

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **25th September 2012**

Present:

Cllr. Adby (Chairman);
Cllr. Chilton (Vice-Chairman);

Cllrs. Bartlett, Bennett, Feacey, Galpin, Mrs Hutchinson, Link, Mrs Martin, Mortimer, Smith.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Apps, Davison, Hodgkinson, Robey, Shorter, Taylor, Yeo.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Davidson, French

Head of Personnel and Development, Member Services and Scrutiny Manager,
Senior Scrutiny Officer, Member Services & Scrutiny Support Officer.

140 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Davidson	Declared an 'Other Interest' as he was the current Mayor	142
Feacey	Declared an 'Other Interest' as his son had gone through the Kent County Council apprenticeship programme.	142
Smith	Declared an 'Other Interest' he was the current Deputy Mayor.	142
Link	Announced an 'Other Interest' as a member of the Tenterden & District Residents Association but this did not directly refer to any item on the agenda.	

141 Minutes

A Member considered that the minutes did not fully reflect the wording of the KCC Officer who presented the report on Ashford's Shared Space to the Committee with regards to the funding of the scheme. It was agreed that this would be discussed with the Member Services and Scrutiny Support Officer and that the notes from the meeting be reviewed to see if this fact had indeed been omitted. Any proposed amendments considered necessary would be discussed at the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting.

Resolved:

That subject to the possibility that an amendment may be proposed at the meeting on the 23rd October 2012 the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 24th July 2012 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

142 Review of Changes made to the Mayoralty following the O&S Review in 2010.

The Senior Scrutiny Officer reported that due to a printing error, paragraph 22 had been omitted from the papers and read the paragraph to the Committee. It should have read "*However, in the opinion of the current Mayor, these conditions are not onerous and he has found no difficulty working within the guidelines and budget of the new system*". In addition she gave a quick overview providing the history to the Task Group Review of the Mayoralty and the recommendations that had come from it, and been approved. Overall the cost of the Mayoralty had been steadily reducing over the years due in part to the reduction in transport costs.

The Chairman opened the debate during which the following issues were raised:

- The past Mayor, who had been the first Mayor to be affected by the changes made to the Mayoralty following the review, explained that he had no concerns on the budget and had not found it onerous, but had concerns over the decision to not permit the Mayor to attend events outside the Borough. He agreed that local events and engagements needed to take priority over those outside the Borough, and understood that a Mayor could fund their own attendance at outside events, but said that not all would be in a financial position to do so. He considered the Mayor should be permitted to attend events at neighbouring Boroughs. It was essential that the Mayor network with others to learn about neighbouring areas, but also to identify what perceptions others held about Ashford, which, he said was a very large and influential Borough in Kent. In his opinion, the absence of the Mayor at events outside the Borough was being noted. Following this, he suggested that the budget restrictions may prevent people putting themselves forward for becoming Mayor.
- A Member was concerned that the reductions in budgets and the constraints on the Mayor's attendance at events had fundamentally "demoted" the role of the Mayor and considered this to be inappropriate.
- Some Members supported the idea that the Mayor ought to reasonably be entitled to attend events outside of the Borough. It was suggested that the Mayoralty was a tool to promote Ashford during very difficult times and the opportunities brought about through Chamber of Commerce Meetings was being limited by budget restraints. The money invested in the civic role would grow by return and it was suggested that this in turn may assist in the Borough recovering from a difficult economic situation. Other Members considered it was the right decision to limit the movements of the Mayoralty to within the Borough, staying local ie visiting schools, hospitals and businesses etc. Any events outside the Borough would need to be agreed.

- In terms of the role of the Mayor being an ambassador, it was reported that the Ashford Mayoralty was an ever present “force” at Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce events, whilst others merely paid flying visits. An ambassadorial role required the Mayor to be passionate, committed and dedicated. It should be remembered by all that the Mayor was the “public face” of the Council.
- Further concerns were raised that a non-driving Member could be deterred from taking on the role of Mayor and that the policy needed to be fair and appropriate for all Members. The Member Services and Scrutiny Manager reported that the budget had had to be reduced as part of the 5 year Business Plan, but said there was a budget for hire cars where necessary and the policy could be reviewed for a year if a non driving Member took Office as Mayor.
- In terms of the increased use of the Parlour, the Member Services and Scrutiny Manager said whilst there were no specific figures available it was being used far more frequently. The Mayor was very proactive in bringing people into the Civic Suite for events to showcase the Council and since the Leader had given up his office, he too was holding prestige meetings in the Parlour as were senior Officers of the Council.

The current Mayor addressed the Committee and said he was in a fortunate position as he had been Mayor previously and as such was able to give his views on the role before and after the changes to the Mayoralty. He accepted that in his previous term as Mayor there were a lot of events that were very much social fundraisers, but the cost to attend was high and therefore valuable “Ashford” money was being spent on other Boroughs. With the changes in place during this term, he considered that the role was still as important, but that he was happy to be an ambassador under the new system. He only attended a non civic event outside of the Borough if he paid for it himself and considered that was the purpose of his Mayoral allowance. He supported the cuts to the transport provision for Mayors, driving himself where possible and using his personal allowance to cover costs. The Mayoralty was still perceived in good light in the community and by fully using Media provision he had increased the amount of interest in the Mayoralty, and had attended some 100 events already, therefore raising awareness of the Mayor’s Charity and associated events.

The Mayor restricted himself going to events outside of the Borough unless it was a Civic event or an event at which his attendance to represent Ashford was essential. He considered certain ceremonial visits were justifiable in terms of the cost to the Council, and indeed very important. Any other non ceremonial visits outside the Borough were definitely funded out of his personal Mayoral Allowance and he considered this an appropriate use of this tax free allowance.

