

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 **22nd January 2013**

Present:

Cllr. Adby (Chairman);

Cllr. Chilton (Vice-Chairman);

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

Apologies:

Cllrs. Bartlett, Hodgkinson, Robey, Yeo

Also Present:

Cllrs. Mrs Dyer, Michael

Finance Manager, Senior Scrutiny Officer, Member Services and Scrutiny Manager

The Chairman thanked Councillor Claughton, Portfolio Holder for Community and Wellbeing and the Deputy Chief Executive for the presentation on Welfare Reform they had given to Members prior to the meeting.

301 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Bennett	Declared an "Other Interest" as he was the Council's representative on the Tenterden Leisure Centre Trust	303
Feacey	Declared an "Other Interest" as he was the Council's representative on Volunteering Ashford	303
Mrs Hutchinson	Declared an "Other Interest" as she was a Trustee on the Tenterden Leisure Centre Trust and also the Tenterden Day Centre	303
Mortimer	Declared an "Other Interest" as he was an Honorary Member of the Nepalese Sagarmatha Association	303

302 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the meeting of this Committee held on the 23rd October 2012 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

303 Report of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group

The Chairman invited the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Budget Scrutiny Task Group to introduce the report.

The Task Group Chairman explained that he was pleased to present the report of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group for the 2013/14 year and said that he would like to thank his colleague Members, Councillors Apps, Chilton and Mrs Martin and also the support from Councillor Davidson and Councillor Smith. He also thanked the Senior Scrutiny Officer and her team for their support together with Officers from Financial Services and the Service Heads who had presented their draft Budgets at the various Budget Scrutiny Group meetings.

He advised that the Budget Scrutiny had been undertaken in a period of uncertainty as no Formula Grant information had been available at the start of the process. In the absence of this information two “bottom lines” were offered by Officers; one based on no increase in Council Tax and the second showing the balance with an increase of 2%. He explained that the draft Budget did not include the latest round of New Homes Bonus which was in line with the Cabinet recommendations that it could not be taken into account until it had been received. He said this left a small gap in the overall Budget and considered that it was now for the Cabinet and the Council to look at how this could be bridged.

The Chairman of the Task Group then said that he was pleased that some Portfolio Holders had been able to attend the Task Group, however, receiving full endorsement from all Portfolio Holders to the draft Budget would have given the Task Group more comfort in terms of their endeavours. He further advised that during the scrutiny process it was apparent that Officers were working extremely hard and he drew attention to the report recently published by consultants Grant Thornton which had identified that there was a significant risk nationally of a “tipping point” being reached. The Task Group had acknowledged that Officers were still keen to provide a “Rolls Royce” service on a “Mini” budget and accordingly the Task Group recommended to the Committee that the “Best Service Resources Allow” activity be reviewed and that it be added to their programme of works.

In conclusion he advised that the biggest risks to the Budget related to the introduction of the forthcoming Universal Benefit and changes to Council Tax support and that the Task Group recommended that the risks set out within the report be reviewed by the Cabinet. However, in overall terms the Task Group regarded the Budget as achievable.

The Chairman of the Committee also thanked the members of the Task Group and Officers and then opened up the report for debate.

During the debate the following issues were discussed:-

- The Finance Manager explained that the second paragraph on page 3 of the report explained the two budget scenarios which had been presented to the Task Group during their deliberations. He said that there was a need to develop a strategy to bridge the Budget gap and advised that the NNDR 1 form and the figures set out within that form would assist in bridging that gap. Furthermore information received from the DCLG before Christmas had indicated that the lowest quartile of Local Authorities were making a loss against inflation and were encouraged to increase their Tax by £5 per annum on Band D properties. Other options included consideration of the use of the New Homes Bonus or reserves. Management Team would be working with the Cabinet to bring forward a solution to the overall Budget gap.
- A Member advised that he had been involved in the draft Budget proposals as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan Task Group and asked that his gratitude be recorded to Officers from Financial Services who had dealt with continuing changes to the figures presented until such time as the Government had provided the information in late December.
- In response to a question, the Finance Manager explained that the figures for New Homes Bonus within the report were correct and were based on the actual houses constructed between October 2011 and the end of September 2012. He also explained that the longevity of the New Homes Bonus was not certain as questions were being raised nationally as it was being treated as base line funding.
- The Chairman of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group explained that Service Managers all had work plans designed to meet customer demand which they endeavoured to achieve.
- The scrutiny process identified that staffing issues were becoming critical in certain areas and it would be difficult to further reduce those in some areas. The recommendation that the existing Task Group be dissolved and a new Group be created for the next Budget round was questioned as the existing membership was very experienced and well aware of issues affecting the Council across the board.
- A Member advised that he had suggested to the Head of Customers, Homes and Property that Housing Services work with the Ashford Volunteer Group in terms of providing support for the elderly.

Recommended:

That the Cabinet:-

- (i) be advised that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee regards the Council's draft 2013/14 Budget as achievable.**
- (ii) endorses the Risk Matrices and the risks identified within them, particularly noting those that fell in the shaded part of the matrix.**
- (iii) note any future risk items in the main issues tables.**
- (iv) all Portfolio Holders be encouraged to attend the Budget Scrutiny Meetings dealing with their relevant service areas.**
- (v) in terms of the retention of NNDR the Council take a robust approach to countering claims which should, if necessary, include supporting lobbying to overturn case law and supporting any other Council that challenges it in the higher courts.**

Resolved:

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed:-

- (i) the "Best Services Resources Allow" activity be reviewed by the Committee to ensure that the Council was not prejudicing its ability to deliver core services at an acceptable level.**
- (ii) the existing Budget Scrutiny Task Group be dissolved and a new Group be appointed for the next Budget round.**

304 Future Reviews and Report Tracker

Members considered the report and Forward Plan.

The Chairman advised that at the February meeting there would be a presentation by the Ashford Clinical Commissioning Group regarding healthcare provision in Ashford and the Borough. He also explained that the Cabinet had asked that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee look at the Biomass/CHP issues regarding the Stour Centre before a final decision was made and he said with the Committee's agreement this would also be dealt with at the February meeting.

The Senior Scrutiny Officer advised that the Project Office Manager would be submitting a report on the Biomass/CHP issue to the Committee but in advance of that he hoped to arrange a visit to sites where biomass boilers were in use. She asked Members for a straw poll in terms of interest in attending the site visit. Seven Members indicated their interest in attending such a visit. The Senior Scrutiny Officer also advised that given the complex nature of the issues, the Project Office Manager had asked that detailed questions be submitted in advance of the meeting to enable full and informed answers to be given. The Member Services and Scrutiny

Manager advised that the original issue which had made consideration of this item urgent was likely to be resolved by an alternative location for the boilers which would enable the existing boilers to remain in place until such time as the new ones were able to be commissioned.

In terms of the presentation by the Ashford Clinical Commissioning Group, a Member considered it was important that it was focussed on their plans and how it would affect the population of the Borough.

A Member who was also the Chairman of the Licensing and Health and Safety Committee advised that he had spoken to the Licensing Manager about the possibility of the Council signing a Voluntary Agreement regarding the Code of Conduct for Charity Street Collections in the Borough. He said if possible he would like the Licensing Manager to submit a report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee if the Committee were agreeable to it. The Committee agreed that this was an issue that they would be happy to consider.

Resolved:

That the Future Reviews and Report Tracker be noted.

(KRF/AEH)

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Queries concerning these Minutes? Please contact Keith Fearon:
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