

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held as a virtual meeting on the **11th August 2020**.

Present:

Cllr. Ovenden (Chairman)

Cllr. Chilton (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs. Blanford, Burgess, Chilton, Farrell, Harman, Howard-Smith, Iliffe, Ledger.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 1.2 (iii) Cllr. Harman attended as Substitute Member for Cllr. Hayward.

Apologies:

Cllr. Hayward, Mulholland.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Bartlett, Feacey, Pickering

Head of Corporate Policy, ED & Communications, Head of Community, Safety and Wellbeing, Compliance and Data Protection Manager, Community Safety and Resilience Team Leader, Strategy and Policy Development Manager, Policy & Scrutiny Officer, Member Services Officer (KM), Member Services Officer (CR).

35 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of this Committee held on the 14th July 2020 be approved and confirmed as an accurate record.

36 Draft Recovery Plan 2020

The Head of Corporate Policy, ED & Communications introduced the report, and explained that there were three aspects that would be covered in the Meeting. The first part would cover the report 'The Council's Emergency Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic' that went to Cabinet on 25th June. The second part would talk about lessons learnt from the Covid-19 Pandemic and the final part would be the actual Recovery Plan.

The Head of Community, Safety and Wellbeing introduced the first Report 'The Council's Emergency Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic' which included details of the command and control arrangements, the establishment of the Ashford Response Depot, the Voluntary Emergency Response Appeal, the assistance provided to those

on NHS shield lists and other vulnerable people, and grant support arrangements for the voluntary sector. The report outlined the significant steps taken to keep essential services running as well as responding to immediate emergency needs. Since the report had been produced, Covid cases had reduced in the Borough, with six cases reported in the last week. The Kent Resilience Forum Strategic Coordinating Group had now been stood down, however the Tactical Coordinating Group continued to meet weekly. An Ashford Local Outbreak Control Plan was currently being drawn up to support the county arrangements but would be focusing on the specific actions to be taken by the Borough Council in the event of a local outbreak, community spread or local lockdown. It would take the form of an action matrix.

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

- A Member asked about the Ashford Local Outbreak Control Plan, specifically where it would be reported to and whether the O&S Committee would have the opportunity to scrutinise it. The Head of Community, Safety and Wellbeing confirmed that the document was currently being prepared but that there would be no problem sharing it with the O&S Committee.
- In response to a question about Covid testing and symptomatic people, the Head of Community, Safety and Wellbeing referred the Member to information regarding testing on the NHS website for full details but confirmed that those with symptoms could be tested as could someone they live with.
- Regarding case numbers, the Head of Community, Safety and Wellbeing indicated that the latest Leaders briefing contained lots of information regarding Covid cases within the Borough, along with a document regarding national and regional comparative figures. It was stressed that while the number of cases had decreased, it was important to avoid becoming complacent, to prevent future outbreaks. Additionally, caution should be given to the cumulative case data since the reasons for the earlier higher numbers in Ashford related to the start of the outbreak rather than the current position.
- A Member enquired whether the Council were confident that they and KCC were receiving the correct data regarding making contact with those people that had tested positive in the Borough. The Head of Community, Safety and Wellbeing indicated that data provided was that circulated with the Leader's Briefing and that the lead for individual cases was KCC on Public Health and Public Health England. It was stated that ABC had offered assistance with the track and trace system, should there be a resourcing issue.
- In respect of what steps were being taken to ensure public communications were accurately relayed, The Head of Community, Safety and Wellbeing was pleased to note that some radio programmes were now accurately reporting that Ashford was now in a better position. ABC were working with KCC Communications Team as the lead Public Health Agency and its own internal Comms Team.

