting eligible individuals. £30 food voucher to each household in receipt of Council Tax Support; and £50 to each household in receipt of Housing Benefit (but not Council Tax Support).
- 4.7 The fourth and final phase funded £50 food vouchers for 4,678 households on Council Tax Support, and £80 vouchers of 513 Housing Benefit only households.
- 4.8 In addition to the Housing Support Fund, the Benefits Team also manage the Discretionary Housing Payment Scheme, through which DWP provides funding to the Council to support people with housing costs. The table below shows the number of applicants and value of awards of this fund over the past five years:

Financial Year	Number of applications	Funding from DWP	Amount Spent
2019/20	503	£161537.45	£161056.15
2020/21	312	£206050.00	£198399.85
2021/22	276	£169159.00	£154562.23
2022/23	364	£119892.00	£107587.21
2023/24 (YTD)*	327	£119892.00	£97740.10

*Officers expect the remaining allocation to be spent by year end.

4.9 Despite a higher number of applications in 2022/23, there was a lower spend. This is primarily due to a lack of information being provided when requested, or the customer asking for support with things which could not be covered by the scheme.

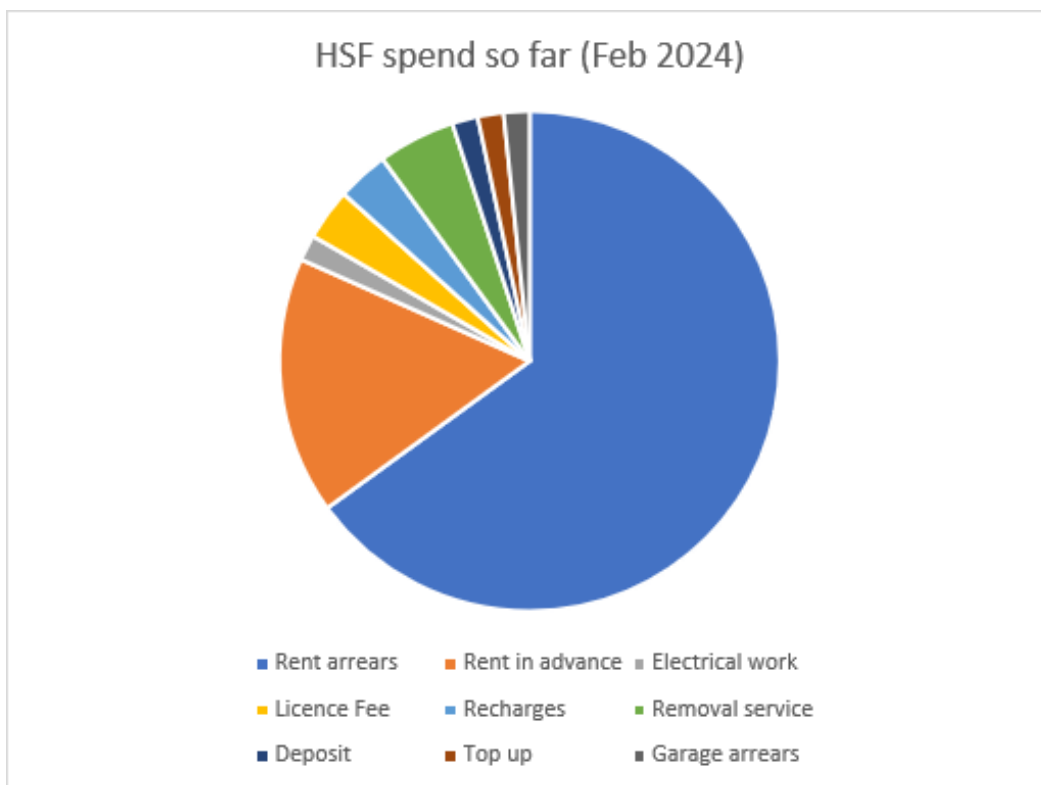
4.10 The table below looks specifically at the Exceptional Housing Cost proportion of the Household Support Fund:

Date	Amount awarded	How it was administered	Number of Households assisted
Sept 21 – Mar 22	£97,000	Open application scheme – vouchers or payments to landlords	122
April 22 – Sept 22	£48,000	Via the Housing Options team – payments to landlords	26
Jan 23 – Mar 23	£48,000	Open application for £125 grants – payments to customers	312
Sept 23 – Mar 24	£97,000	Via the Housing Options team – payments to landlords	66
Total	£290,000		526

4.11 In each round officers have targeted residents who were struggling with their housing costs by working with both private and social landlords, the Housing Options team and working with those households in temporary forms of accommodation, whose rent arrears were a barrier to moving on to a settled home.

4.12 Officers have taken a holistic approach to helping households who needed assistance. Rather than just administering the grant they have linked people into essential services and sign posted them to other agencies who can provided support.

- 4.13 A range of households needed help from the Household Support Fund, those in work, those out of work, single people, families, and a range of ages.
- 4.14 People expressed financial pressures around day to day living expenses such as utility bills, food and fuel. Some households whose heating runs on oil struggled to make the upfront payment for their oil, support was given to them to enable this purchase.
- 4.15 Households with specific dietary requirements, allergies, gluten and dairy free, repeatedly featured as did households with children who maybe autistic and have sensitivities towards some food textures. In addition, financial pressures for new clothing, specifically shoes, and household items such as beds and kitchen appliances were highlighted.
- 4.16 In order to give choice and control to households, vouchers for supermarkets and Argos were purchased and distributed.
- 4.17 The current round of Household Support Fund has assisted 66 households with the following:



- 4.18 The following figures are also helpful to understand the context of support provided:
- 55% of those assisted had no children, 45% did have children.
 - 95% of households assisted did not have someone of pensionable age within their household, whilst 5% did.
 - 95% of households assisted did not have someone who considered themselves to have a disability, whilst 5% did.

5. Corporate Objectives and Priorities

- 5.1 The work of the Council in bringing together partners to discuss the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis forms part of the Council's community leadership role and focus on quality of life for all. More specifically it is relevant to the corporate priority areas of prosperity, connectedness, inclusion, and sustainability.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Whilst many of the national headline figures around inflation and interest rates appear to be past their worst, living costs are still significantly higher than they were two years ago, and the economic outlook generally remains uncertain.
- 6.2 We and our partners have experienced differing fluctuations in demand and impact in different parts of the borough, with some change in the demographics of those accessing support in the southern and rural areas, but support for the Foodbank sustaining and even growing. Whereas in the north, those accessing the urgent support of the Foodbank have decreased slightly in number with no significant change in demographics, but with drastically lower levels of donations.
- 6.3 Demand on Citizen's Advice has increased significantly, and it would be helpful to explore to what extent this is through closer working with the likes of the Foodbank extending their reach, and to what extent it is new clients who are not accessing the foodbanks (who have not seen significant increases in clients during the same period).
- 6.3 Although there have been differences in nature and fluctuations in demand between organisations, there is a consistently high level of need compared to historical levels.
- 6.3 The response of partners across the borough has shifted from a response footing, where there was a shared attitude of preparing for the worst, to a situation where organisations are looking to plan for how to provide sustainable support to households in the longer term. Although, as one partner described it, for many schemes of local support, an exit strategy due to reduced need is unlikely for many in the short term.
- 6.4 Nonetheless, there are ongoing opportunities for partners to work together to ensure that support is not only sustainable but provides a coordinated route of enablement and empowerment for households in Test Valley who are struggling with the increased cost of living.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
None			
<u>Confidentiality</u>			
It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:	None		
Author:	Sam Hall and Dave Growcott	Ext:	8610 / 8606
File Ref:	N/A		
Report to:	Overview & Scrutiny Committee	Date:	6 March 2024

ITEM 10 Update on outcomes of the Communications Panel

Report of the Head of Strategy and Innovation

Recommended:

That the progress made over the last year to deliver the recommendations of the Communications Review be noted.

