

## Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in Committee Room No. 2 (Bad Münstereifel Room), Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the 21<sup>st</sup> July 2015.

### Present:

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

Cllrs. Burgess, Farrell, Feacey, Knowles, Krause, Link, Sims, Wedgbury.

### Apologies:

Cllrs. Adby, Howard.

### Also Present:

Cllr. Clokie.

Head of Community & Housing, Head of Health Parking & Community Safety, Housing Strategy Manager, Procurement Officer, Technical Administrative Assistant, Member Services and Scrutiny Manager, Senior Member Services & Scrutiny Support Officer.

## 84 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Chilton	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as he was a Trustee for the Ashford Volunteer Bureau.	86
Feacey	Made 'Voluntary Announcements' as he was Chairman of the Ashford Volunteer Bureau, a member of the Management Committee of UK LPG, the Council's representative on the Quality Bus Partnership and Chairman of the Repton Park Community Centre.	86, 87, 88

## 85 Minutes

### Resolved:

**That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2015 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.**

## **86 Annual Report of the Housing Framework 2013-2018**

The Housing Strategy Manager introduced the report which summarised the annual report of the Housing Framework 2013-2018. It highlighted work undertaken during 2014/15 to achieve the five priorities of the Framework and issues and opportunities presented over the last 12 months. The report also recommended a review of the five priorities further to the publication of the Council's Corporate Plan.

The report was then opened up to the Committee and the following responses were given to questions/comments: -

- In terms of the number of completions of affordable housing when balanced against those being sold under the Right to Buy, there had been a net gain of 55 properties between 2011-2015 (144 brought forward and 89 lost). They were expecting to complete 69 new affordable housing properties in 2015/16. This still fell somewhat short of the number the Strategic Housing Market Assessment had identified as being needed annually in the Borough.
- Downsizing as a result of the spare room subsidy had been occurring and at present there had been no increase in rental arrears. This had been encouraged by the Housing Service by way of assisted moves and swaps via mutual exchange. So there was a general movement in stock, however there did remain a shortage of available two bedroom houses and those available at affordable rent.
- Five grants of £40,000 were available for tenants in the Ashford Borough to help them purchase a home on the open market. At present there had not been any take-up of this here or in any of the neighbouring Districts where this was also available, but it was being promoted and this would continue. The deadline was March 2016.
- When Council properties had improvements undertaken this did not lead to an increase in rent for the tenant. Rents for Council properties were decided on an agreed framework.
- The items on the Action Plan that had been 'missed' or were 'to be progressed' did include actions in the summary update which could be used as a tracker going forward.
- Social Lettings and Private Sector Leasing currently had some staffing capacity to take on extra properties and did not put pressure on other areas on the Service.
- With regard to Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), licences for these could be applied for anywhere in the Borough. The Article 4 direction could be used by the Council to limit the number of HMOs in a geographical area under planning law.
- The temporary accommodation at Christchurch House had been a great success. It had been used constantly with 23 families there since its opening

in September 2014. It was estimated to have already saved the General Fund approximately £100,000 in Bed & Breakfast costs. Whilst it was important not to over-provide there was some demand for a similar facility for single people as they wanted to keep Christchurch House clear for families, but this demand would be kept under review.

- The five priorities in the plan, whilst in need of review, did in the main still appear to be relevant.
- There was a recognised problem with people on housing benefit not being able to easily access private rented accommodation. There were various measures to tackle this including the ABC lettings agency, Private Sector Leasing and more affordable and extra-care housing, but these could not resolve the entire problem.
- The Council worked with the Home Improvement Agency (HIA) to deliver Disabled Facilities Grants. In response to a question about the Volunteer Bureau's four Care Navigators who participated in this line of work, the Housing Strategy Manager said they were aware of them and she understood that they worked with the HIA so there was a link. Officers wanted to improve collaborative working in this area.
- The fuel poverty indicator was a difficult one to measure and there were no significant historical figures to refer to. The figure had remained static at 7.6% so the action plan could not say it had reduced, but this was still a good figure when compared to neighbouring Districts.
- A Member said that in terms of the trial to insulate homes this had to be approached carefully as there had been reports of such homes becoming too hot in the Summer months and causing a danger to residents in that way.

