

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held in Committee Room 2, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **13th September 2022**

Present:

Cllr. Ovenden (Chairman);

Cllrs. Blanford, Burgess, Hayward, Ledger, Meaden, Mulholland

Apologies:

Cllr. Chilton, Howard-Smith

Also Present:

Cllrs. Feacey, Pickering

Also in Attendance (virtually)

Cllr. Harman

Assistant Director HR Customer Services Communications and Digitalisation,
Director of Place, Space and Leisure, Human Resources Manager

In attendance:

Head of Policy & Performance, Assistant Director Planning and Development, Team Leader, Plan Making and Infrastructure, Senior Governance & Data Protection Officer, Policy and Democratic Services Assistant, Member Services Officer

Prior to the commencement of the meeting, the Committee held a 2-minute silence in memory of Her Majesty the Queen, who died on Thursday 8th September 2022.

137 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 14th June 2022 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

138 Corporate Performance Report (Quarter 1 2022/23)

The Chairman spoke to the Committee about the items on the agenda, including the Corporate Performance Report, where Planning featured quite heavily. He asked that discussion be kept stringently to the reports, and he advised that at the final agenda item he would propose a Task Group be set up to review the issues that Planning had experienced in regards to their IT system.

The Senior Governance & Data Protection Officer summarised performance against the council's updated suite of KPIs reflecting the Corporate Plan 2022-24.

He explained that many performance indicators from the previous council's framework had been retained and allowed for historic data comparison. However, a number of new performance indicators had been agreed upon, for which data was only available for the last quarter. As this was the first of the performance reports reflecting the Corporate Plan – all measures had been included both those which, going forward, would be reported upon annually and those reported upon quarterly. The aim was to provide a complete view of the council's KPI suite for this first report. Measures were grouped into the corporate plan themes, that of Green Pioneer, Caring Ashford, Targeted Growth and the Council's underlying principles.

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

- The Chairman asked about the sections where no status was present and it was clarified that the value was sometimes the trend, rather than a specific or obvious target.
- When asked for his comments on the Planning items within the report, the Senior Governance & Data Protection Officer stated that after working closely with the Planning department, he knew how exceptionally hard they worked. Unfortunately, they had experienced hindering issues outside of their control including Stodmarsh and IT limitations.
- The Assistant Director Planning and Development explained that by Quarter 4 he anticipated the Service being in a more stable position. He reiterated that some of the performance issues were governed outside of the Council's control. Stodmarsh was a long standing issue and progress was being made to try and resolve that, with Natural England's assistance. Those deterring factors that were within the Departments control, should be resolved by Quarter 4. The Manager suggested that the figures be configured to show the number of applications that were impacted by Stodmarsh, thus showing the true impact that issue alone was having on overall case numbers.
- In response to a question asking about trends in numbers of applications, it was clarified that there had been an increase earlier in the year, but this had flattened out near and was now about average. The earlier increase could be attributed to economic factors and the pandemic whereby homeowners were making alterations to their properties instead of looking to move house.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

139 S106 Review – Process Mapping Update

The Team Leader, Plan Making and Infrastructure introduced this item. The report provided an update on the process mapping exercise of the current process for identifying, negotiating, implementing and monitoring S106 agreements in

response to the first recommendation of the O&S S106 Task Group report to Cabinet in November 2021.

In addition, it provided an update for the Committee in respect of the remaining seven recommendations (in Table 1), progress in respect of the Mid Kent Audit actions and other S106 related work streams currently being led by the Plan Making and Infrastructure Team.

The main theme within the report was the process mapping exercise, which had been broken down into three parts; the policy formulation stage or plan making phase, the planning application phase, and the monitoring and implementation phase.

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

- A Member asked whether the processing mapping exercise could also be applied to content. The Assistant Director Planning and Development explained that content was a policy issue and would be considered at the stage of discussions with the developer.
- The guidance for Officers (mentioned in Table 1 of Page 49 of the report) would be produced around the same time as the handbook for Members and Parish Councils.
- A question was asked whether the timeframe to prompt Parish Councils (contained within the sub-process outlined on page 58) could be longer, and could more flexibility be built in. The Team Leader, Plan Making and Infrastructure highlighted that caution was needed in this area, owing to legal implications, but it was hoped that more flexibility could be built in once the rules and regulations had been reviewed.
- The Team Leader Plan Making and Infrastructure indicated that the new Arcus system would replace the manual task mentioned on Page 61 of the report where by Officers had to check with Finance colleagues whether funding had been received. **Post Meeting Note:** It was confirmed that while improvements had been made to the current system of manual checks in terms of the information shared and frequency of meetings, that these would continue as there were no plans to link the Council's EFin system to Arcus.
- The Chairman and Assistant Director Planning and Development spoke about Parishes being encouraged to engage with S106 before it transpired, and the process map should be updated to reflect this. The Chairman stated that parishes must be explored as they were an integral part of the planning process. The process map in the report focused on a Local Plan led approach, with opportunity for dialogue and thought within Parishes, in the knowledge that sites may be coming forward, as in Neighbourhood Plans. Difficulties arose when windfall (i.e. non-Local Plan site) applications were submitted and Parishes and/or the Council were on the back foot, as to understanding the needs or benefits that could be sought as part of any S106. Therefore continual collaboration was needed with parished, unparished and town council areas. A Member added that some Parish Councils rarely dealt

with S106's, so it was important to include wording about them keeping a renewed view, to keep abreast of changes. The Chairman added that S106 funding was gathered generally for the Borough so Parishes should look for S106 contributions from other pots.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

