

Agenda Item No: 4
Report To: Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date: 21 May 2013
Report Title: Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report
Report Author: Senior Scrutiny Officer



Summary:	The Council's constitution requires the O&S Committee to make an annual report to full council. This is the report for the Municipal Year May 2012 – April 2013.
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Key Decision: No

Affected Wards: None

Recommendations: **The Committee is asked to note this report and to agree for it to be presented to Full Council later this year.**

Policy Overview: None

Financial Implications: None

Risk Assessment No

Background Papers: O&S Committee Agendas and Minutes from May 2012 – April 2013

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Report Title: Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report

Purpose of the Report

1. The Council's constitution requires the O&S Committee to make an annual report to full Council on the work they have undertaken during the year.
2. This report will give an overview of the work the O&S Committee and its Task Groups have been involved in during 2012/13.

Background

3. Under Section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has power to make reports and/or recommendations either to the Cabinet or to the Authority on any aspect of Council business. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee also has the power to make reports and/or recommendations about other matters which affect the authority's area or its population.
4. The O&S Committee has 19 members, representing all political groups on the council, who work together to ensure that the Council and its Services are acting effectively and efficiently. Reviews may be undertaken by the whole Committee or a Task Group.

Issues Scrutinised by the Committee since May 2013

5. Since May 2012 items considered by the main O&S Committee have included: -
 - ABC Business Plan quarterly performance report
 - Shared Space 3 year post implementation report
 - Post 2010 Mayoralty review – update on effect of changes
 - Apprenticeships
 - Listed Buildings
 - Presentation from the Ashford Clinical Commissioning Group on Health Care provision in Ashford Borough
 - Stour Centre – Biomass/CHP review
 - Briefing on Welfare reform
 - Community safety partnership update
 - Code of conduct for charity street collections.
 - The council's draft 2013/14 budget

Further information about some issues reviewed by the main committee/Task Groups (to read the full reports please see www.ashford.gov.uk/committees for agendas, reports and minutes of O&S meetings)

Budget Scrutiny

6. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has a duty to scrutinise the council's draft Capital and Revenue budget. The Budget Scrutiny Task Group's remit was to ensure that the draft 2013/14 budget was achievable and in line with the council's 5 year business plan.
7. By the end of the scrutiny process the Task Group were confident that the Budget was achievable. The biggest potential risk was in relation to the introduction of the forthcoming Universal Benefit, the changes to the way Housing benefit was paid and changes to Council Tax support. The Task Group suggested five Recommendations for O&S to put to the Cabinet and the full Committee agreed these. At the subsequent Cabinet meeting all five Recommendations were Resolved. These recommendations included:-
 - Noting that the O&S Committee regarded the Council's draft 2013/14 budget as achievable;
 - Encouraging Portfolio Holders to attend the Budget Scrutiny meetings dealing with their relevant service areas; and,
 - In terms of the consequences of the Makro case, the Council to take a robust approach in countering claims which should, if necessary, include supporting lobbying to overturn case law and supporting any other council which challenges it in higher courts.

Review of changes made to the Mayoralty following O&S review in 2010

8. In May 2011 the amendments to the operation of the Mayoralty, as proposed by O&S and agreed by full Council in Dec 2010, were implemented.
9. These amendments included reduction of the Mayor's entertainment allowance, restrictions on the number/type of engagements which could be attended outside of the Borough, terminating the lease on the Mayor's car and using a private hire firm as and when necessary, and, as a result of deleting the Mayor's attendant's post, Mace bearing and other duties to be covered on an ad hoc basis by an employee of the Council.
10. When these amendments were agreed, O&S required a progress report, to review the situation, to be provided in September 2012.
11. The Mayor for 2011/12 and the Mayor for 2012/13 were both at the meeting when the review was presented to the Committee. The Mayor for 2012/13 had been Mayor before and so was able to compare the two regimes. In his opinion the conditions were not onerous and he found no difficulty working within the guidelines or the budget. He now only attended events outside of the Borough if it was a Civic or ceremonial event where his attendance to represent Ashford was essential. If he wished to attend other non-ceremonial events outside of the Borough, he funded these himself from his personal mayoral allowance. With regard to the arrangements with the private car hire firm, he found these most satisfactory and commented on the professionalism and helpfulness of the private hire chauffeurs.