**Resolved:**

- That**
- (i) the Annual Report of the Housing Framework 2013-2018 be noted and published on the Ashford Borough Council website.**
  - (ii) a review of the five priorities of the Housing Framework is recommended to take place following the publication of the Council's Corporate Plan.**

## **87 Quality Bus Partnership**

In response to a previous request by the Committee, the report updated Members on the work of the Quality Bus Partnership (QBP) and advised of the links to other transport related Committees, Task Groups and future development plans. The need for a more detailed review of the QBP was also addressed.

With regard to the potential for a wider review of the QBP, the Head of Health Parking & Community Safety said she would advise against this at the present time given that: - the agreement was somewhat out of date and in need of review; changes were being implemented to the operation of the Joint Transportation Board;

there was a new Public Transport Liaison Task Group; and there had been changes within the Council with the Health, Parking and Community Safety service only recently taking over responsibility for the day to day work associated with highways and transport. Members' concerns relevant to bus transport could however be brought to the attention of the QBP.

Councillor Feacey advised that he was the Council's representative on the QBP, however all Members had the opportunity to attend the meetings and raise issues. The Ashford QBP had been recognised nationally at the UK Bus Awards and both he and the Cabinet Member were of the opinion that the Partnership had worked well and contributed to a massive improvement in local bus services in recent years.

The report was then opened up to the Committee and the following responses were given to questions/comments: -

- Stagecoach provided the vast majority of bus services in the Borough, but other providers were not precluded. Any Operator was able to bid for contracts but companies did need sufficient finance and an operating centre to keep their vehicles which made it difficult for some to compete. For subsidised services KCC ran a competitive tender exercise for each contract every four years and Kent Coach Tours operated some services under contract to KCC. Whilst in an ideal world some more competition may be healthy, Stagecoach was held to account and matters like pricing did compare well to other Districts.
- The issue of rural bus services was one that was recognised as something the Council wanted to tackle and it would be addressed through the new Public Transport Liaison Task Group.
- Stagecoach was currently in the process of forming a bus user group in the Ashford Borough where members of the public would be able to raise suggestions/concerns directly with the operator.
- The targets in the agreement for percentage of drivers with NVQ Level 2 in Road Passenger Transport were now out of date and would be considered as part of the wider review of the agreement.
- Significant Section 106 funding was made available to subsidise new bus routes, but once the subsidies ran out the routes had to be viable on their own and this was why many were reduced or withdrawn. The majority of routes within the Ashford Borough did run on a commercial basis but KCC could intervene if a service which was not commercially viable was withdrawn by the operator and KCC felt that the service was socially necessary for a community. The Technical Administrative Assistant said he would circulate a full list of current bus services in Ashford to the Committee so Members could appreciate the whole picture.
- Officers wanted to undertake a piece of work to plot a map of all of the bus routes in the Borough (particularly in and out of Parishes/villages) and find areas where there was currently poor provision. By being creative there may be wider opportunities to deliver transport by utilising things such as

community groups with vehicles, involving the taxi trade and other potential developments. There was a lot of work to do but the first step was to identify service gaps and better understand need, and Members and Parish Councils could help in that process.

- The Chairman said he would also like there to be some focus on the expectations of customers who used buses. There was quite a bit of anti-social behaviour taking place including drinking alcohol and rubbish being left and he wondered if the QBP could do anything to tackle this.
- The latest Bus Passenger Satisfaction survey carried out by Transport Focus had been published in March 2015. This was an annual survey carried out to compare and benchmark what passengers thought about their bus service. Officers agreed to circulate the results related to Ashford to Members.

