

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20



ASHFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

FOREWORD FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Councillor Noel Ovenden

I am pleased to present the annual report on behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at Ashford Borough Council. Key activities undertaken by the Committee over the last municipal year are detailed within the report. To summarise, the Committee have looked at matters such as how the council communicates with the public in its Ashford For campaign, the performance of Aspire Landscape Management since the service has been brought back in house, and also the proposed masterplan for the village of Wye.

Covid-19

The impact of COVID-19 on Ashford Borough from March of this year is yet to be determined as crisis continues at this time. However, there is scope for the committee to exercise its function when considering our response to the crisis.

I would like to thank all of the Officers who have been involved with reviews during the year and have assisted the Committee proficiently. Thanks must also go to the Members of the Committee and non-committee Members who have played an active role at meetings regarding various matters such as scrutiny of the budget for 2019/2020.

Looking towards the future, the Committee looks to have a full and busy year ahead with dealing with the council's recovery from COVID-19 and also some major topics being brought forward such as digital transformation.





AN INTRODUCTION TO OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

The Local Government Act 2000 (the Act) introduced a requirement that councils with a 'Leader and Executive' arrangement must include the provision of one or more Overview and Scrutiny Committees within their council structure.

Under section 21 of the Act, the council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee has power to submit reports and make recommendations to the Cabinet or full Council on any aspect of council business or any matter affecting the Borough or its residents.

The constitution of Ashford Borough Council contains provisions for a single Overview and Scrutiny Committee to carry out the functions detailed in the Act, although the Committee may assemble task groups from its membership for specific reviews.

In the 2019/20 municipal year the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had 12 members, appointed in line with the broad political balance of the council. The roles of Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee were appointed to opposition members, although the Committee operates apolitically in its discussions, with all members of the Committee working together to ensure that the council and its services are acting effectively and efficiently.

Following the local elections in May 2019, the political makeup of the council and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee changed for the last municipal year. Members were provided with introductory training in preparation for a new committee on the role, purpose and powers of Overview and Scrutiny was arranged through the Centre for Public Scrutiny. This training session was attended by members of each political group on the Council and key staff involved in the delivery of the scrutiny function.

MATTERS SCRUTINISED BY THE COMMITTEE

Since May 2019, the Committee has considered a number of items related to the council's operations and the wider issue affecting the borough and its residents. These include:

- PERFORMANCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF ASPIRE LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT
- WYE MASTERPLAN DEVELOPMENT AND CONSULTATION
- ASHFORD COLLEGE UPDATE
- BROADBAND AND PROMOTION OF FIBRE TO THE PREMISES

The Committee also considers some items on annual basis, namely:

- SCRUTINY OF THE COUNCIL'S DRAFT BUDGET (CARRIED OUT BY A TASK AND FINISH GROUP)
- A REPORT OF THE ASHFORD COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP
- A REPORT ON SAFEGUARDING ADULTS AND CHILDREN AT RISK
- A SICKNESS ABSENCE REPORT FOR THE COUNCIL'S WORKFORCE
- THE COUNCIL'S QUARTERLY CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORTS.





BUDGET SCRUTINY TASK GROUP

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has a duty to scrutinise the council's draft Capital and Revenue budgets. In 2019/20, the Committee assembled a cross-party task and finish group whose remit included ensuring that the draft 2019/20 budget was achievable and deliverable in line with the council's 5 year Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and the council's adopted corporate priorities.

The group consisted of 5 cross-party Members and met with various Directors and Heads of Service to ask further questions. The group targeted Planning and S106 in its first meeting which looked at the delivery of the service's restructure and management of risks regarding S106 funding.

The second meeting looked at Commercial Property and the council's income from its property company, A Better Choice for Property.

The final meeting was set aside to look at an analysis of the council's reserves, the Capital Plan, Business Rates, Council Tax and Universal Credit. A wrap up meeting followed to also answer any additional queries the group wanted to bring forward.

The Task Group made a total of six recommendations in regards to the budget for 2020/21 that they believe will assist in managing any risks within services in the year.

WYE3 MASTERPLAN

Following a Cabinet decision made in September 2018 to defer the adoption of the WYE3 Masterplan, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee felt that it would be beneficial to examine and develop the consultation process before reconsideration by Cabinet.

A cross party Task Group was set up comprising of 5 Members and conducted an in depth review of the processes and practices followed in developing and consulting on the WYE3 Masterplan.

The role of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group in conducting this review was twofold – first, to review the masterplan development and consultation processes to establish the veracity of any claims of process failures, and secondly to provide recommendations for improvements in process that will be of benefit for the future.

In conducting its review, the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group considered a range of written and oral evidence regarding the development of and consultation on the draft WYE3 Masterplan.

A total of 12 recommendations were made to Council in September 2019 with the view that they would enable improvements to the council's processes for future masterplanning and consultation exercises. The focus of these recommendations were based around a number of themes such as traffic, resourcing and governance, and consultation and communication.

ASPIRE

In October 2016, Ashford Borough Council made the decision to adopt an in-house grounds provider, Aspire Landscape Management. An update report on the progress of Aspire was then presented to Cabinet in January 2019. Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee felt that it would be beneficial to review whether the Aspire had achieved its expected goals and outcomes so far.

The Head of Environment and Land Management presented a report to the Committee and noted that the Aspire service had been hugely successful across areas of the Borough.

The Committee discussed the expansion of the Aspire services to developing areas across the Borough and it was noted that Aspire would have an opportunity to put in competitive bids when appropriate to do so.

Overall, Members supported and commended the Aspire team for its excellent service and supported plans for further development of the in-house service.

ASHFORD FOR YOU

In light of its first year of publications, the Committee requested a review of the council's residents' magazine, Ashford For You. In particular, members wanted to look at how receptive residents had been during its first year and what the plans were for development/digitisation of the magazine and other communications in the future.

A presentation was brought to a Committee meeting led by the Communications and Marketing Manager to explain to Members the various ways that the council had communicated with residents.

Members were invited to ask questions and discuss the magazine. Overall, it highlighted that the magazine was of an excellent standard, however, advised that more could be done to provide coverage to the more rural areas of the Borough. Other questions were aimed at understanding the cost implications of the magazine and if this was value for money. Overall the Committee supported the continuation of magazine and look forward to learning of its future developments.