

## 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 November 2016**.

### **Present:**

Cllr. Michael (Vice-Chairman in the Chair)

Cllrs. Burgess, Heyes, Hicks, A. Howard, Krause, Link, Mrs. Martin.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 1.2 (iii) Councillor Heyes attended as Substitute Member for Councillor Feacey.

### **Apologies:**

Cllrs. Adby, Chilton, Feacey.

### **Also Present:**

Cllr. Smith.

Deputy Chief Executive, Policy & Performance Manager, Senior Policy, Performance & Scrutiny Officer, Corporate Scrutiny and Overview Officer, Member Services and Ombudsman Complaints Officer.

## 201 Minutes

### **Resolved:**

**That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 2016 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.**

## 202 Quarter 2 2016/17 Performance Report

The Senior Policy, Performance and Scrutiny Officer introduced this item. He said a number of questions had already been asked about the report, including on some of the methodology, which he would do his best to address.

Regarding the measurement of town centre footfall, data was provided via a device installed opposite WH Smith on the High Street. This device measured both pedestrians and cars. This data was audited each day by the company to ensure that the tracking software was operating as expected. However, the details provided in the report were just a snapshot of the total information available through the Dashboard, which provided a wider picture of the overall health and vitality of the High Street. In this instance, footfall figures should be viewed alongside various other factors, such as town centre vacancy rates and usage figures for town centre car parks.

The Senior Policy, Performance and Scrutiny Officer said the report provided unemployment figures for those of working age, as well as young people. The Dashboard provided further comparative data and greater detail, whilst the report only showed a glimpse of the data available on the site.

The Dashboard also provided a great deal of information on house prices and sales over the last few years, as well as rents, % of rent collected from Council housing tenants and mortgage repossessions. The site thus provided a broad understanding of the health of the housing market in the Borough.

The Chairman opened up this item for discussion, and the following questions/comments were made:

- A Member pointed out that the footfall measurement device on the High Street would only measure footfall in that one area, and he questioned how footfall throughout the rest of the town centre was measured. The Senior Policy, Performance and Scrutiny Officer explained that the site for the device on the High Street had been chosen after investigative work to find the best representative place. He said that separate footfall data was also gathered from Park Mall, although clearly these two areas did not capture every entry and exit into the town centre. The Lead Member for Town Centres Focus and Business Dynamics responded that this issue had been noted. Work was currently being undertaken to consider how best to develop a more reliable measuring tool for town centre activity.
- One Member commented on the state of the Lower High Street, which she felt was neglected. She considered the Council should spend more resources in that area.
- A Member said he considered that there was not sufficient provision of shared ownership housing throughout the Borough, and especially in the town centre. He was concerned that there was an absence of this type of property in recent planning applications and he considered the Council should be making an effort to encourage more shared ownership opportunities. It was agreed that the Senior Policy, Performance and Scrutiny Officer would provide information to a future meeting of this Committee to ensure that this concern was being addressed. Another Member pointed out that at Planning Committee, Officers often argued the case against shared ownership due to viability issues. Members noted that shared ownership provided benefits to the first owner, but thereafter there were no benefits to subsequent owners, unless the property was owned by a Housing Association. One Member said that the 'building to rent' approach was popular, but should not be considered ideal. However, he did acknowledge that such an approach indicated investor confidence in the town centre and that the Council should seek a balance between commercial interests and looking after residents.
- One Member questioned whether it would be viable to convert the top of shops in the town centre into residential flats for local people. She suggested this might improve the night-life of the town centre and inject more vitality into the area. Members felt this might work in the case of new

build, but may be too complex in the case of older buildings. The Council's space and quality standards may also make such a proposal out of the question.

