

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 **24th November 2015**.

Present:

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

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

Apologies:

Cllrs. Adby, Howard

Also Present:

Cllrs. Britcher, Shorter

Member Services & Scrutiny Manager, Policy and Performance Officer, Resilience Partnership Manager, Resilience Officer, Member Services & Scrutiny Support Officer.

212 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Cllr Shorter	Made a "Voluntary Announcement" as Director of Kent Play Clubs (Kingsnorth) and made a "Voluntary Announcement" as Director of Ashford Borough Council Building Company	214

213 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 20th October 2015 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

214 ABC Business Plan Performance Report

The Committee considered the report which had been approved by the Cabinet on 12th November 2015. The Chairman and Vice-chairman had submitted questions in advance of the meeting and invited the Policy and Performance Officer to respond.

- The Policy and Performance Officer confirmed that free parking in the town centre had been introduced in August 2014 and the year to date footfall had increased by 1.7%. This compared to the UK average of a decrease of 1.6%. Car parking had increased by approx. 40 cars per day which was an increase of 2.15% year on year average. Upward spikes had been seen in January, February, May and July, with the highest levels of parking recorded since 2009. The conclusion was that the Free Parking Initiative had a small positive impact, with an increase in numbers of visitors to the Town Centre. Other initiatives including TCAT and the Farmers Market had also contributed.
- In terms of unemployment figures; JSA showed 800 whilst the KCC District Monitoring Report gave the figure as 951. The KCC figures were based on experimental statistics which estimated the claimant count. The claimant count included all out of work Universal Credit (UC) claimants, as well as all JSA claimants. However, the coverage of UC estimates did not precisely match the claimant count definition, because it included some claimants who were not required to seek work. The Office of National Statistics were aware that the figures were not exact and were working with The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to produce an agreed methodology for separating out unemployed and inactive UC claimants. This methodology should be available late summer/early autumn 2016. Until then, the Head of Finance had agreed that we use JSA figures until further national guidance was provided.
- The omission of the homeless data on the technical annex had been done in error. The figure was 56 for Quarter 2, with 42 of those accepted.
- The 15 households which Ashford placed in B&B accommodation at the end of the last quarter was just above the Kent average of 12.5, with the average for England being 15. Over the last two years, there had been an increase of 1% in Kent and 30% in England, whereas Ashford had seen a decrease of 50% over the same period.
- Positive feedback had been received from customers and staff following the change of Customer Service delivery to appointment only. The main comment being that reduced wait times had resulted in less stressful visits. The council's 'Beat the Queue' fast track system had also been very well received. A common complaint from customers was in respect of parking facilities, and therefore a move back to the Civic Centre enabled a limited number of free parking bays to be made available.
- The Benefits caseload had seen a general downward trend due to the improving economic picture and with the impact of welfare reform and Universal Credit. With regard to new cases, upward spikes were often seen after the beginning of the new calendar and financial year.
- Customers are encouraged to consider paying by Direct Debit when they were in conversations regarding Council Tax or other financial matters. This method of payment was beneficial to both residents and ABC. There was also ongoing communications work to promote the use of Direct Debit to

residents including annual Council Tax leaflets and via social media and the website.

- The Ashford District Deal was agreed by Full Council on 15th October 2015 and was intended to be the first in a series of deals KCC wished to agree with all Districts. Each deal would be tailored to the priorities of the area, and learning from each would be shared across Districts. Officers would report to the District Deal Delivery Board which would meet on the same day as the Ashford Strategic Delivery Board, to be held on 22nd January 2016.
- The figure for footfall in the town centre did not just necessarily apply to people, but also included cars. The council's performance was made accessible to the public via the transparency pages of the website and needed to be presented in plain English, although appropriate alternate terminology to the word people would be considered for future reports.

The Chairman and the Portfolio Holder both thanked the Policy and Performance Officer for his explanations.

The Portfolio Holder advised that as Chairman of the Council Tax and Welfare Reform Group, he could explain that DWP did not release overall unemployment figures to the Council.