With regards to the increased use of the Mayor’s Parlour, the Mayor considered that the increased use was beneficial, as it was an opportunity to showcase the Council and show the Civic Suite to be welcoming and accommodating.

His only concern overall was the yearly 15 percent reduction to the budget, in line with the Council’s proposed 5 year business plan. He was advised that this was an overall saving and not a yearly target. The changes to the provision of a permanent car and attendant had created the savings and there was evidence to show that the

Mayoral Budget was reducing annually without any further reductions being necessary.

The Mayor considered he was well supported by the Civic Engagement Officer and the private hire chauffeur both of whom were very helpful and professional and wished his thanks to be noted.

He concluded that a car had always been made available when required and that he had not been disadvantaged as a result of the Task Group review recommendations from 2010. All Boroughs were facing the same restrictions this was not specific to Ashford.

The Deputy Mayor also supported the changes to the Mayoralty although he considered that there were occasions where taking his own vehicle to an event was inappropriate as there was still a degree of stigma from some other Boroughs and on these occasions he would choose to use a taxi, paid for from his allowance if using the private hire vehicle was inappropriate.

The Senior Scrutiny Officer read a letter which had been sent from a Member of the Committee who had been unable to attend, but who had been a Mayor in 1979/80. He considered that the review had taken the Mayoralty full circle as when he had been Mayor he drove himself and funded events and attendance at events from his own Mayoral Allowance. He made suggestions as to ways to ensure the proposed amalgamation of allowances could not be the subject of abuse and suggested the Mayoralty be reviewed every 3 years. He concluded that it must be remembered that the Mayor was the Queen's representative and the First Citizen of the Borough, and therefore the Council's main ambassador.

A Member proposed that the present situation be maintained subject to the Mayor not being restricted to the point that they were unable to satisfactorily carry out their role as ambassador for the Borough. This was supported, as was the decision to review the Mayoralty every 3 years.

Resolved:

That the report be noted subject to it being acknowledged that the Committee would not wish to see the Mayor restricted by the budget in their role as Ambassador to the Borough and that the Mayoralty be further reviewed in 3 years time.

144 Apprenticeships

The Head of Personnel and Development introduced the report of the Personnel Officer which informed Members of the current situation regarding the employment of apprentices within Ashford Borough Council including the recruitment process, number employed, those who have gone on to secure employments within ABC, how the scheme was promoted and how much apprentices were paid.

The Chairman opened the debate and the following issues were raised:

- Once an apprentice had left the Council, was there any further feedback gained as to how they fared following their training. It was reported that this information was not pursued, in the same way that students leaving colleges were not monitored. The important issue for the Authority was to ensure that the training given was suitable and effective.
- In terms of how Ashford Borough Council's Apprentice Scheme compared to others, this information was not known, but a comparison could be carried out if Members wished it to be.
- The Apprentices' contract ran on a 1 or 2 year term, at the time of the meeting, there was one apprentice on a 2 year programme with the remainder being on a 1 year contract.
- A Member suggested that this was a terribly important area. It was difficult for the youth of Ashford to enter the employment market. Apprentices were a vital part of the employment structure and having an apprentice programme would assist with the recession recovery for Ashford albeit that he considered the current programme to be just a start. Young people needed all the encouragement to work that could be offered in the present economic climate.
- It was suggested that there were far more areas where apprentices could be taken on within the Authority. IT, Fitness, Environmental, Planning and Human Resources were amongst those suggested. This was supported by the Committee. Members were reminded that there were other training programmes available within the Authority in addition to the Apprentice Scheme.
- The salary that Apprentices were being paid created considerable debate. There was some disappointment that it was not the National Minimum Wage. It was suggested by one Member that a modest increase would not be too onerous on the Authority but could make a huge difference to the Apprentices. Others considered that for young people the figures paid were satisfactory. Had they chosen college to train they would not receive a salary, and through the apprenticeships were being paid to learn a trade. If the scheme became too costly, then the Authority might decide not to continue with so many Apprentices.
- In terms of supporting the Apprentices further, Members discussed the options for helping with travel costs, and suggested this was a realistic area where further support could be given. A Member said that he was happy to make a recommendation to Kent County Council to propose that Apprentices be included in the Freedom Pass Scheme.
- A Member who was on a working group, which was considering youth employment, reminded Members that the number of Apprentices employed had to reflect what there was for them to do and how available other members of staff could be in order that they could be trained. It took patience to train an individual and the impact on existing staff should be taken into consideration. The number of Apprentices, therefore, needed to be monitored. In order to meet the learning criteria for their studies, Apprentices had to be offered good

quality work to enable them to demonstrate their competence to be able to gain their qualifications.

- Apprentices in the most part were given the opportunity to go for vacancies if appropriate, however this was not always the case.

The Senior Scrutiny Officer considered the recommendations that had been moved and seconded and compiled recommendations for the Committee to agree on. These were supported.

Recommended:

- That: (i) The number of Apprentices be reviewed and increased if possible.**
- (ii) The Council to consider working towards paying its Apprentices the National Minimum Wage.**
- (iii) Consideration be given to ways that the Council could assist with Apprentices' travel costs.**

145 Future Reviews and Report Tracker

Members considered the report and tracker and discussed a couple of areas that potentially could be reviewed by the Committee. Members were reminded that the appropriate way to do this was for the request to be put in writing to the Chairman.

Resolved:

That the Future Reviews and Report Tracker be noted.

HC