

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 **16th December 2014**.

Present:

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

Cllrs. Buchanan, Burgess, Hodgkinson, Mortimer, Sims.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Aaby, Apps, Bartlett, Mrs Hutchinson, Yeo.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Galpin, Shorter.

Policy and Performance Manager, Policy and Performance Officer, Economic Development Manager, Town Team Manager, Senior Scrutiny Officer, Member Services & Scrutiny Support Officer.

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Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 25th November 2014 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

299 Update on Corporate Plan and Public Consultation

A presentation on this item was given by the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Budget and Resource Management, together with the Policy and Performance Manager and the Policy and Performance Officer. Following the presentation, the Chairman opened up the discussion and the following points were raised:

- A Member asked whether Quality Homes and Design Codes and Panels clashed with Government advice. The Portfolio Holder responded that the existence of the Council's Local Plan prevented developers from having free rein and helped to keep planning control in-house as far as possible. The Planning Committee were able to refer to the Local Plan when considering planning applications, and the Council's record on planning appeals was very sound. The Policy and Performance Manager added that the Design Code was developed principally for large developments, such as Chilmington Green, rather than individual houses. CLG had recently advised that all authorities should develop a local plan within the next few years, or face remedial action to encourage the development of robust local plans and design standards.

- In response to a question regarding translation services, the Policy and Performance Officer said he believed that Nepali translation was available on the Council's website, but he would check and confirm that fact. (*Post-meeting note: The Policy and Performance Officer confirmed that Nepali is included in the list of 85 languages which the website can produce in translation*).
- A Member asked whether International House was meeting financial targets. In response, the Portfolio Holder advised that the investment was where it should be at the moment, with floor 1 now clear for redevelopment and marketing. Another Member questioned whether the Council were receiving good returns from their investment in International House, and whether reserves were being replenished. The Portfolio Holder responded that income was being paid into revenue at the moment, although the principal and interest were being repaid.
- In response to a question about whether residents who undertook the public consultation understood the difference between KCC and ABC, the Policy and Performance Officer advised that the survey questions were deliberately split to indicate which services ABC was responsible for, and able to influence directly, and those where the Council had an interest but no direct responsibility. The Portfolio Holder added that he had recently been interviewed by Radio Kent regarding Council Tax and had stressed that ABC only received 10% of the Tax collected, with the rest being distributed amongst the other precepting authorities. A Member asked how the areas to be covered by the survey were determined. The Policy and Performance Officer responded that the representative sample was drawn from the census and distributed geographically across the Borough, using telephone codes.
- One Member questioned the inclusion of Askes Court as an example of disabled adaptation to sheltered accommodation. The Policy and Performance Officer explained that it had been drawn from the list of sheltered housing schemes, but it should have been made clear that this was not a new scheme, but an old scheme now also providing disabled accommodation.
- The Portfolio Holder advised that MIPIM were based in London, so were 'UK-centric', which provided an opportunity for ABC to sell to the UK market. He considered that this had been an excellent investment, which he hoped to repeat next year. A Member noted that there were foreign investors present who were looking for potential investments in the UK.
- A Member said he was concerned that there was a perception among communities that Neighbourhood Plans were only valid if the final document was approved by the Council and in line with the Council's Local Plan. He considered there was a need for the Council to persuade local communities of the validity of Neighbourhood Plans, and to encourage them to continue to draw them up. Members agreed to make a recommendation to Cabinet that a presentation should be given at the Parish Forum encouraging the continued

development of community plans. Another Member said that when the Local Plan was reviewed, any existing Neighbourhood Plans had to be taken into consideration, so they were important in acting as building blocks and influencing the Local Plan.

- A Member commented that there were no inspirational buildings of architectural merit in Ashford. He questioned whether the Design Panel could actively introduce some outstanding architecture into the Borough. The Portfolio Holder responded that this comment was worthy of note.
- In response to a question regarding Community Governance Reviews, the Policy and Performance Manager confirmed that the Council had to undertake such a review if petitioned. One single 10% petition could trigger a review across the whole Borough. It was a sensible use of resources to undertake a Borough-wide review, rather than separate reviews for each community area, but it would require substantial Council resources. The Local Government Boundary Commission were about to undertake a review of ward boundaries and indicated they would prefer no other reviews to be held at the same time, so there would inevitably be a delay until the Boundary Commission review was complete. The Portfolio Holder advised that the next step would be to bring urban Members together in January to update them on the position, before discussing further with the affected urban forums. The Chief Executive had received a letter from the Boundary Commission confirming their intended review, and the Policy and Performance Manager agreed to check whether this could be made available to all Members.