- The Senior Policy, Performance and Scrutiny Officer said that the figure provided in the report for social rent income was incorrect, as an additional element of social rent had not been included. However, this had now been remedied on the Dashboard.
- Members asked for an update on the situation regarding the new community toilets. One Member said that signage for the community toilets was unsatisfactory and unclear and that the scheme should not have been rolled out until all signs were in place. The Policy and Performance Manager responded that stickers were displayed in participating shops, but conceded that they may not be sufficiently visible. She pointed out that at the moment the Vicarage Lane toilets were still open to the public, although there were persistent problems with vandalism. One Member noted that extra disabled spaces had been provided in the Vicarage Lane Car Park, close to the entrance, to enable better access to the Gateway or the Phoenix pub, both of whom had community toilets.

**Resolved:**

**That that the Senior Policy, Performance and Scrutiny Officer provide information to a future meeting of this Committee on the issue of provision of shared ownership housing in the Borough.**

## **203 Developing infrastructure to support Ashford's Growth – Scoping Report**

The Corporate Scrutiny and Overview Officer introduced this item. He tabled a paper in response to previous Overview and Scrutiny Committee discussions and concerns about potential gaps between the emerging Local Plan and the provision of key infrastructure. He said that the Planning Policy team were liaising closely with infrastructure providers concerning the emerging Local Plan to 2030, and the preparation of an infrastructure delivery schedule; however, this was a complex process as not all stakeholder forward plans matched the lifespan of the Local Plan.

The Chairman opened up the item for discussion and the following questions/comments were made:

- One Member noted that faster broadband provision was now a condition on some new developments. The Council was trying to drive forward fibre technology across the whole Borough, and he considered this was a reflection on the current Administration's desire to facilitate business and accessibility.
- Members questioned the priority level attached to various projects within the Infrastructure Development Schedule. In particular, they considered that the upgrade of the Ashford to Hastings Line, the Ashford Spurs, and the Pound Lane Link Road projects should be given high priority.

- A Member noted that the Council had only delivered half of the housing target anticipated, but there were still problems meeting the infrastructure requirements. He wondered how much further behind the infrastructure would have been in the event of the Council meeting the housing target.
- Members were concerned that the information provided in the Infrastructure Development Schedule, which formed part of the evidence base for the Local Plan, may be out of date. There had been discussions at the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group in August, which may have had an effect on the priority details of projects. Since this document was prepared prior to consultation on the Local Plan, the details could have been superseded. It was agreed that the Corporate Scrutiny and Overview Officer would liaise with the Council's Planning Policy team regarding an updated version of the Infrastructure Delivery Schedule.

**Resolved:**

**That Officers from the Council's Policy Planning team be invited to a future meeting of the Committee to update on any changes to the Infrastructure Delivery Schedule.**

## **204 Future Reviews and Report Tracker and Topic Selection Flowchart**

The Chairman introduced the item and invited the Committee to discuss what topics they would like to select for future reviews. The following questions/comments were made:

- One Member considered that air quality and pollution were becoming a more critical issue in the Borough, and this issue should be reviewed sooner rather than later. It was agreed that this should be added to the Tracker. Environmental Health Officers would be asked to report to a future meeting of the Committee.
- A Member said that the Police would attend an Overview and Scrutiny Committee, on invite, to explain the current policing of the Borough and any constraints. Members agreed that this should be added to the Tracker for February 2017 to coincide with the Community Safety Partnership Annual Update.
- It was also agreed that a review of the Stour Centre refurbishment was not required at this time, and the item should be removed from the Tracker.
- The Policy and Performance Manager advised that with regard to Ashford's wellbeing focus, a Sustainable Transformation Plan for Kent and Medway would be published shortly. Members agreed that this item should be retained as an open item on the Tracker.

- It was agreed that the topic of community integration should remain as an open item on the Tracker.

**Resolved:**

**That**

- (i) a report should be received by the Committee on Air Quality and Pollution;**
- (ii) February's Committee would consider the Community Safety Partnership Annual Update, as well as extending an invitation to the Police for an update on policing in the Borough;**
- (iii) community integration and Ashford's wellbeing focus would remain as open items on the Tracker.**

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