SUMMARY:

This report provides an update twelve months on from the completion of the Communications panel as resolved by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and sets out where the council has been able to progress many of the key issues identified by the committee.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This report updates on the progress made following the Overview and Scrutiny review of communications that was reported to the Committee in March 2023.

2 Background

- 2.1 In July 2021, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee appointed a member panel to review how the council communicates information to residents, how effective this is and what opportunities there are to develop and strengthen our approach in the future based on new technology and changing habits. The panel was chaired by Cllr Brooks and included Cllr Parker, Cllr Bailey, Cllr Swain and past councillors, Cllr Hamilton and Cllr Baverstock.
- 2.2 The panel explored a range of different communications methods and approaches. The scope of the panel included a review of corporate communications, including the website, councillor communications, and communications direct from services, including letters to residents. A copy of the report can be accessed via the following link:
<https://democracy.testvalley.gov.uk/documents/s25009/OSCOM%20Communications%20Panel.pdf>
- 2.3 The report findings set out a series of proposals that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorsed. It was resolved that that the proposals should be considered as part of informing the strategic approach to communications and that the committee should receive an update on progress within twelve months.

2.4 The main areas that formed the proposals are as follows:

- Website and online services
- Digital communications
- Councillor and Officer Communications
- Communications via letters

2.5 This report updates the committee on the work undertaken across each of these areas.

3 Website and online services

3.1 Following the feedback as part of the review, officers have been investigating why the current website is not meeting expectations and to determine an appropriate course of action. Several factors have been investigated including the technology/platform used to deliver the site, the design and style of the site and also the features and functions it delivers.

3.2 The work to investigate the current website and consider alternative options has involved the following activities:

- In September 2023, an external organisation was engaged (Methods) to run a workshop with officers from across the council to explore the current site, technology platform and features to establish our future requirements and ultimately recommend a course of action.
- Brought together feedback from councillors gathered through various forums including OSCOM.
- Delivered a series of internal workshops across the organisation regarding our next Digital Strategy in January/February 2024.
- Delivered a deliberative event in January with residents focused on our communication methods of which the website formed part of the discussions.

3.3 The feedback was consistent across all activities around 3 themes:

- Search results not being returned as expected.
- Content relevance and accuracy
- Structure and navigation, not logical from a user perspective

3.4 **Search results** – Older (sometimes outdated) pages often appear to be returned higher in a search as they are deemed more popular as they would have been accessed more regularly over a longer period. To address this issue and to improve the quality of the search functionality, older pages will be deleted from the site if no longer relevant. When adding new content there will be greater focus on adding key words and promoting pages as appropriate via a key match facility (forcing the page to the top of search results). In February officers from the Strategy and Innovation service received training with our

current website supplier to understand the search function in more detail to enable web editors to use this feature more effectively which should result in an improved experience for users of the website.