140 Annual Sickness Report 2021/22

The HR Manager introduced the report, which provided members with sickness absence figures for the financial year 2021/22 (01 April 21 to 31 March 22). The figures within the report demonstrated a return to pre-pandemic sickness levels, although it was clear that absences due to Covid 19 had proportionately affected attendance levels.

Mental ill health accounted for 40% of the council's total sickness absence, compared to 34% last year. Although high, this figure followed national trends as reported by the CIPD. The HR manager went on to explain that they were working with the Health and Safety team to introduce Mental Health First Aiders as an additional layer of support for the organisation.

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

- The Portfolio Holder advised that ABC had superior levels of sickness and attendance in comparison to other Local Authorities, and he thanked staff for contributing to that. In addition, the Council were the first to introduce the concept of Mental Health First Aiders.
- A Member asked about assistance offered in other areas away aside from mental health. The HR manager outlined the 4 wellbeing pillars of physical, financial, mental and cyber, and the plan with Benenden Healthcare where staff can have access to treatment for physical health if NHS waiting lists were long. The Chairman added that the O&S committee were the ones responsible for directing and guiding the HR team concerning health & wellbeing.
- A member of public indicated he wanted to ask a question, but the Chairman explained that this needed to be submitted in writing prior to the meeting.
- In response to a question regarding absence levels when staff were able to come back to the office, the HR manager noted that staff remained positive about returning, but unfortunately she did not have any statistics on this. She added that she could provide them in the next report if the Committee requested.
- Information pertaining to the absence reason from neighbouring Local Authorities was not yet available.

Resolved:

- i) That the report be received and noted**
- ii) That the committee wish to receive a further update in a year's time**

141 Hybrid Working

The Assistant Director HR Customer Services Communications and Digitalisation gave a brief introduction to the Committee on the report, which had been requested by the O&S Committee to explore how well the hybrid arrangements were working, with particular consideration in terms of performance, customer satisfaction, savings, human resources and recruitment.

The overarching conclusions were that hybrid working was here to stay across the country, but it needed sustained effort to ensure it continued to work efficiently. Management Team were keen to remain agile, keeping customers' needs at the forefront of decisions and continuing to work flexibly.

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

- It was confirmed that staff working from home were not receiving any financial assistance towards their utility bills, because they were able to choose whether to work remotely or come into the office.
- The Assistant Director HR Customer Services Communications and Digitalisation clarified that Project Office and Project Cake were initiatives to engage staff in the questionnaires.
- The Chairman spoke about the information on page 10 of the report concerning the main reasons for wanting to work from home more frequently. He noted that one of the top answers were less commuting time and costs, which would help to balance the costs of working from home. The questionnaire would be revisited and regular surveys and reviews would be carried out.
- In response to a question regarding monitoring the effectiveness of hot-desking, the Assistant Director HR Customer Services Communications and Digitalisation explained that there was a trend for staff to gravitate towards certain desks that they preferred working at, within their Team's allocated area. There was now 60% capacity within the Civic centre and there were hot desk areas for 'overspill' on busy days. Additional space was still available on level three for any future strategies if the trend leaned towards working in the office.
- Fridays in the office were always a quieter day, whilst Mondays were slightly busier, and the middle of the week showed higher levels of staff working in the office.

Resolved:

- i) **That the report be received and noted**
- ii) **That an update report be presented to the Committee in the future**

142 Report Tracker

The Chairman reiterated that he wished to propose a Task Group be set up to review the issues that Planning had experienced in regards to the Arcus IT system. It was anticipated that this would be a closed group meeting.

The Head of Policy & Performance explained that the findings from the Consultation and Engagement Task Group would be presented at the October meeting. The work programme was quite full now with the proposed Task Group the Chairman had mentioned, and then Budget Scrutiny Task Group following that, as well as the reports coming to the full committee in the autumn, as outlined on the Tracker.

The Chairman said that he had been asked to raise the possibility of liaising with the Water Authority and the Head of Policy & Performance confirmed that Southern and South Eastern Water were planning to attend the forthcoming Ashford Strategic Delivery Board meeting. The Chairman asked for someone to report back from that meeting.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.