Members considered that certain key routes had become elongated in recent years, with particular journeys in and out of Ashford now taking two or three times longer than they needed to. A Member said that in his view bus companies appeared to chase subsidies rather than providing the best possible routes for residents. Another Member made a specific comment about the Stagecoach No.2 Service in the mornings from Tenterden to Ashford which seemed to have joined a number of routes together and was now taking a lot longer to reach Ashford. This had resulted in a number of complaints and children being late for school. The Technical Administrative Assistant said he understood that changes were linked to East Sussex County Council withdrawing subsidy for the part of the service south of Tenterden. The Committee considered this was exactly the sort of issue that should be raised at a future QBP meeting and encouraged the Member to do so, not only for specific issues but to gain a fuller appreciation of the work undertaken by the QBP.

**Resolved:**

- That**
- (i) the update report on the Quality Bus Partnership be received and noted.**
  - (ii) the comments made by Members in the course of the discussion be noted.**
  - (iii) a further update report be received in a year's time.**

## **88 Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012**

The Procurement Officer introduced the report that had been requested to update Members on how the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 was being implemented by the Council since being brought fully into force in January 2013. She explained that the Act placed a requirement on commissioners to consider the economic, environmental and social benefits of their approaches to procurement before the process started. Although the Act only applied to the pre-procurement stage of certain public services contracts (because this was where the social value could be considered to greatest effect), as a matter of good practice the Council's commissioners were also encouraged to consider Social Value for all procurement activity, including works contracts.

A Member said he was pleased that the Council was taking positive and proactive steps on this as there were many possible benefits. He considered the Committee should receive another report on this in a year's time to reflect on developments.

In response to a question about whether it was possible to favour local companies in procurement, the Procurement Officer said Officers were encouraged to consider what benefits could be realised from the procurement but European Union rules had to be obeyed. A Member said it was about setting specific matrices and 'weighting' questions to judge the most advantageous tender. If a company was using the local workforce or local supply chains, you could decide to mark those answers specifically highly. There were safeguards though in that decisions were open to legal challenge, there was no longer a preferred supplier list and any contract over £15,000 in value had to be advertised on the South East Business Portal.

The Committee considered it would be useful for the Council to put something in writing on the issue of Social Value, specifically with regard to the Council's own corporate priorities. Councillor Knowles said he would be happy to work with the Portfolio Holder and the Officers on this. The Chairman said that the Committee would like to receive a further update in a year's time and if they could be of any further assistance in the meantime they would be pleased to help.

**Resolved:**

- That (i) Councillor Knowles work with the Portfolio Holder and Officers to develop corporate Social Value priorities to reflect the Council's organisational priorities and needs**
- (ii) a further update report be received in a year's time.**

## **89 Budget Scrutiny Task Group**

The report asked the Committee to agree the set up and membership of a Budget Scrutiny Task Group which would scrutinise the Council's draft 2016/17 budget and report its findings and recommendations back to the full Overview & Scrutiny Committee. The Committee would then report to Cabinet on the soundness of the budget.

Five Members then volunteered to be Members of the Task Group and the Member Services & Scrutiny Manager advised that the main bulk of the meetings would take place during the day in December and January. A meeting would also be arranged for September/October as a 'pre-scrutiny briefing session'.

**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 Burgess, Chilton, Krause, Link and Michael.**

- (iii) a briefing session should be arranged prior to the commencement of the scrutiny process.

## **90 Future Reviews and Report Tracker**

The Chairman proposed that in view of the cancellation of the Cabinet in August and the holiday period, the next meeting of the Committee scheduled for 25<sup>th</sup> August should also be cancelled. This was agreed.

It was also agreed that as September was currently scheduled to be a busy meeting, the item on Disabled Adaptations should be moved back to the quieter October meeting.

The Committee also agreed to move future meetings back to the Council Chamber as it had been difficult to hear everyone speaking in the Committee Room.

### **Resolved:**

- i) That the Committee meeting scheduled for 25<sup>th</sup> August 2015 be cancelled.**
- ii) That the item on Disabled Adaptations be moved from the September to October meeting.**
- iii) That future meetings return to the Council Chamber.**

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Queries concerning these Minutes? Please contact Danny Sheppard:  
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