12. The Mayor for 2011/12 also said that he had no concerns over the reduced budget, but considered that the restrictions might discourage people from putting themselves forward for becoming Mayor.
13. Figures presented to the Committee showed that the cost of the Mayoralty was reducing - in 2007/08 the outturn on the Mayoral budget was £70,781, by 2010/11 this had reduced to £57,750. In 2011/12, following the changes, outturn was £43,225. The number of engagements also showed a reduction – from 287 in 2007/08 to 187 in 2011/12, however it was important to note that the number of engagements was more a reflection of the demand for, and capacity of, the Mayor to attend events. The number of events did not necessarily indicate high expenditure especially if many of them were within the Borough.
14. Overall the Committee were happy with the alterations to the budget and functioning of the Mayoralty as long as this did not diminish the Mayor's role as ambassador for the Borough.

Apprenticeships

15. Apprenticeships are work based training programmes designed around the needs of employers. They give rise to nationally recognised qualifications and can be used to train both new and existing employees.
16. Ashford Borough Council has an apprenticeship scheme, most of the training given is 'on the job' i.e. at the council's premises. The council currently offers two levels of apprenticeship –Intermediate level: a one year contract leading to a Level 2 competence qualification and Advanced level: a two year contract leading to a Level 3 competence qualification.
17. The Council has been offering apprenticeships since August 2008 and, at the time of presenting the report to O&S, 14 people had been employed as apprentices.
18. There is a National Minimum Wage for Apprentices (not to be confused with the National Minimum Wage) but employers are free to pay above that level if they wish, apprentices also have a statutory entitlement to 28 days paid holiday (inclusive of bank holidays) per year. The council pays slightly above the minimum wage for apprentices and provides for 30 days paid holiday (inclusive of bank holidays) per year.
19. The number of apprentices in the Council at any one time has to reflect what there was for them to do and how available other members of staff were to train them. In order to gain their qualifications, apprentices have to be offered good quality work in order for them to be able to demonstrate their competence.

Stour and Civic Centres – Biomass/Combined Heat and Power (CHP) for heat provision to the buildings.

20. In January 2013, the Cabinet approved the recommendation for implementation of the Stour Centre essential repairs and Proposed Invest to Save Project (including the choice of a CHP plant for heating and power supply to the buildings)
'subject to more sensitivity work being undertaken, and a reappraisal of the financial aspects of this scheme and subject to any recommendations following a review by the Overview and Scrutiny committee..'
21. A comprehensive review was carried out by officers including
 - A reappraisal of the financial savings and environmental benefits
 - A sensitivity analysis identifying the impact of changes in gas and electricity prices on predicted savings
 - A refreshed comparison of the pros and cons of the two systems
 - A visit with Members to see three Biomass boilers at leisure centres in the south east.
22. The findings from this review were that the use of biomass heating could generate local environmental and employment benefits if the wood fuel supply contact was won by a local firm, but the size of this contract would mean that it would have to be advertised in the European Journal which could mean that the wood might not even come from this country. Also, the use of Biomass would cost the council £140,000 more than its current utilities cost. However, the CHP option would save the council £1.384m.
23. Based on these significant savings the O&S Committee recommended that Cabinet confirmed its decision in January to proceed with the choice of CHP plant for heating and power and that consideration be made to using biomass boilers for other more suitable and less sensitive buildings. Both these recommendations were resolved by Cabinet.

Reviews on the Forward Plan

24. The Overview and Scrutiny committee sets its own work programme. Future reviews/other items on the Forward Plan include:-
 - Quarterly Updates on the ABC Business Plan performance
 - Update on Stour Valley Arts agreement
 - Refurbishment of the Stour Centre
 - Communication and consultation with the public (re planning policy)

The Future

25. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee's work is aimed at ensuring the effective and efficient provision of Council services for the residents of the Borough. However the O&S Committee can also act as a 'critical friend' in reviewing the services of other 'partner' organisations e.g. KCC.
26. With the agreement of the Chairman, items can be put on the O&S agenda following a request from Cabinet or another Committee (e.g. Audit). Members

of the O&S Committee are also able to suggest items to the Chairman that he may wish to put on the Committee's agenda – such items must represent a Borough wide perspective and provide the opportunity to influence, to improve services or contribute to policy development. The Chairman will then decide if the item is appropriate for O&S to consider and, if so, is there room on the work programme.

Conclusion

27. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has received reports, commented on and made recommendations to Cabinet on a variety of issues which directly affect the Council or residents of the borough. Should the Committee consider that a decision made by the Cabinet is unwise then Members are always able to Call-in that decision.

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