

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 **22nd September 2015**.

Present:

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

Cllrs. Britcher, Burgess, Feacey, Knowles, Krause, Link, Sims, Mrs Webb, Wedgbury.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 1.2 (iii) Councillors Britcher and Mrs Webb attended as Substitute Members for Councillors Farrell and Adby respectively.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Adby, Chilton, Farrell

Also Present:

Cllr. Shorter

Resilience Partnership Manager, Resilience Officer, Strategic Housing and Property Manager, Policy and Performance Officer, Member Services and Scrutiny Manager.

136 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Wedgbury	Made a "Voluntary Announcement" as he had been in the past involved in reviewing responses to emergency planning activities.	138

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Councillor Feacey referred to Minute No. 87 – Quality Bus Partnership and advised that the Public Transport Liaison Task Group had now been established and this would be the most appropriate medium for Members to discuss matters associated with bus or rail travel. The next meeting of that Group would be held on Friday 9th October 2015 at 9.30 am. All Members would be formally advised of the arrangements for this meeting in due course.

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the meeting of this Committee held on the 21st July 2015 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

138 Emergency Planning Response to Oak Tree Road Gas Explosion

Further to the request made at the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in June 2015, the report gave a brief overview of the Ashford Borough Council Emergency Planning arrangements and a specific response to the Oak Tree Road gas explosion and fire which occurred in June 2015.

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

- It was normal practice for all notifications of potential emergencies to be channelled via the Monitoring Centre. In terms of funding for Ashford Borough Council costs, there was not a specific budget and costs had to be met from within current services' budgets. In certain cases expenditure on emergencies over a certain threshold could under the Bellwin arrangements enable Local Authorities to recover elements of their costs.
- The Health and Safety Executive had become involved as an employee of Southern Gas Network had been working in the area at the time of the incident and the Health and Safety Executive was responsible for investigating accidents at work.
- The report was a direct response to the Committee in terms of the ABC response to the Oak Tree Road incident. A review of how the incident had been handled in practice would be subject to a debrief report which would be considered by Management Team in early October. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be welcome to see the report and its recommendations following consideration by Management Team.
- In terms of emergency planning generally, the Borough Council did not work in isolation as it was part of the Kent Resilience Forum which was a multi-agency forum that worked together to plan and learn from best practice.
- The delay in undertaking the debrief was largely attributable to the work that the section had to undertake in terms of follow up actions to the response, Operation Stack in July and delays due to the unavailability of staff during the August holiday period.
- One of the Ward Members for the area affected said that there was a high level of contentment from the residents in terms of how the Council had handled the emergency.
- The Fire Service had overall control over the incident with the ABC response team being headed up by the Chief Executive. In the short term the residents displaced by the incident were housed initially by their relatives.
- The Officers present were not aware whether the final cause of the explosion had been determined as that matter was being handled by the Housing

Service. The ABC Insurance Officer had all the information in terms of potential claims the Council may be able to make arising from the incident.

The Vice-Chairman thanked the Resilience Partnership Manager and Resilience Officer for attending the meeting and said that he believed the incident had been handled very well.

Resolved:

- That (i) the report be received and noted.**
- (ii) the outcome of the debrief and any recommendations be brought back to the Committee in due course.**

139 International House - Report on Full Year's Trading

The report advised the Committee of the financial outturn from International House following the first full year's trading to 31st March 2015.

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

- International House had been purchased in April 2014 at a cost of £7.37 million and the income generated up to 31st March 2015 represented a 10.87% return on investment. The outturn figures did not reflect the refurbishment costs of the first floor as this expenditure had been capitalised.
- In terms of how much it was hoped to save on service costs, the issue of facilities management was being examined in terms of both International House and the Park Mall shopping centre which had been purchased in the Summer. It was considered that facilities management could be undertaken in-house which would achieve a saving over the current costs incurred for both properties.
- The Portfolio Holder believed that the purchase of Park Mall had given the Council the opportunity to streamline the management of these properties and a report would be considered by the Cabinet in November 2015. He further advised that although the initial purchase of International House was not related to the core business of the Council, its acquisition and of other properties such as Park Mall would help achieve the aim for Ashford to become grant free from Central Government and by placing the properties in local ownership it would be of benefit to the local community.
- In response to a further question, the Strategic and Housing Property Manager advised that at the present time there was not a need to refurbish other floors within International House. Furthermore it was likely that in the near future tenants would be taking up the last available space within the building.

The Vice-Chairman thanked the Strategic Housing and Property Manager for attending the meeting.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

140 Ashford Borough Council's Performance – Quarter 4 2014/15 and Quarter 1 2015/16

The Committee considered the report which had been approved by the Cabinet on 10th September 2015.

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

- It was noted that there was a comment in the report that those claiming Universal Credit were no longer included in the figures for those claiming Job Seekers Allowance and the figure for those claiming Universal Credit was sought. There were currently 103 recipients of Universal Credit in the Borough but this only showed new single claimants. Further information on this particular issue had been set out in the Welfare Impact report which had been considered by the Cabinet at its meeting in September 2015. In terms of obtaining a better comparison in terms of the overall unemployment level, the difficulty of comparing both figures had been accepted by the Government and work was under way to identify an appropriate method for identifying the overall unemployment level.
- The Council Tax and Welfare Reform Task Group had been heavily involved in the overall management of the transition to the application of Universal Credit and the report presented to the Cabinet in September 2015 on the welfare impacts contained a significant amount of detailed information which Members were encouraged to read.
- The encouragement for residents to take up the option of direct debit payments for Council Tax was currently approached in two ways. The Communications Team were involved in the production of a leaflet which was sent to all residents with their Council Tax bill. Furthermore, the opportunity to complete a direct debit mandate was available via a live form on the Council's website. It was noted that the practice at one Authority when receiving phone calls from residents was that their details were examined to ascertain whether the residents were paying by direct debit or not and if not, they were encouraged to take up that arrangement. It was accepted that the encouragement of direct debit was the way forward, however, there were a significant number of residents in the Borough who did not have a bank account. Officers were working with the local Banks within the town to try and resolve this and also the option of credit unions to provide banking services was being explored. The Portfolio Holder agreed to ascertain whether callers

to the Council were encouraged to take up direct debit mandates if they did not pay their Council Tax in this way.

- In relation to the Channel Shift programme, the Portfolio Holder explained that a significant amount of work had been undertaken on this and although residents were encouraged to use electronic communication they could arrange for face to face appointments. There was insufficient data at the present time to be able to identify whether a reduction in the number of face to face contacts had led to a consequent increase in the use of self-service. A further 12 month period would enable such data to be examined.
- There were no plans to extend the Borough Council's operations to provide a 24/7 service although in practice by utilising web payment systems and applications this enabled residents to transact with the Council outside of the normal working day.
- In response to a comment that it would have been helpful to have information on the effect the new free parking initiative was having on the use of Council car parks, the Portfolio Holder said that this could be considered for inclusion in a future report. He also explained that there were many other areas of the Council's performance which could be reflected in the document.

The Vice-Chairman thanked the Policy and Performance Officer for attending the meeting.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

141 Future Reviews and Report Tracker

The Committee considered two items put forward for review which were Freedom of Information Decisions – Withholding Information from Requests Received and the Effectiveness of the Whistleblowing Policy. Following discussion the Committee decided that they did not wish to review these matters.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

(KRF/AEH)
MINS:OSCX 22.09.15

Queries concerning these Minutes? Please contact Keith Fearon:
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