

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 **21st May 2013**.

Present:

Cllr. Adby (Chairman);

Cllrs. Apps, Bennett, Burgess, Davison, Feacey, Hodgkinson, Mrs Hutchinson, Link, Miss Martin, Mrs Martin.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Bartlett, Chilton, Mortimer, Yeo.

Also Present:

Policy and Performance Officer, Senior Scrutiny Officer, Member Services & Scrutiny Support Officer.

12 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 23rd April 2013 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

13 Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2012/13

The Senior Scrutiny Officer introduced the report and advised that she would need to make two amendments to it before it was considered by Council. These amendments were relating to size of the Committee, which had reduced from 19 to 16; and, in relation to the Reviews on the Forward Plan, the Update on the Stour Valley Arts Agreement was included in the presentation to the Committee that had taken place on the 23rd April 2013 and therefore would no longer be retained on the forward plan.

The report gave an overview of the work that the O&S Committee and its Task Groups had been involved in during 2012/13. It was required as part of the Council's constitution that the O&S Committee make an annual report to Full Council on the work they had undertaken during the year.

During the discussion the following points were raised.

- Were the Committee satisfied that the Cabinet was taking forward the recommendations? Was there any mechanism in place to report back that what was being sought, through the reports of the O&S Committee, was actually being done? The Senior Scrutiny Officer agreed to consider ways in which this could be monitored. Members could, it was reiterated, attend the Cabinet meeting at which the O&S Reports were being considered and address the Cabinet. A Member suggested that from his experience at attending Cabinet meetings, that the Cabinet did take the reports of the O&S Committee very seriously. There was also the mechanism of call-in that could be used. It was suggested that if the Cabinet were to change a recommendation made by the O&S Committee then the relevant Portfolio Holder should attend the next O&S Meeting to report the reasons behind this to the Committee.
- A Member suggested there had been concerns raised for sometime that O&S was not supported fully, with its remit being reduced further and further. It was important that the strength and influence of the remaining Committee was retained.
- It was accepted that it was not within the remit of the O&S Committee to change decisions made by external bodies, such as the Clinical Commissioning Group, but Members could legitimately raise concerns and/or criticise through the Scrutiny process. It was feared that the scrutiny process may be “losing its way”.
- Historically Ashford’s O&S Committees had made some tough decisions through their work programmes, actively drilling down into issues with operating departments being scrutinised annually. This system identified areas of poor practice but Constitutional changes had stopped this process. It was accepted that the operating style of the Council had changed and that there had been improvements, but decisions were being made by the Cabinet sometimes months before the O&S Committee could consider them.

Resolved:

That the report be noted and the amended version be presented to full Council.

Recommended:

That, should the Cabinet vote to change a recommendation made by the O&S Committee, the relevant Portfolio Holder attend the next Committee meeting to address the Committee on the reasons for such a change.

14 ABC Business Plan Q4 Report

The Policy and Performance Officer introduced the report which was the fifth of its kind and provided Members with an overview of how the Council had performed over the last quarter, also giving an overview of the performance for the last year, giving a key performance snapshot on specific areas. The report had been considered by the Cabinet on the 9th May 2013 and Members were invited to consider it.

The Policy and Performance Officer reported that there were demands on front line services, particularly as a result of the Universal Credit impact with much pre-emptive work being carried out. He undertook to deal with as many of the Members questions as possible and assured Members that he would find answers to any questions he was unsure of and report back to the relevant Member.

During the discussion Members raised the following points:

- Members sought clarity as to how concerned the Authority was with regard to the impact of Universal Credits. It was the unknown demand that presented the greatest concern. There had been some work undertaken to “map” the potential issues that would arise and the workload impact of that, but until the information actually reached the residents and they began to call on the Council’s Services it was not something that could be measured.
- With regard to the vulnerable people within the Borough, what special measures were being put in place to support them in understanding the changes and prevent them getting into crisis? The Policy and Performance Officer agreed to discuss this with the Housing team, but assured Members that the Authority had been working hard to protect its residents in implementing this Government led change. To date the appropriate staffing decision had been made and the Authority was in the best position possible with the situation as it stood at the present time. A Member reported that the Cabinet had considered a very informative report on the 9th May 2013 on the subject of Universal Credit and urged Members to read this as it covered some of the issues being raised. Another Member added that in her opinion the Housing Department could do nothing more in terms of preparation and awareness, but that it was indeed the unknown that was the concern. Members were advised that there was a single Task Group to deal with the Welfare Reform and that there was a team in place to provide a holistic approach to cater for the cross cutting social needs of claimants. A good advance measure for the issues concerning those affected by the Welfare Reforms would be to ask the Customer Contact Team to keep records of the nature of the calls coming to the Authority on this matter.
- A Member considered that the telephone app to aid residents with recycling was out of date and needed some review. It was agreed that this would be reported to the Communications team.
- There had been some discussion regarding the impact on the Council’s Parking Income if the Portas Pilot suggestion of offering some free parking was put in place. Members were advised Management Team considered parking issues and that this concern would be forwarded to them.

- A Member suggested that the report could just be seen as a public relations exercise and that it was actually rather bland. In his opinion some of the important subject matters affecting the Borough were missing, such as Chilmington Green and Sevington. The Policy and Performance Officer explained that the projects reported on were agreed with the Heads of Service, and it was likely that these two would be added in the near future. He reiterated that if Members wanted to see specific items reported then they could request this.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

15 Future Reviews and Report Tracker

The Senior Scrutiny Officer introduced the report. The Chairman reported that he had received requests from Members for items to be considered for inclusion in the Tracker for future reviews and explained that he would be meeting with the Vice-Chairman and Senior Scrutiny Officer to discuss these. He reminded all Members that they could contact him or the Senior Scrutiny Officer with written suggestions for items.

In terms of the Sickness and Absenteeism report, which was due to be considered in June, clarification was sought if the sickness figures would be reported department by department. This was not the case, although if Members had specific concerns regarding sickness in certain areas, they could raise this with the Officer at the meeting.

Resolved:

That the Future Reviews and Report Tracker be noted.
