

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 **20th August 2013**.

Present:

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

Cllrs. Bartlett, Bennett, Burgess, Davison, Mrs Hutchinson, Link, Miss Martin, Mrs Martin, Mortimer, Smith.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Apps, Feacey, Hodgkinson.

Also Present:

Cllr. Britcher.

Chief Executive, Senior Scrutiny Officer, Senior Member Services & Scrutiny Support Officer.

112 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meetings of this Committee held on the 25th June and the 9th July 2013 be approved and confirmed as correct records.

113 Budget Scrutiny Task Group

The Senior Scrutiny Officer's report asked the Committee to agree the set up and membership of a Budget Scrutiny Task Group which would scrutinise the Council's draft 2014/15 budget and report its findings and recommendations to this Committee. The O&S Committee would then report to Cabinet on the soundness of the budget. There was some discussion about the timing of meetings and it was explained that day time meetings had been selected rather than evenings due to room availability, the need to have six or seven meetings in close succession, to avoid any potential conflict for evening meetings Members may be committed to and to increase the likelihood that both Members and the relevant Officers would be available.

The following Members were put forward as Members of the Task Group: -
Councillors Apps, Burgess, Chilton, Mrs Martin and Mortimer.

Resolved:

That (i) the O&S Committee agree to set up a Budget Scrutiny Task Group.

- (ii) **the following be selected as Members of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group: - Councillors Apps, Burgess, Chilton, Mrs Martin and Mortimer.**

114 Best Services Resources Allow – An Update

The Chief Executive attended and gave a presentation to update on the Best Services Resources Allow (BSRA) activity. The Budget Scrutiny Task Group had recommended that the Committee receive an update following concern that the Council may be prejudicing its ability to deliver core services at an acceptable level on a reducing budget.

The Chief Executive said it would be useful to firstly explain the background to BSRA. This was one of the priorities that arose from the SIMALTO exercise in 2010 when the people of Ashford were asked where they would like Council resources to be focussed over the next five years in the light of reductions in formula grant from the new Government. The ethos behind BSRA was that the Council could shift spending to priority areas, but it was expected that essential Council business would still be maintained at a decent standard but modest cost (the concept of less for less or a 'Ford Mondeo' level of service rather than a 'Rolls Royce' one).

The identified corporate priorities coming out of the exercise were: - recycling and environment; activities for young people; economic development and housing; and BSRA. The Chief Executive outlined progress under each of these four headings, which had been significant, along with the few areas which had not gone so well. Generally speaking the whole process had gone well and had contributed towards improved staff morale as a result of them feeling more engaged in the process, as well as delivering savings of £2.8m in 3 years whilst retaining the lowest Council Tax in Kent.

During the discussion the following points were raised: -

- Whilst it was perhaps too early to debate the success or effectiveness of the new waste and recycling arrangements, the early teething problems, particularly in the rural areas and with regard to the rollout of the garden waste scheme, were noted. It was a small fraction of 1% of residents who had experienced problems but a small fraction of 1% of 52,000 homes could still equate to a significant number. It had been clear though that the ability to more easily recycle their waste had been a top priority for residents and the Council had been able to facilitate that. A number of Members said they were pleased to report that they had received an extremely low number of complaints about the new waste and recycling arrangements and those that had been received were mainly around getting through to the Council on the telephone. There was still a general issue with phone lines and people who rang in to the Council having to wait too long and it was recognised that this was a particularly topical issue. A Member said the most frustrating thing was not necessarily the problems themselves, but not being given a time-frame for when the problems would be remedied.