- 3.5 **Content** – There is currently too much content on the website which requires a full content review to significantly reduce the number of pages on the site. Work has started on a first phase of this, and the project team are currently putting in place the resources and plans to broaden this package of work during 2024. The current website has over 3,000 pages which will be categorised, reviewed, and updated or deleted as appropriate. In this first phase, we aim to reduce the number of pages to under 2,000.
- 3.6 **Structure and navigation** – The current website was built a number of years ago mainly based around how the council's services are structured. Based on the best practice advice we have received and from user feedback, we will now look to move to a more function/task-based navigation which can be achieved within the current platform.
- 3.7 There are also opportunities to update the look and feel and overall design of the current website. The TVBC corporate brand guidelines are currently being refreshed which will include the option of using additional colours from our agreed palette which will help to promote and define different types of content on the website.
- 3.8 Following the OSCOM review, consideration was given to the options for how to best improve the website. The feedback gathered from multiple stakeholders, in conjunction with a full site analysis, has indicated that the current frustrations with the site would not be resolved by simply procuring a new website platform. Fundamentally the work outlined above regarding content management would need to be undertaken ahead of any new platform being introduced.
- 3.9 An officer project team has been formed from across the Strategy and Innovation Service and has been tasked with taking this forward as a priority. A full site map has been produced and a full site review is currently being put together. Following a review of internal resources, changes have also been put in place to build resilience and capacity within the Strategy and Innovation Service to maintain and update our website on an ongoing basis.
- 3.10 The key next steps are as follows:
- Web publishing guidelines, principles and checklist are being drafted to ensure future content is consistent by end of March 2024.
 - Full site content review to be completed (old pages removed, content updated) by end June 2024.
 - Options for a refreshed design and colour palette to be developed by end July 2024.
 - New site structure and navigation to be designed (research into best practice and other local authority sites currently underway) by end of July 2024.

4 Digital Communications

- 4.1 The Council has continued to invest in the development of its email newsletter which people are able to subscribe to a range of topics. At the time of the review, there were two topics and since then the range of topics has increased. The panel concluded that it wished to see further work be undertaken to build upon the reach and content of the email newsletter.
- 4.2 Work is underway increase the reach and quality of the newsletter, as part of a review of all our communications channels. The development of new newsletter topics has been undertaken to make sure that we are providing thematic updates that relate to specific areas of residents' interest. This now includes Green Test Valley, Landlords, Regeneration and Business Matters topics as well as Events and News
- 4.3 The Communications Team is continuously making ongoing improvements to the design and layout of the family of newsletters now produced. We are being data-led in our approach with interrogation of open rates and click-through rates so that we build on content that interests residents most, as well as testing the frequency/day/time of sending the newsletters to maximise on the above.
- 4.4 Further opportunities to promote the newsletters are being developed. For example, there is a now a sign-up to the newsletter on every page of our website, we ran a #ChristmasCheer campaign on social media to promote the newsletter, we're updating corporate email signatures as part of our brand refresh and this will include a newsletter sign-up; we're flagging the sign-up in offline publications, posters, Test Valley News, at events etc.
- 4.5 There has been a steady growth in subscribers of the newsletter. For both News and Updates and Events there has been around a 2,000 subscriber increase from this time last year. A summary of current subscriber numbers are below:
- Regeneration – 186
 - Business Matters – 1,988
 - Green Test Valley – 1,488
 - News and Updates – 10,418
 - Landlords – 260
 - Events – 7,048
- 4.6 As part of the recent deliberative event held with residents, it was clear that for most people, information received by direct email (such as the newsletter) is a preferred way in which to receive information from organisations such as the council. We will continue to look for opportunities to find out what information residents want from to take an insight-led approach to further strengthening our digital communications.

5 Councillor and officer communications

- 5.1 As part of its review, the communications panel explored how the council was maintaining and improving effective councillor and officer communications both through how information is shared, and ensuring clear internal channels for communication are in place. The report set out steps that had already been taken such as modernising the Councillors Information Bulletin which has received positive feedback.
- 5.2 Following the elections in 2023, the Democratic Services Manager and the Innovation and Business Change Manager held meetings with councillors individually to discuss their needs regarding support within the role, communications and IT equipment. As a result of this, new IT equipment is being rolled out to councillors this month, feedback regarding officer and councillor communications has informed the work of the member and community development group, and there is a renewed focus on ensuring the highest standards of communication are maintained.
- 5.3 This has also included creating more opportunities for councillors and officers to come together to build networks and learn about the work taking place across communities and through services. The recent place-based workshops that have been held across communities, following the adoption of the new corporate plan, have provided an excellent opportunity for officers and councillors to work together with local communities on developing their local priorities. In addition, the recent "Councillor Marketplace" event provided an excellent opportunity for councillors to meet with a range of officers from across all of the council services.
- 5.4 The review did highlight concerns that councillors were at times experiencing some challenges in being able to contact officers with telephone issues being highlighted. Since the review, work has been undertaken internally to explore this issue with the Customer Services Team providing valuable insight. There continues to be some issues in regard to telephones and the Council's Management Team are working collectively to address these issues where they remain.
- 5.5 This will include an internal communication 'behaviour change' campaign which will be rolled out in March 2024, reminding staff to log into and use the telephone system in the way in which it is designed to ensure that calls are not missed. This will include reminding people how to use the system and a series of drop-in sessions will be held alongside a more tailored approach where a specific training need is identified.

