

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 October 2015**.

Present:

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

Cllrs. Bartlett, Farrell, Hicks, Howard, Knowles, Krause, Link, Sims, Wedgbury.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 1.2(iii) Councillors Bartlett and Hicks attended as Substitute Members for Councillors Adby and Burgess respectively.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Adby, Burgess.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Clokie, Smith.

Chief Executive, Housing Improvement Manager, Member Services & Scrutiny Manager, Senior Member Services & Scrutiny Support Officer.

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The Chairman thanked the Vice-Chairman for stepping in for him as he had been unable to attend the previous meeting.

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 22nd September 2015 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

179 A More Strategic Approach to Scrutiny

The Chief Executive attended the meeting to give his thoughts on this Committee adopting a more strategic approach to scrutiny. The Chairman said that before the last Election he had met with the Chief Executive to discuss Scrutiny and whilst it was thought that the Committee had made some positive impact, it had largely lost its way and was not contributing in the way it perhaps could.

The Chief Executive said that in his view Overview & Scrutiny had become somewhat emasculated in recent years and there was an opportunity for it to become involved in a more strategic, constructive and ultimately more interesting programme of work that could add value to the Authority. There were a large number of organisations whose work had a big impact on the people of the Borough and this

Committee did have an opportunity to engage with them. Examples were given which included schools, healthcare providers, public transport companies, utility providers, the Environment Agency and other Local Authorities including KCC. There were also broader issues such as legislative changes around planning, business rates and troubled families, the housing market in general and the effect of Central Government cuts. There were perhaps more opportunities in the 'overview' category that could assist the Committee in being less insular, whilst still keeping a watching brief on the 'scrutiny' side and fulfilling that part of the Committee's remit where necessary. He advised that the Leader was very much supportive of the Committee moving in this direction and all three Political Groups appeared to want to make a 'better fist' of Overview & Scrutiny. There was capacity for Officers to do research for the Committee and he considered that the whole approach could provide some really worthwhile recommendations going forward to Cabinet.

The Committee was unanimously supportive of the proposals. It was considered that anything that could be done to expand the remit of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and allow it to tackle some more worthwhile work could only be a good thing. The following points and observations were made: -

- There was some discussion about how the Committee could engage with outside organisations that were under no obligation to engage with the Council. The Chief Executive considered it would be possible and it would all be about the approach. It was ultimately in the interests of most of the aforementioned organisations to engage with the Council, but perhaps the prospect of coming along to an evening meeting and being 'grilled' may not be attractive. They may be opportunities to get out and meet them at their own workplaces and report back, or doing some desktop work to research their plans and working more closely with them on initiatives.
- It would be important to respect the Council's role as a potential statutory consultee for certain planning schemes in neighbouring Districts and for this Committee not to do anything that may cut across that.
- There was a responsibility on Members themselves to be properly engaged with Council business as a whole and to get the most out of this Committee. There needed to be a better understanding of the call-in process and ultimately assisting, not frustrating, the Cabinet in its decision making.
- The KCC Select Committee approach may be one that was worth examining. They ran for a limited time concentrating on a particular subject with different Chairmen and Members for each Committee. A Member said that they worked particularly well and the opportunity to spread the leadership out a bit was a positive. The Chairman re-iterated that they did have the option to create Sub-Committees for particular issues and that had always been envisaged when they had moved to one Overview & Scrutiny Committee.
- Education and schools was seen as an important area for this Committee to get involved in, but the potential difficulties of engaging when the Council had no specific remit in this area were acknowledged.

- Members had the option to put forward items for the Committee but in the past decisions had been taken on whether to take them forward by the Chairman and Officers only. A Member thought that in the future all items should be discussed by the full Committee to assess their suitability.

The Chairman concluded the item by saying that there appeared to be a degree of agreement over the way forward. He said that as Chairman he considered it was his job to act on the wishes of the Committee and it appeared that everybody wanted to make this Committee more worthwhile. He proposed that following the next meeting in November, the Committee should hold a separate session to devise a new forward work programme based on some of the discussions that had taken place at this meeting. This was agreed by the Committee.

Resolved:

- That (i) the Committee agree to take a more strategic approach to Overview and Scrutiny.**
- (ii) following its November meeting the Committee hold a separate session to devise a new forward work programme based on some the discussion that had taken part at the meeting.**

180 Disabled Adaptations to Council Homes

The Housing Improvement Manager introduced the report which provided Members with an update on the impact of policy changes introduced in July 2014 for disabled adaption work to Council homes. It also gave information on the levels of spend on such work (including in relation to similar housing providers) and commented on levels of demand.

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

- Establishing a stricter policy on eligibility had reduced the demand for adaptation work. The revised policy basically excluded people who significantly under-occupied their current Council home from being eligible for all but minor adaptation works. However, Officers worked with tenants in such circumstances to encourage them to move to accommodation more suited to their needs, including offering financial support through the assisted moves scheme. There was also a degree of pragmatism and common sense involved as there were degrees of 'under occupancy'. The policy was there to guide Officers but they would take advice from Social Services and look at each individual case on its merits.
- Of the 25 refusals, none had resulted in an appeal which seemed to suggest the policy was working well and the criteria were generally accepted.
- Occupational Therapists (OTs) were made aware of community based facilities that may be able to assist some disabled tenants and would take

these into account when undertaking their assessments. The Council did work closely in liaison with both the OTs and Social Services in this area.

- Demand did appear to be more under control as the Council worked through the previous backlog and the one-off increase to the budget for 2016/17 would help to further tackle the waiting list and bring waiting times to within the maximum one year recommended. Officers were confident that the specific adaptations budget of £300,000 each year after that would be sufficient.
- The Portfolio Holder said that he was keen to ensure that in the coming years, any expensive adaptations to properties did have one eye on the future and that any particular improvement would continue to be able to be used for the same purpose.
- The direction of travel in terms of bathing facilities was very much towards Wet Rooms. These did suit a majority of more elderly and disabled tenants. This was also seen as an investment in the particular property and had been extremely well received.

Members said that would like to thank the team for the work they undertook in what was sometimes a difficult and emotive role. They had delivered some good outcomes for local people and dealt with the situation sensitively and sensibly.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

181 Review of Changes Made to the Mayoralty Following the Overview & Scrutiny Review in 2010

The report of the Member Services and Scrutiny Manager advised that following a review of the Mayoralty in 2010, some amendments had been made to its day to day functioning. These amendments were introduced at the start of the Municipal Year in May 2011. An update report on the effect of these changes was considered by this Committee in September 2012. At that Meeting the report was noted, subject to it being acknowledged that the Committee would not wish to see the Mayor restricted by the budget in their role as Ambassador to the Borough and that the effect of changes be further reviewed in three years' time. The report presented information for the 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15 Mayoral years.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

182 Future Reviews and Report Tracker

The Member Services & Scrutiny Manager advised that the November meeting would consider two fairly short reports on Emergency Planning and Business Plan Performance. The Chairman reminded the Committee that following that meeting a separate session would be held to devise a new forward work programme for this

Committee therefore the rest of the Future Reviews and Report Tracker should be deferred until the outcome of that session was known.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

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