

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 **26th November 2013**.

Present:

Cllr. Chilton (Vice-Chairman in the Chair);

Cllrs. Apps, Bennett, Burgess, Davison, Feacey, Hodgkinson, Mrs Hutchinson, Link, Marriott, Mrs Martin, Mortimer, Smith.

In accordance with Procedural Rule 1.2 (iii) Councillor Marriott attended as Substitute Member for Councillor Bartlett.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Adby, Bartlett, Miss Martin, Yeo.

Also Present:

Policy and Performance Officer, Housing ICT Development Manager, Nature Conservation and Tourism Officer, Sports Projects Manager & Active Ashford Co-ordinator, Senior Scrutiny Officer, Member Services & Scrutiny Support Officer.

211 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Davison	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as he was a member of various rowing and sailing organisations.	215
Feacey	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as he was Chairman of the Ashford Volunteers Bureau and a member of Maidstone Canoe Club.	215
Mrs Martin	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as she was a Member of Conningbrook Working Group.	215
Mortimer	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as he was a Member of Conningbrook Working Group and one of the Ward Members for the area.	215

212 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 20th August 2013 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

213 Ashford Borough Council's Performance – Quarters 1 and 2, 2013/14

The Policy and Performance Officer introduced the two reports, which sought to give members of the public and Councillors information on the Council's progress against key performance indicators. These indicators were built around Focus 2013 - 2015, which had been agreed by the Cabinet in the previous month. He advised that performance remained strong across the Council, with a rapid fall in applications for Job Seekers Allowance. However there had been a notable increase in homelessness, although this was being addressed proactively through various new initiatives.

A Member commented that the Ashford Strategic Development Board (ASDB) was mentioned in the report. With regard to Ashford's shared space, the Member considered there had been a lack of accountability at top management level, and he suggested that ASDB appoint one person to take responsibility for identifying problems at an early stage to prevent escalation. The Policy and Performance Officer explained that the ASDB had not yet met, but he would ensure that the Member's comments were passed to the Board in due course.

In response to a question about the monitoring of the Council's telephone system, the Policy and Performance Officer confirmed that all indicators relating to telephone calls continued to be monitored. This included indicators such as length of time of call, abandonment rate and number of calls answered within a specific time period. The abandonment rate had reduced to between 10-15%, which was the lowest rate for some years. Target waiting times for customers to be assisted on a face to face basis were also impressive due to an increase in staffing levels over the summer.

One Member praised the report, but pointed out that it was not presented in the corporate style i.e. Arial size 12 font, which was noted by the Policy and Performance Officer.

There was some discussion about the proposal to establish a small working group of Members, chaired by Councillor Shorter, to consider codes of practice for corporate projects and to identify one person to be ultimately responsible for each project.

The increased homelessness figures were noted by Members, and the Policy and Performance Officer agreed to relay Members' concerns to the Housing team and to discuss whether to include further housing information in the quarterly reports. The Policy and Performance Officer explained that these increased figures had arisen because the number of families as well as individuals seeking emergency

accommodation was increasing. Addressing this problem was one of the key components of the Homelessness Strategy, agreed in July 2013.

Members generally liked the format of the reports, although there was a request to see Job Seekers Allowance presented as a percentage of the local working population of the Borough. The Policy and Performance Officer confirmed that the number of residents applying for Job Seekers Allowance had fallen by approximately 20% between September 2012 and September 2013.

In response to a question about the apparent dramatic decrease in Benefits caseload, the Policy and Performance Officer advised that this was a typographical error, and the figure should read 10,350, which represented only a small decrease. He undertook to provide the Committee and all other Members with more information on the number of residents returning to employment or transferring to Job Seekers Allowance from other benefits.

Resolved:

That the reports be received and noted.

214 Procurement of Energy Saving Proposal for Civic Centre: LED Lighting & Sub-Metering

The Housing ICT Development Manager introduced his report and explained that his proposals had been to full Council at an earlier date but had been referred to Overview and Scrutiny. The purpose of the report was to advise Members on the procurement process undertaken, and to establish that this was a value-for-money proposal. When asked if the changes to the lighting included controls to dim or automatically turn off the new lighting, he explained that the lights would not be dimmable and that controls to turn lights off automatically would only be installed where it was appropriate. This was to be addressed for suitable areas of the building, such as the Council Chamber, but lights in the open plan office areas would continue to need to be switched off. The current system relied on staff to be alert to turning off lights and computers. The Housing ICT Development Manager advised that new computer devices had been installed which used less energy, and that the sub-metering system calculated energy usage in daytime and at night so it would be possible to see areas of greatest usage.

There was discussion about the tenants in the building and their energy usage. The Housing ICT Development Manager advised that tenants paid a rental charge and an extra service charge and consumption was included in the latter charge. Although sub-metering would identify tenants' usage in future, their lease conditions would remain unchanged until the end of the lease period. He further explained that it had been difficult to make direct comparisons between different sub-metering systems in terms of value-for-money because it was not a case of comparing 'apples with apples' and he had evaluated the solutions based on meeting the Council's stated requirements. He advised that he planned to monitor usage whilst also encouraging staff to move towards reduced consumption. He wanted to move to a position where it was possible to charge services for energy consumption rather than the current system of using head count. He expected the sub-metering system to

enable at least 5% savings, and this figure would be increased if staff were to respond to the drive to lower energy usage. He considered that services would only feel pressure when there was a change of budget apportionment to reflect usage. He advised that the original indicative costs and payback period quoted to Cabinet had now reduced following procurement work. Members noted that the Portfolio Holder was not present at the meeting and it was considered that Portfolio Holders should be expected to attend where an item under their responsibility was being discussed.