6 Communications via letters

- 6.1 The Communications review outlined several areas in which written communications namely licensing and council tax letters could be improved. The premise of this was to ensure that residents received communication that was accessible and clear. Since the review, officers from these respective services have sought to address these concerns whilst continuing to operate within the regulations.

- 6.2 **Licensing** - The three main letters for private hire licensing have all been revised. Letters are now no more than one side of A4 and use bullet points to highlight the documentation/information required for successful renewal of the licence. Where appropriate the letters are tailored to the individual and bullet points removed where we already have or don't need a specific item. The new style letters were introduced based on feedback from applicants that it was unclear what was required resulting in incomplete applications. General feedback from applicants is that the new style letters have (in most cases) completely removed these issues.
- 6.3 **Council Tax** - The Revenues & Welfare team have made some small changes to the letter templates as a result of feedback from the communications review. However, the legislative requirements of what must be included on the letters, including, for the Council Tax reminder, the potential for additional costs and court summons, means that there is limited scope to radically change the content. However, this will be kept under review. We continue to seek other ways to contact customers that reduces the need for reminders to be issued, such as SMS text message reminders when payments are missed.
- 6.4 Other options have been considered such as re-introducing an initial soft reminder before more formal recovery begins. However, on balance, it is felt that the cost (both in actual terms such as postage and the impact of delays in recovering amounts owed) outweigh any benefits in the messages that are conveyed.
- 6.5 The outcome of the Council Tax Support review may lead to an opportunity to simplify the Council Tax Support notification letters that we know from feedback some find more difficult to understand. This is something that will likely be considered by the overview and scrutiny panel that has been recently formed that will help officers develop a new Council Tax Support scheme for 2025/26.

7 **Consultations/Communications**

- 7.1 To support officers in taking forward the proposals of the communications panel, experts and third parties have been engaged to provide feedback on key areas such as the website.
- 7.2 In January 2024, a deliberative event was held bringing together a cross-section of residents to consider the following question: *What is the best way to reach you as an individual with our council communications?* A series of recommendations came from this event which is informing our onward strategic approach to communications. This includes:
- Improving accessibility and usability of the website
 - Utilise existing / established publications such as parish newsletters.
 - Tailor messages to specific audiences
 - Email is the most effective way of sending out focused information.

8 Conclusion

- 8.1 This report provides an update twelve months on from the completion of the Communications panel as resolved by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It sets out where the council has been able to progress many of the key issues identified by the committee, whilst recognising there is still more to be done and that continuous improvement will be at the forefront of the councils ongoing strategic approach to communications.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
None			
<u>Confidentiality</u>			
It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:	None		
Author:	James Moody	Ext:	8130
File Ref:	N/A		
Report to:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	Date:	6 March 2024

ITEM 12

Programme of Work for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Report of the Chairman

Recommended:

That the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme – March 2024, as shown in Annex 1 to the report, be approved.

SUMMARY:

The purpose of this report is to enable members to keep the Committee's future work programme and recommendations update under review.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee approves a work programme every year, detailing selected issues that affect Test Valley or its residents. The work programme represents the work of scrutiny throughout the municipal year and is managed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The work programme is a rolling plan of in-depth reviews alongside standing items such as finance and performance.

