

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held in Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **14th November 2023**.

Present:

Cllr. Bell (Chair),

Cllrs. Bartlett, Chilton (Vice-Chair), Feacey, Ledger, Michael, C. Suddards.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Arnold, Nilsson, Ovenden, Walder.

In attendance:

Cllrs. Campkin, Hayward, Hicks, Wright.

Douglas Whitfield and Jo Shippey (South East Water),
Inspector Simon Johnson (Kent Police).

Assistant Director of Environment, Property & Recreation, Safety and Wellbeing Manager, Commercial Projects and Recreation Manager, Project Accountant, Leisure Contract Manager, Scrutiny and Partnerships Manager, Senior Governance & Data Protection Officer, Member Services Officer.

Also in Attendance (virtually)

Cllrs. Forest, Joseph, Shilton, McGeever, Meaden.

Deputy Chief Executive, Director of Place, Space and Leisure, Corporate Director of Health and Wellbeing, Head of Policy and Performance.

201 Declaration of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No
Bartlett	Made a Voluntary Announcement that he was a Member of Ashford Community Safety Partnership and KCC, and that he had awarded a Member grant to Sk8side.	204
Campkin	Made a Voluntary Announcement that he was a Member of KCC	204
Chilton	Made a Voluntary Announcement that his relative was employed by Kent Police	204
Feacey	Made a Voluntary Announcement that he was Chair of Ashford Volunteer Centre and Chair of Ashford International Development Company	206

202 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 11th October 2023 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

203 South East Water Presentation

Douglas Whitfield and Jo Shippey from South East (SE) Water attended the meeting and gave a presentation to the Committee, which covered in detail the following areas:

- About South East Water and its history
- Recap on recent outages in December 2022 and June 2023
- Improving resilience and investment
- Key drivers in Kent necessitating increased water supply resilience
- Longer term resilience options
- Broad Oak reservoir
- Planning for the future
- Regional approach to tackle challenges of the network
- Headline investment £1.9bn

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

- The risk of outages to some areas of Kent e.g. Biddenden and Staplehurst, remained for the next couple of years as the enhancements outlined in the presentation would take time to implement. Short-term improvements already employed to neighbouring areas would help to minimise any outages to other areas, including more storage and source water. Increased reactive actions had also been built into the plan.
- Sensors on the pipe network were restricted in numbers to certain levels, hence why the public were still encouraged to continue reporting water leaks. Increasing the sensors was included as part of the future plan.
- SE Water hoped to roll out Smart Meters by 2027, but the tariffs had not yet been categorised. The benefit of Smart Meters was to improve detection of leaks or unusual usage.
- A data sharing agreement was in place with Maidstone Borough Council to identify vulnerable customers and those with financial difficulties, and this agreement could be explored with Ashford, with the intention to ensure that any discounts or social tariffs be applied to eligible residents.
- Factors influencing replacement of old pipework included age, size, and condition and failure rate. A significant increase for pipe replacement was

included in the 5-year plan.

- To try to ensure the plans were future-proof, the long term 25 year Water Resource Management Plan took into account Central Government housing/growth predictive data. In addition, SE Water considered climate change and varying growth and economic scenarios when formulating the short and long-term plans, to ensure greater resilience and possible adaptations.
- In addition to Broad Oak, another reservoir would be constructed within 5 years at Arlington in Sussex, which would provide additional storage and source.
- A Government target had been set to reduce per person usage, and new initiatives were being considered for each household to help reduce waste and usage. It was suggested that SE Water liaise with ABC on ways in which the Council and Councillors could assist with communication on this matter, and with a view to including this target within the Local Plan.
- The SE Water Business Plan operated in 5-year cycles to correspond with funding. Business Plans were submitted in October and in the following year Ofwat would announce the final determinations, which would confirm if the plans were acceptable and finalised.
- In response to a question requesting figures for people breaching hosepipe bans over the past 5 years, it was explained that the core aim of bans was to raise perception and a lot of steps were taken before reaching the issuing of a fine, so the figure was likely to be low.

Resolved:

That the Presentation be received and noted.

204 Community Safety Partnership Update

Inspector Simon Johnson and the Safety and Wellbeing Manager introduced the report, which provided an interim update on community safety, including crime statistics for the Borough, and the work being undertaken to reduce crime and disorder in conjunction with partners and other agencies.

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

- The 101-telephone service had previously experienced issues with the volume of calls being answered, and a Member acknowledged that although reporting was also available via social media and email, some residents still preferred to report via telephone. Insp Johnson explained a new model had been implemented and that figures in Ashford showed a reduction in crime figures. Feedback from the public was positive around the collective work undertaken between the police and partners and he gave thanks to everyone involved.

- Catch 22 and Uprising were youth initiatives that would hopefully gain more promotion and recognition once a Working Group had been established.
- The Safer Streets Fund was overseen by Kent Police and the Police Crime Commissioner and if ABC was a correct fit for the funding stream, then another bid could be submitted.
- The Police Victim Based Crimes Team had recently been expanded, and this model was hoped to provide a more specialised service, and this included retail crime. Consequently, victims received differing methods of police support and contact, and worked to different timescales.
- Youth provision and intervention formed part of Central Government's Anti-Social Behaviour Action Plan, and financial investment across all age youth groups was planned. It would be interesting to see how that would cascade down across regions and counties, to understand what young people actually wanted, and to offer something they would attend and enjoy.
- Increased numbers of local PC's were incorporated into the new police model, a new Neighbourhood Task Force had been set up, and a Child Centre Policing Team would be set up soon. PC numbers were currently at 50% with the objective of increasing to 100% as the new model continued to roll out.
- Sk8side was expected to be increasing its opening hours and this would help to alleviate anti-social behaviour in the Borough.
- The Chair and Members thanked the Officers and Police for the great work they continuously undertook.