Resolved:

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were content with the procurement process for the lighting replacement and sub-metering projects.

215 Update on Conningbrook Lakes Country Park

This report was introduced by the Nature Conservation and Tourism Officer. He explained that the report had various elements:

- To inform Members on future proposals for Conningbrook Country Park;
- To provide an update on progress of concluding management agreements with the three proposed operating partners;
- To provide a brief update on work undertaken by Ashford Leisure Trust (ALT) and the Council to develop operating policies and procedures with regard to water sports and other proposed events.

Members generally considered that this was a very exciting opportunity, but expressed concern about management and safety issues. The Nature Conservation and Tourism Officer explained that this was a complex proposal because it was not just envisaged as a water sports centre, but also as a fishery and local wildlife conservation area. It was proposed that no single group would be solely responsible, but that a structure would be put in place for the three operating partners and the Council to work together to develop the appropriate operational procedures. The partners had already held discussions to identify potential issues and had consulted the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) to anticipate issues and develop policies. The Nature Conservation and Tourism Officer emphasised that this park would evolve and grow over time. He felt it was important not to be overambitious at the beginning, and early access arrangements would be limited, and would be unlikely to include schools.

The Sports Projects Manager & Active Ashford Co-ordinator explained that he had consulted with local organisations who were involved in water sports to get an understanding of what was needed at this facility. He considered that many local voluntary clubs were highly knowledgeable, and they had offered comments regarding how the facility could operate. He was hoping to arrange for these clubs to run taster sessions with ALT in Spring 2014. They had been unable to arrange these sessions during 2013 due to a busy stadium schedule. It was intended to

discuss these taster sessions with the Conningbrook Members Working Group, and information would be cascaded down to all Members in due course.

Members continued to express concern over the precise management and safety arrangements, and recommended that the Officers report back to the Committee in Spring/Summer 2014 with more concrete details of management and safety policies and procedures. The Nature Conservation and Tourism Officer explained that the Council would be appointing a Country Park Manager in due course with overall responsibility for the site. It was understood that the main risk would relate to activity on the lake. ALT would be managing access to the lake, but activities on the water would be organised and managed by the responsible clubs who had skill and experience in operating these types of events. Each partner had undertaken risk assessments and put in place procedures in relation to their area of responsibility. ROSPA had been consulted over the project plan and did not highlight any major risks associated with the operation of the lake facility. They were content with the proposed safety enhancements. Zurich Insurance had also been on site and had undertaken a risk assessment and provided advice, as had the Council's Health and Safety Officer. In addition, the Council's Tree Officer had inspected the site to identify any potential risks from trees surrounding the lake. All assessments had reached the same conclusion that the main risks arose from the water and the railway line, and these risks would be managed through policies and procedures, and the site would not open until these were in place. The Park Manager's role would not be a 24 hour one, although there would also be a Kent Wildlife Trust warden on duty, and there would be mechanisms in place to report incidents to the Monitoring Centre. The Nature Conservation and Tourism Officer pointed out that there was only so much work that could be done before the partnership agreement came into play formally.

One Member mentioned Singleton Lake and pointed out how the area had fallen into disrepair due to a lack of cohesive management. She warned against allowing a similar fate to befall the Conningbrook venture. The Nature Conservation and Tourism Officer assured the meeting that any future management structure would be robust with the facility being managed as a Country Park, with appropriate rules and regulations.

It was noted that the Willesborough Road was extremely busy at the entrance and exit to Conningbrook and it was considered that reassurance was needed regarding this issue. The Sports Projects Manager & Active Ashford Co-ordinator explained that the report to Overview and Scrutiny had been limited to avoid submitting a huge document, but that various details would be made available to Members in due course.

Resolved:

that

- (i) the report be received and noted;**
- (ii) a further update report, especially on safety issues, be provided in Spring/Summer 2014.**

216 Future Reviews and Report Tracker

The Vice Chairman in the Chair advised that a Joint Transportation Board meeting would take place on 10th December 2013 at 7pm. This meeting would be considering the Amey Shared Space report and Kent County Council officers and representatives from Amey would be at the meeting. The Vice Chairman in the Chair encouraged all Members to attend as there would be an opportunity to ask questions.

The Vice Chairman in the Chair advised that, due to the number of budget scrutiny meetings taking place in December, there would be no December meeting scheduled for the main O&S Committee, but the date would be retained in case of call-in.

Tracker

Members agreed the following actions:

- Report on the Council Play Parks – to be added to the Tracker.
- Update on Focus 2013 – 15 (the updated Corporate Plan) – to be added to the Tracker.
- Traffic Flows and Transport Infrastructure associated with developments in East and South Ashford – to wait until after the presentation from the Highways Agency to see if there were still concerns.
- Street Markets – to be removed from Tracker.
- Effectiveness of single O&S Committee – it was agreed that the Committee would discuss this item again in one year's time. In the meantime, the Senior Scrutiny Officer would provide Members with a brief paper on the role and responsibilities of the O&S Committee.
- Cultural Strategy – to be removed from the Tracker.

The Vice Chairman in the Chair urged Committee Members to suggest appropriate items for future agendas, and to contact the Senior Scrutiny Officer if there was an item they wished to have discussed at a future meeting.

Resolved:

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

Queries concerning these Minutes? Please contact Rosie Reid:
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