2 Corporate Objectives and Priorities

- 2.1 Effective processes are used when selecting and prioritising review topics to ensure meaningful outcomes and tangible improvements. This involves including topics that are of community concern, contribute to the Council's Corporate Priorities, add value to the Council's overall performance, and have defined objectives and clear outcomes.

3 Conclusion and reasons for recommendation

- 3.1 Effective processes are used when selecting and prioritising review topics to ensure meaningful outcomes and tangible improvements. This involves including topics that are of community concern, contribute to the Council's Corporate Priorities, add value to the Council's overall performance, and have defined objectives and clear outcomes. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme is presented at Annex 1 for review and approval.
- 3.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is responsible for examining decisions made by the cabinet as a whole, and individual Portfolio Holders, as well as key decisions delegated to Senior Officers. With each agenda, the Committee receives copies of the Cabinet Work Programme. The Committee can then decide or use pre-scrutiny for forthcoming decisions on the Cabinet Work Programme. The Cabinet Work Programme is attached at Annex 2 for the Committee to consider.

- 3.3 Task and Finish Groups (panels) are small groups of members set up to examine specific issues in detail and report back to the Committee. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee Task and Finish Panels update is attached at Annex 3.
- 3.4 For Overview and Scrutiny to have an impact, it is important that recommendations to Cabinet and Council are followed up. At each meeting the Committee considers follow up action on recommendations to Cabinet and Council as part of the review of the Work Programme. Also as part of the Work Programme the Committee considers actions arising from the previous meeting.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
None			
<u>Confidentiality</u>			
It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:	3		
Author:	Councillor Jeffrey	Ext:	8014
File Ref:	N/A		
Report to:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	Date:	6 March 2024

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME - MARCH 2024

	*Scrutiny Indicator	Requested by	Purpose of Report (Responsible Officer / Member)
<u>6 MARCH 2024</u>			
Round Table on Economic Development Strategy	4		Support development of the Economic Development Strategy with consideration to the different economic characteristics across the borough (Head of Planning Policy and Economic Development)
Presentation from the Recycling and Environmental Services Portfolio Holder	2		To receive a presentation from the Recycling and Environmental Services Portfolio Holder (Councillor Drew, Recycling and Environmental Services) (45 Minutes)
Cost of Living	2		To review the approach taken by the Council and its partners reflecting on lessons learnt and the impact this support has had on people and communities (Head of Community and Leisure/Head of Housing and Environmental Health) (20 minutes)
Update on actions from the Communications Panel	3		to provide a 12 month update on the outcomes of the review that was reported to Committee in April 2023 (Head of Strategy and Innovation) (20 minutes)
<u>10 APRIL 2024</u>			
Round Table on Youth Services/Amenities	3		To explore the provision of services and amenities for young people within local communities (Head of Community and Leisure)
Presentation by the Strategic Regeneration and Partnerships (South) Portfolio Holder	2		To receive a presentation from the Strategic Regeneration and Partnerships (South) Portfolio Holder on the progress and plans for the Romsey Regeneration (Councillor Adams King) (45 minutes)

ANNEX 1

	*Scrutiny Indicator	Requested by	Purpose of Report (Responsible Officer / Member)
S106/CIL Presentation	2		To receive a presentation on S106 and CIL money (Head of Planning and Building) (30 minutes)
<u>5 JUNE 2024</u>			
Chairman's Annual Report	2		To consider the Chairman's Draft Annual report prior to Council (Councillor Jeffrey) (20 minutes)
Report of the Council Tax Support Scheme Panel	3		To report back on the findings of the Council Tax Support Scheme Panel and to make a recommendation to Cabinet on the scheme to consult on. (Councillor xxx, Lead Member) (20 minutes)
Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults	2		To look at the policy of safeguarding adults and children (Community Engagement Manager) (20 minutes)
<u>17 JULY</u>			
Test Valley Partnership	2		To provide members of the Committee with an update on the work of the Test Valley Partnership (Head of Strategy and Innovation) (20 minutes)
Corporate Action Plan	2		Presentation by the Leader on the Corporate Action Plan (Councillor North) (45 minutes)

