

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held in Committee Rooms 1 and 2, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **8th February 2022**.

Present:

Cllr. Ovenden (Chairman);

Cllrs. Burgess, Chilton (Vice-Chairman), Farrell, Howard-Smith, Krause, Ledger, Meaden, Mulholland.

Apology:

Cllr. Blanford

Also Present:

Cllrs. Brooks, Feacey, Hayward, Harman, Shorter, Wright (remotely).

In attendance:

Chief Inspector Nick Sparkes, Detective Inspector Simon Johnson (remotely)

Head of Community Safety and Wellbeing, Community Safety and Wellbeing Manager, Compliance and Data Protection Manager, Governance & Data Protection Officer (remotely).

Policy and Scrutiny Officer, Member Services Officer.

267 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Chilton	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as he was related to a Kent Police Officer	270
Farrell	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as he was a self-employed contractor and worked at Cameo Nightclub	270

268 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 9th November 2021 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

269 Corporate Performance Report (Quarter 2 & 3)

The Governance & Data Protection Officer introduced this item and explained that the Q2 report was originally due on the November agenda, but owing to time

constraints was not complete, and this was the first opportunity since November to bring the report to the Committee (after Budget Scrutiny). The Q2 data was included within the Q3 report for comparison. Members were reminded that the Corporate Plan 2022-24 was presented at November's Cabinet and those periodic reports would be altered to reflect the themes and performance measures outlined in the new Corporate Plan.

A Member referred to page 19 of the report and the ongoing problem with recruitment and retention of staff, particularly within the Planning Department. He wondered whether staff morale should be reviewed and if the O&S or Joint Consultative Committee should somehow become involved to try to solve the problems. The Committee agreed that the pandemic and lockdowns had undoubtedly contributed to low morale. The Chairman felt that the HR department would be abreast of the issues, and considered inviting the Head of HR to join a Committee Meeting to discuss this further. A Member raised a secondary concern in regards to limitations of staff pay grades and salary scales and considered this too could be a contributory factor to low staff morale. The Chairman agreed and went on to explain that the Planning Department was reviewed in detail as part of the Budget Scrutiny meetings and acknowledged the difficulties they faced. He assured the Committee that this would be kept on the radar for future review.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

270 Annual Report on the Community Safety Partnership

The Community Safety and Wellbeing Manager introduced Chief Inspector Nick Sparkes and Detective Inspector Simon Johnson. She explained that the report provided the Committee with the Community Safety Annual Update. The report paid particular regard to the Council's statutory obligation to work in partnership to reduce crime and disorder, work that was being progressed through the Ashford Community Safety Partnership (CSP). The report detailed key projects that the Partnership had led on including obtaining approximately £550,000 from the Home office for the Safer Streets fund, and the Charlton Athletic Community Trust Project.

The presentation was then opened up to the Committee and the following questions and points were raised: -

- A Member asked whether figures were available detailing the gender split from the educational talk at Charlton. The Community Safety and Wellbeing Manager did not have that data to hand, but was meeting with Charlton on 22nd February and would feed those figures back. She had been encouraged to hear that females were attending the sessions and engaging with the female staff at Charlton.
- A Member spoke about a programme called Operation Encompass, in which a child's school received notification if the police had been called to that child's home the previous day/night. Thereby enabling the school to understand why that pupil may be anxious or disruptive in the classroom, and

taking steps to assist that child.