Recommended:

- That**
- i) The report be noted**
 - ii) The committee supported the formation of a cross member working group**
 - iii) The annual Community Safety Partnership report be presented to the Overview & Scrutiny committee each November**

205 Freedom Leisure at the Stour Centre - presentation

The Commercial Projects and Recreation Manager attended the meeting and gave a presentation to the Committee, which covered in detail the following areas:

- Leisure Contract Overview and Timeline
- Contract Finances
- Performance Standards and Monitoring
- Participation
- Programmes, Activities and Events

- Memberships
- Staffing
- Facility standards (Cleanliness / Hygiene / Maintenance)
- Energy and Environmental
- Healthy Communities

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

- Members noted the difficulty in contacting the Stour Centre via telephone and were assured that this was being rectified.
- The Stour Centre café had received a very low hygiene rating, and one of the main reasons for this was attributed to complacency regarding checking-procedures. More robust measures and mechanisms were now in place, and staff were being re-trained.
- Freedom Leisure were focussing on generating revenue via subscriptions and café proceeds.
- Some of the membership subscriptions were price protected by ABC, whilst others were subject to inflation according to market trends. The £1.50 administration booking charge would be examined.
- The additional cleaners were welcomed with an increase from one to three employees, and this salary cost fell under Freedom Leisure.
- Whilst there had been an overall saving and the Public Sector Decarbonation Scheme had eliminated the gas usage, the electricity tariff had increased.
- Swimming pricing was reviewed regularly and competition was stiff around the Ashford area. To counteract that, Freedom Leisure tried to promote the wider range of activities including soft play and the café area.
- Following Covid, the subscription price increase in 2021/2022 could be attributed to the refurbishment and improved facilities. Pre-pandemic prices were based on the older facilities and different operators. Discounted subscriptions were available for those people on lower incomes and means tested benefits.
- A new app would shortly be launched to assist with bookings and this would help alleviate waiting times.

Resolved:

That the Presentation be received and noted.

206 Savings Plan Progress – 2nd Quarter 2023/24

The Project Accountant presented the report to the Committee, which provided a detailed update on the proposed savings plan and was included and supported in the 2023/24 budget report presented to Cabinet in February 2023.

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

- Under the proposed savings, the Administration review had been amalgamated into the Review of service structures.
- A saving of £234k had been made this year within the Environment, Property and Recreation department, but £88k had been earmarked for two park keepers from April 1st, if the Parks Foundation proposal was accepted.
- Central Government had decided that there would be no Border Control Post at Dover, and imports/exports would now be processed at Sevington, therefore the scale of work would be greater for Ashford.
- The direct charge for Project Management to Capital for a specific post initially was a cost, but it was then split across assets that were being built or developed and so this could be attributed to an asset, which then depreciated over 25/30 years.
- The interest payment from the Ashford International Development Company was not included within the Savings Plan, but would be additional. This would be deliberated at the Budget Task Group meetings.
- The Safety and Wellbeing Manager was leading on the Enforcement Review, and would consider the Committees view that Planning enforcement should not be reduced, as it was a vital service. The Chairman asked if Planning enforcement could be brought before the Committee to be reviewed on a regular basis.

Resolved:

That the Report be received and noted.

207 Corporate Performance Report – Quarter 2

The Senior Governance & Data Protection Officer introduced the report, which provided an update and performance monitoring of the Council's progress towards the aspirations of the Corporate Plan. Whilst progress generally remained strong, the cost of living squeeze continued to impact upon a number of measures. There were some positives across the spectrum with two new experience based businesses opening in Ashford Town Centre, and planning caseload figures continuing to reduce.

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

- The Council tax collection amount was slightly lower than in previous years, and more figures would be collated and brought before the Committee.
- The new Corporate Plan was being drafted and a working group had been formed. The Policy & Performance Manager explained that the first draft should be ready early 2024 with a public consultation planned for spring 2024. The final draft was planned for completion in July 2024.
- The Counter Fraud Team worked to ensure due diligence was undertaken with regards to business rates collections, and ABC were part of the Kent Intelligence Network, which used industry led technology to identify properties that might be fraudulently claiming exemptions or were not registered. The Small Business Rates Relief review was underway, periodic measures were in place, and a report recently went before the Audit Committee which covered the work by the Fraud Team. A figure of 2 - 3% was estimated for fraudulent business rates for counties outside of London.
- The Economic and Development Team would be able to provide more detail on what connections ABC had with the Job Centre and other partners regarding 18-24 year old unemployment.
- The number of Homelessness presentations within the report was discussed and the Deputy Chief Executive observed that a report had been sent to Management Team concerning homelessness and temporary accommodation. He added that this topic could be included on the O&S work programme, as it did present a budget pressure. In response to a Member's question regarding homeless presentations by people from outside the Borough, it was confirmed that initial checks were made to ensure a local connection before an application could proceed.
- The Chair expressed his apprehension around Small Business Rates Relief checks in rural areas to achieve savings, since these business were often vital services in small communities. It was confirmed that this was a statutory Central Government scheme and was not specific just to Ashford.
- The Planning KPI showed that the backlog had been reduced, and this figure would be lower still, if the Stodmarsh issue was taken out of the equation.

Resolved:

That the Report be received and noted.

208 Cabinet Schedule of Key Decisions

Resolved:

That the Schedule be received and noted.

209 O&S Work Programme 2023 to 2024

Resolved:

That the Report Tracker be received and noted.