BRIEFING NOTES

TOPIC		DATE CIRCULATED
Briefing Note on Affordable Housing (Head of Housing and Environmental Health)		
Briefing Note - Neighbourhood Plans (Head of Planning Policy/Head of Planning and Building and Head of Community and Leisure)		
<u>TO BE INCLUDED IN WORK PROGRAMME</u>		
Round Table on Climate Action in the Community	4	To explore the role that communities can play in tackling climate change (Head of Planning Policy)
Round Table on the efficiency of recommendations to Cabinet	2	(Head of Strategy and Innovation)

* Scrutiny Indicator Key:

1 : Holding to Account	2 : Performance Management	3 : Policy Review	4 : Policy Development	5 : External Scrutiny
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Cabinet Work Programme

March 2024

Further information

1. This is a formal notice under Regulation 9 of The Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements)(Meetings and Access to Information)(England) Regulations 2012. This edition supersedes all previous editions.
2. Documents submitted to the Cabinet or Cabinet Member(s) for decision will be in the form of a formal report, which if public and non-urgent, will be available for public inspection on this website at least 5 clear working days before the date that the decision is due to be made.
3. Background papers for such reports are listed in this Programme where their identity is known in advance of the report being written.
4. Documents shown will be available from the Democratic Services Manager at Test Valley Borough Council, Beech Hurst, Weyhill Road, Andover, Hants, SP10 3AJ. They can also be contacted at admin@testvalley.gov.uk.
5. Please note that additional documents relevant to those matters mentioned in the Work Programme may be submitted to the decision maker.
6. Whilst the majority of the Cabinet's business at the meetings listed in this Work Programme will be open to the public and media organisations to attend, this is formal notice under the above regulations that part of the Cabinet meetings listed in this Work Programme may be held in private because the agenda and reports for the meeting will contain exempt information under Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended) and that the public interest in withholding the information outweighs the public interest in disclosing it.
6. To view details of the members of the Council's Cabinet who will be making these decisions, please click the link below:
[Cabinet Members](#)

KEY DECISIONS

A key decision is one which is likely

1. to result in the local authority incurring expenditure which is, or the making of savings which are, significant having regard to the local authority's budget for the service or function to which the decision relates;
or
2. to be significant in terms of its effect on communities living or working in an area comprising two or more wards or electoral divisions in the area of the local authority.

The Council's thresholds are

- | | | | |
|----|---|---|------------------|
| a. | Decisions on spending which are within the annual budgets approved by the Council | NO THRESHOLD | NOT KEY DECISION |
| b. | Decisions on cash flow, investments and borrowings. | NO THRESHOLD | NOT KEY DECISION |
| c. | Decisions for spending or savings outside the budget, or included in the annual budget with reservations. | SPENDING EXCESS OF £75,000 PER ITEM IS A KEY DECISION | |

Arrangements for making representations to the cabinet regarding decisions contained within the work programme

A member of the public may address the Cabinet in accordance with the Public Participation Scheme. Notice must be given to the Democratic Services Manager by noon on the day before the meeting.

Members of the public are welcome to write to the appropriate Head of Service as listed in the Work Programme on any matter where a decision is to be made.