- The knife bins around Ashford were commended and a Member suggested introducing one in each ward around the Borough.
- In response to a question about the decline in shoplifting, a Member asked whether this was owing to increased policing, better-behaved people or the fact that the shops had been closed owing to the pandemic. Chief Inspector Nick Sparkes explained that the figures were skewed owing to the closure of shops throughout the lockdown period, and consequently, the data was to be observed cautiously because of that influencing factor. A return to normality was expected with the lifting of restrictions. He added that many retailers were facing financial difficulties and consequently had to cut the number of staff and security guards that they employed. This inevitably would create an increase in opportunity for shoplifters.
- A Member highlighted the work that the Street Pastors undertook in the Town Centre and gave an example of how they had assisted a lone female that had been approached by two males in the early hours, and the Street Pastors intervened to ensure her wellbeing and safety. The Community Safety and Wellbeing Manager joined the Member in commending the outstanding work of the Street Pastors, and said that additional equipment for them had been sourced via the Safer Streets funding.
- The problem of poor maintenance, lighting, fencing etc. within public spaces was highlighted, one example being the zigzag path leading from the cinema at Eureka Park up to Kennington, which Cllr. Spain had been instrumental in improving. A Member suggested an audit on those types of pedestrian paths and routes be organised, to scrutinise the security of those areas. The Community Safety and Wellbeing Manager confirmed that as part of the survey work undertaken prior to the Safer Streets bid, many footpaths and alleyways had been identified as needing extra security measures. The funding had been utilised to increase CCTV in Town Centre areas and fitting plastic mirrors in alleyways to increase visibility prior to entering. It would now be interesting to see how those methods had worked and the impact they may be having on incidents of crime. She encouraged Councillors to continue to highlight those areas that required extra attention.
- The Active Bystander training was discussed and Detective Inspector Simon Johnson confirmed that there had been sufficient budget for the training, but all the funding had to be spent by the end of the financial year. The training had been well received and involved around 180 workers and professionals working within the Town Centre.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

271 Annual Safeguarding Report

As the designated safeguarding lead for the Authority, the Community Safety and Wellbeing Manager introduced the report, which outlined the work undertaken by the lead Officer group to safeguard the most vulnerable within the local community. It provided details on the work linked to Prevent and Modern Slavery whilst it also supported the delivery of the priorities set by the Kent Safeguarding Children's Multi-agency Partnership and the Kent and Medway Safeguarding Adults Board.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

272 Report on the Budget Scrutiny Task Group

The Policy and Scrutiny Officer introduced the report that gave the final findings of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group. The Task Group had provided a number of recommendations to be made to Cabinet and then to Council. The Management Team had seen and supported the recommendations and a summary of their advice had been tabled within the report.

The Chairman explained that the Budget Scrutiny Task Group had met four times and had conducted an in depth review of the budget. As the Committee had already touched on earlier in the meeting, the difficulties in the Planning Department had been discussed at the Budget Scrutiny Meetings. It was anticipated that some of those difficulties would continue owing to the constraints around recruitment and retention, as well as the far-reaching issues about Stodmarsh. The Task Group had agreed that the new Head of Planning and his Officers should be given the opportunity to deliver the department's objectives within the budget, as he had implied they could. There was contingency budget in place if needed.

Resolved:

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends to the Cabinet that:

- I. The Council's draft budget for 2022/23 is sound and that mitigation plans are in place for any increases to borrowing interest rates during 2022/23.
- II. The Council's reserves position is sufficient to manage the economic risks to the 2022/23 budget.
- III. The Task Group support Cabinet's recent decision to have regular monitoring of delivery against Service savings targets, through the quarterly budget monitoring reports in 2022/23.

- IV. It be noted that the Task Group have concerns over the ability to deliver the savings target in the Planning and Development Service for the next budget year
- V. It be noted that delivery of the Henwood project needs to be timely in order to meet the savings targets in the next financial year
- VI. It be noted that the Task Group supports the invest-to-save approach regarding homelessness prevention proposals following the service review in 2021/22.

The Overview and Scrutiny Budget Task Group recommends to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that:

- VII. The Committee would review their position on the Senior Structure Proposal, once it had been submitted to Cabinet.

273 2022/23 O&S Work Programme & Tracker

The Policy and Scrutiny Officer spoke to the Committee about the forthcoming work programme and encouraged Members to suggest future topics for review. The Tracker detailed topics already identified and scheduled for the Committee to scrutinise, including long standing annual reports.

The Chairman referred again to the requirement to monitor the progress of the Planning Department and suggested placing that as an item on the Tracker and Members agreed.

A Member suggested the subject of inclusivity, particularly for those hard to reach groups, as a future topic for review by the O&S Committee.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

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