- More needed to be done for young people who found themselves homeless or in vulnerable situations. Quite often they were being put into inappropriate Bed & Breakfast accommodation that did not suit their needs. Could the Council give some consideration to providing some sort of hostel, overseen by experienced and professional workers who properly understood the situation? There were plenty of people locally who had the necessary skills and control that the Council could work in partnership with on such a scheme (Housing Associations, KCC, and Youth Workers such as those at Sk8side etc.) The Committee agreed that a recommendation should be made to Cabinet to task Officers to look at options around providing support to homeless people in the Borough.
- In a similar vein, with regard to youth work, the Sk8side facility had been fantastic for young people and really engaged and supported young people of all ages who had not previously had that kind of outlet. The individuals there were doing some great work but the service was under pressure and a bit of extra resource there would go such a long way. KCC's Youth Service was the main funder of such services but they also had to find their own savings. The Chairman reminded Members that Sk8side was a facility that served young people from across the Borough and any Member was welcome to use their Ward Member Grant to support it.
- There was some discussion about the next steps and whether there was going to be a follow up survey to the one undertaken in 2010. The process of consultation and using that to form the basis of the Five Year Business Plan had worked well but now, three years into that Plan, many of the objectives raised then had been achieved and it was now important to identify the next set of priorities and savings targets. The Chief Executive said he envisaged the next survey taking place in spring 2014 with a view to compiling information to use in the budget build for 2015 and to inform the new Council from May 2015. With further reductions to Government Support Grant likely it would be vitally important for the Council to have all the information it needed to understand the public's aspirations before it had to take tough decisions and identify similar levels of savings again. Members considered that completion of this survey in the next 12 months should be a recommendation from this Committee to the Cabinet.
- A Member said that the savings made so far to the budget were impressive and he supported an early repeat of the consultation process as the next stage of savings may have to be even more dramatic.

A discussion then ensued about the future of the town centre. Some Members said they had serious concerns about the future of the immediate town centre and in their view some of the 'town centre' developments referred to in the Chief Executive's presentation were misleading as they were happening on the outskirts of the town (McArthur Glen Outlet Centre and John Lewis at Home). It was considered that such developments would not necessarily help the High Street and the area within the old ring road which was the traditional town centre and was not attracting or retaining traders. It was considered that more needed to be done to support small businesses and market traders in the town centre. There was talk of providing a cinema in the town, but if there was nothing else to draw people in, why wouldn't people still use

the existing cinema at Eureka with its free parking and variety of eateries? There were clearly other plans in place than just a cinema, but there was concern that not enough was being done for the immediate town centre. Other Members said that a cinema in the town centre would support both the daytime and night-time economy and bring with it its own eateries and it was all about creating as much footfall as possible in the town centre. The Chief Executive said that this was not really the forum to have this type of debate and this whole issue was something which perhaps needed to be discussed more widely within the Core Strategy Review. He concurred with comments about a cinema bringing footfall in the day and evening and said that in his view a cinema and an expanded outlet centre (moving closer to the town centre) would draw more people in to Ashford and that could only be positive. He agreed the town centre should be a priority as should supporting small business, but as a Borough Council it was not possible to change Government policy on business rates or write blank cheques to businesses to enable them to stay in Ashford High Street. It was also a fact that people's shopping habits had changed immeasurably. So much shopping was done on-line with shops themselves almost becoming showrooms for products people would try and then buy cheaper on the internet. In terms of positive action that had been taken, the Council had recently appointed Jo Wynn-Carter as Town Team Manager and were due to launch the Town Centre Action Team later that week. Pop-Up Britain had also launched Ashford pop-up in an empty shop in the Park Mall shopping centre in an initiative aimed at creating future high street entrepreneurs. The Committee also discussed the realities of attracting a major supermarket/retailer in to the town centre.

Post Meeting Note: Members are reminded that information regarding the Town Centre and recent developments/initiatives is routinely circulated by way of Leader's Briefing Notes, Press Releases and the Weekly Members' Update E-mails.

Resolved:

- That (i) the update report be received and noted.**
- (ii) the Cabinet be asked to task Officers to look at options around providing support to young homeless people in the Borough. Perhaps including provision of a hostel in co-operation with other operators (e.g. Housing Associations, KCC).**
- (iii) the Cabinet be asked to ensure that a revised 'SIMALTO' consultation be completed within 12 months to look at long term budget aspirations for the next Council.**

115 Future Reviews and Report Tracker

A Member referred to the 'Recycling and Blue Box Scheme' item on the tracker which it had been agreed was to be considered when the procurement process had been completed and the new contract was in operation. Given that the contract had commenced in July 2013 he considered that the item should come back to the Committee after a year of operation in July 2014. This was agreed by the Committee.

Resolved:

That subject to the addition above, the Future Reviews and Report Tracker be noted.

Queries concerning these Minutes? Please contact Danny Sheppard:
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