Recommended:

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends to Cabinet that the Parish Forum receive an update and presentation on the development of Neighbourhood Plans.

300 Update on Portas Pilot Project

The Economic Development Manager introduced his report. In the subsequent discussion the following points were raised:

- The Portfolio Holder for Town Centre Focus and Commercial Property said there were two aspects he wished to emphasise: firstly, that for the Economic Development Team the Portas Pilot Project was only one element of their work load, but a huge amount of time and effort had been devoted to the Project. The Portfolio Holder said that it was a challenge encouraging businesses in the town centre to embrace the Project and at times the response was disheartening. Secondly, clarification of the future characterisation of the town was needed i.e. what action was needed in the future to move forward, bearing in mind the constantly changing requirements in shopping and leisure. This would require a collaborative exercise with Local Plan data gathering. A framework Project Plan was expected in Spring 2015 to deliver the future characterisation of the town. The Portfolio Holder said that in spite of magnificent efforts by the team, only a minority of the town

businesses were engaging in the Project and that this was a challenge Officers would continue to work on.

- In response to a question, the Economic Development Manager confirmed that the biggest barrier that businesses were reporting in taking up vacant shops was the cost of the rent and business rates, and he said that it would take time for a structure of change to take place as landlords reassessed the rental values of their premises.
- The Portfolio Holder noted that more visitors were required to make the town centre vibrant. Retailers needed to provide products or experiences which would attract visitors and reinvigorate shops and businesses.
- One Member commented that he believed the town centre had suffered from an aggressive parking regime. The Economic Development Manager responded that there had been requests for a facility to pay on exit at town centre car parks, and a mobile app had been created to provide a cost effective way of handling parking payments. This had increased usage already, and the team were now considering ways to make the less-used car parks more attractive. The Town Team Manager said that the free parking after 3pm was beginning to have an effect with evidence of increased town centre visitors in the late afternoon. One Member asked the Economic Development Manager to ensure that the mobile parking app alerted visitors to times when car parks would be free, to ensure that they did not pay unnecessarily.
- The Town Team Manager acknowledged that Ashford was a 'tale of two high streets'. Free parking and the PopUp shop had increased footfall in Park Mall, but she was aware that work still needed to be done to galvanise that area of the town. She said that ABC's responsibility was to facilitate an upturn in the town centre, but not to run businesses. The Council had taken a shop short-term in Park Mall, and were working with the local college to put on art and music events which would encourage more visitors to the Mall. The Economic Development Manager advised that County Square owners had invested in several of the shops in the Square over the last year in order to attract new businesses.
- There was some discussion about the problem of the appearance of various areas of the town centre, such as the bottom of the lower High Street. The Economic Development Manager said he had been working hard to influence the use of these buildings, but had been unsuccessful so far. He said that the development of Elwick Road was critical to ensuring quality change in the town centre and that it was essential that this project was prioritised, as this would be a critical driver of footfall.
- Members expressed their appreciation and admiration for the work that had been achieved so far by the whole team.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

301 Future Reviews and Report Tracker

It was agreed that the April meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be cancelled due to election commitments.

There was discussion about items to be added to the Tracker as follows:

- The Role of Dog Wardens – this request was not agreed;
- Disabled adaptations – this request was agreed;
- Lorry parking – it was agreed to defer this item until the results of the work currently being undertaken by the Joint Transportation Board and Transport, Highways and Engineering Advisory Committee was completed.
- Review of Task Groups – it was agreed to recommend that Cabinet examine the uses and efficiency of the various task groups and review their effectiveness.

Recommended:

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends to Cabinet that there should be an examination of the uses and efficiency of task groups and a review of their effectiveness.

Queries concerning these Minutes? Please contact Rosie Reid:
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