He also explained that since the opening of Christchurch House approximately 18 months ago, it had been operating at full capacity, resulting in a saving of £100k+ and proving to be a fantastic facility for the borough. He emphasised that the hostel provision prevented children being made to vacate the building at 10am, and therefore wandering around the borough until being allowed back at 6pm. ABC were looking to expand upon these facilities, since they were cost effective and beneficial to families.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

215 Emergency Planning lessons learned in response to the Oak Tree Road gas explosion

The Committee considered the report enclosed within the agenda. The Resilience Partnership Manager answered members questions regarding the update, which had been submitted by the Chairman and Vice-Chairman in advance of the meeting. The responses to the questions are set out below.

- Recommendation 1 regarding roles and responsibilities, it was confirmed that it was important that all roles within the Emergency Centre were covered during a response as they each had their own responsibilities. There was a hierarchy in place that identified who took the lead in emergency situations.
- Recommendation 3; all external agencies involved in the Oak Tree Road

incident, including KCC, NHS, Kent Police and Kent Fire Service would be invited to the multi-agency debrief to receive first hand feedback.

- In terms of Recommendation 6 regarding training exercises, it was noted that training was not mandatory or enforced. There were a variety of training providers and sessions available including Emergency Planning College courses, Public Safety Courses, The College of Policing MAGIC (Multi Agency Gold Incident Command course).
- Recommendation 8; 24 hour cover was provided by arrangement with a coach company. In the long term, it was intended to include relevant suppliers that would be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Recommendation 11; there was currently no national policy on the use of drones. During the Oaktree Road incident the local media requested to fly one, however their request had been declined by ABC. Future developments on this issue relied on maintaining good relations between ABC and the media.
- There was an agreed procedure across agencies through the Kent Resilience Forum to use a single multi-agency message when applicable. The Communications Team liaised with the media to ensure that up to date information was available at all times.
- Recommendation 12; Training for members would be made available via a specific briefing session. This would help members to understand their role in communicating with their community during a response.
- Recommendation 14 discussed the move from response to recovery. The priority was to immediately deal with the safety of the public and secure the site, and was achieved at Oaktree Road on Monday evening and by early Tuesday morning the recovery process had commenced. If the incident had been on a larger scale i.e. more than one borough, then the police/fire service would have handed over from response to recovery to KCC.

The Chairman thanked The Resilience Partnership Manager for her responses to the member's questions.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

216 Future Reviews and Report Tracker

The Chairman invited members to put forward ideas for the future work programme, and suggested that the committee consider two large subjects to focus on. During discussion the following subjects were put forward for consideration.

- A member advised that he had visited Southern Water sewage works and reported that they advised that they had capacity to 2025/2030 and considered that waste disposal should be reviewed. Another member said that South East Water was unable to give any forecast for their supply. Members agreed this was an area that needed scrutinising.
- In terms of education, the issue of how Free schools sat within the education plans for the borough was also raised.

The Chairman also explained that the Chief Executive had suggested the Committee scrutinise the following: how local councils contribute to public health, HMO'S, HS1 and Eurostar services. The Chairman advised that these ideas could be considered at a later date. A member requested the subject of Transport, including rural bus services, be considered. Another member asked for an update on the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme. The Chairman agreed these were good suggestions to contemplate adding to the Future Reviews and Report Tracker in the New Year.

The Chairman noted that the Committee were in agreement that the first project to be added to the O&S Future Reviews and Report Tracker would be sewerage and water supply. He asked the Member Services and Scrutiny Manager's advice on how this could be taken forward. The Member Services and Scrutiny Manager said that he would consult with Officers and produce a report as a starting point to develop some terms of reference for the review.

The Chairman advised that the next O&S meeting scheduled for 15th December would be cancelled, and prior to the next meeting on 26th January he would meet with the Member Services and Scrutiny Manager to discuss and bring forward a work programme for the next 3 – 4 months. He then closed the meeting and wished all members a Happy Christmas.

Resolved:

That the Committee agree that a review of sewage disposal and future water supply be undertaken and added to the Forward Work Programme.

Queries concerning these Minutes? Please contact Clare Ricketts:
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