ANNEX 2

Date of Decision	Item	Key Decision	Decision maker	May include information which is not to be made public*	Documents to be submitted for consideration	Head of Service	Notice of proposed decision first published
3 Apr 2024 Andover	Councillor involvement in Strategic Planning	No	Cabinet	Open	Report of the Planning Portfolio Holder	Head of Planning Policy and Economic Development	11 Jan 2024
3 Apr 2024 Andover	Allocation of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Funds - Community Projects Reserve	Yes	Cabinet	Open	Report of the Planning Portfolio Holder	Head of Planning and Building	4 Sep 2023
3 Apr 2024 Romsey	Adoption of the Economic Development Strategy 2024-2029	No	Cabinet	Open	Report of the Leader	Head of Planning Policy and Economic Development	15 Jan 2024
3 Apr 2024	Corporate Action Plan Review	No	Cabinet	Open	Report of the Leader	Head of Strategy and Innovation	18 Jan 2024
3 Apr 2024 Romsey	Valley Housing Business Plan	No	Cabinet	Part exempt	Report of the Finance and Resources Portfolio Holder	Head of Property and Asset Management	29 Jan 2024
29 May 2024 Andover	2023/24 Treasury Outturn	No	Cabinet	Open	Report of the Finance and Resources Portfolio Holder	Head of Finance and Revenues	31 Jan 2024

ANNEX 2

29 May 2024 Andover	2023/24 Asset Management Outturn	No	Cabinet	Open	Report of the Finance and Resources Portfolio Holder	Head of Finance and Revenues	31 Jan 2024
29 May 2024 Andover	2023/24 Capital Outturn	No	Cabinet	Open	Report of the Finance and Resources Portfolio Holder	Head of Finance and Revenues	31 Jan 2024
10 Jul 2024	2023/24 Project Enterprise Outturn	No	Cabinet	Open	Report of the Finance and Resources Portfolio Holder	Head of Finance and Revenues	31 Jan 2024
10 Jul 2024 Andover	2023/24 Revenue Outturn	No	Cabinet	Open	Report of the Finance and Resources Portfolio Holder	Head of Finance and Revenues	31 Jan 2024
2 Oct 2024 Romsey	Gambling Act 2005 - Statement of Licensing Principles	No	Cabinet	Open	Report of the Democracy and Governance Portfolio Holder	Head of Legal and Democratic	15 Jan 2024

Panel	Lead Member	Progress Update	Report back to OSCOM
Budget Panel	Councillor Neal	<p>The budget panel looked at three main areas, which were the mid-year current financial position; the principles included in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and the draft fees and charges for 2024/25.</p> <p>The mid-year financial reporting has since been reported to Cabinet and the MTFS approved by full Council. Whilst a large variance has been reported in the year to date, it is not surprising that the two biggest contributors are investment income (due to rates increasing faster than expected) and salary costs which are our largest expenditure.</p> <p>Most focus was given to the draft fees and charges that services are proposing for the coming financial year. Three areas were closely scrutinised and they were; pest control; sports pitch bookings; and room hire charges. After careful consideration the panel were in agreement with the proposals that had been put forward by services.</p> <p>The overall conclusion of the panel was that the budget setting work for 2024/25 is progressing well and the next update in January is eagerly awaited.</p> <p>The Panel has not met since the update provided to the Committee at its meeting on 22 November 2023. The next meeting of the Budget Panel will take place on Thursday 11 January.</p>	

Panel	Lead Member	Progress Update	Report back to OSCOM
		<p>The Budget Panel had met on 11 January 2024 to discuss the position of the budget for the next financial year, the provisional Local Government financial settlement and updates on various budget. Overall progress was good and a balanced budget has provisionally been made. The panel also discussed the proposed increase in the Council Tax.</p>	
Regeneration Panel	Councillor Gwynne	<p>The scope was agreed on 22 November 2023 and membership is being compiled.</p> <p>Members were sought to join the Regeneration Task and Finish Panel. Councillors K Brooks and Cattell would join the Panel along with Councillors Gwynne (Lead Member) Gidley, Gregori and Hasselmann. Councillor Gwynne advised that the first meeting to consider the scope of the Panel would take place in February.</p> <p>Councillor Gwynne, Lead Member explained that the first meeting will take place virtually on Friday at 7pm.</p>	