The Community Safety and Resilience Team Leader then introduced the second part of this item, which included a presentation on 'Covid-19 Lessons Learnt to date'. She explained that the Council were still in the response phase, and the lessons identified were still a work in progress. The Kent Resilience Team were also carrying out a similar exercise with regards to lessons learnt, and had been working closely with Leicester following their local lockdown, to explore how they implemented this and the key challenges they faced. The Presentation was split into three parts covering:

1. 'What went well' covering the areas of Community, Staff, Communications, IT and General.
2. 'Even better if' i.e. how the Council would change its response in future again within the areas of Community, IT, MHCLG and generally.
3. 'Recommendations' – within the Community Voluntary Sector, Digitalisation, IT Systems and Remote Working.

The presentation was praised by Members and thanks was given to the Officers involved for their committed hard work responding to Covid-19. It was then opened up to the Committee and the following questions and points were raised: -

- A Member commented that the good weather had been favourable throughout the lockdown period, and asked what contingency plans were in place for if lockdown occurred throughout the winter period, with regards to ensuring continuity of distribution of goods/services. In the context of a surge in Covid cases in the winter months, it was confirmed that Kent were aiming to have a Command and Control structure that ensured all three risks, i.e. Covid, Brexit and Severe Weather could be addressed together. There was specific work being carried out around this within Kent.
- A Member asked what support mechanisms may be needed for those Officers that would not normally choose to work from home. He added that the IT support given to Members from Ashford was commendable. It was confirmed that any staff with concerns had been advised to raise these issues with their line manager or HR. Additionally, Property Services were formulating plans for the return of some staff to the building.
- In relation to a query about financial contribution towards staff broadband costs, and provision of laptops, the Community Safety and Resilience Team Leader said that she was unaware of any financial support for staff towards costs, but she would look into this and reiterated that any staff concerns should be reported to HR. All staff were given a laptop prior to lockdown.
- The Council had built links with the voluntary sector during the course of the pandemic and a Member asked how those connections would be maintained, particularly in relation to digital links with the Parish Councils. ABC continued to work closely with the Volunteer Centre, and a database had been created containing details of all the voluntary agencies that had worked with ABC. Further to this, a Member asked were there any ideas in relation to lists of

vulnerable people within wards and community outreach in the future, and GDPR issues. It was confirmed that the Policy Team were currently reviewing the various data ABC had received, how it was stored and how it could be utilised again were a second wave to occur. The Head of Community, Safety and Wellbeing added that both the Health and Wellbeing Recovery Plan and Corporate Recovery Plan emphasised the community engagement linkages and drew on the positive relationship built during the pandemic.

- A Member commented that he felt it was important for staff to return to the Civic Centre, as well as the Town Centre. Staff productivity was more prominent within the workplace and there were limitations to working from home. The Chairman responded that this topic was far reaching and noted that many Council staff did not live in Ashford. He acknowledged that some Members may favour face-to-face meetings, but he felt that there was a place for remote working and virtual meetings, and looked forward to seeing how these new ways of working would develop in the future. The Head of Corporate Policy, ED & Communications added that staff had been surveyed throughout lockdown and the results showed that many preferred working from home and felt that they could be more productive, and this had been shown to be true across the board. A balance would need to be struck between productivity and wellbeing, and this would be explored in more detail as part of the Recovery Plan going forward.

The Head of Corporate Policy, ED & Communications then introduced the final part of this item, which was the draft Recovery Plan. She showed a presentation to the Committee which covered and included the following ideas and themes:

1. The Road to Recovery – focus on what can be achieved over next 18 months, some projects on hold, aligned to national and Kent wide plans.
2. The Ashford Ambition – new Five year Corporate Plan, Economic Development Strategy and Carbon Neutral Strategy to be adopted in Spring 2022.
3. Ambition supported by three themes – Green Pioneer, Caring Ashford and Targeted Growth.
4. Economic Recovery – balance resources to support existing business, safeguard jobs, stimulate economic growth to create employment and increase productivity.
5. Key actions – Advice and support, utilising government funding, working alongside Ashford College, supporting the tourism industry.
6. Community Recovery – work with statutory providers and assist the voluntary sector to support the most vulnerable, particularly those most affected by the pandemic.

7. Key actions – undertake a community engagement programme, delivery of community safety recovery actions, work closely with health colleagues.
8. Place Making, Regeneration and Infrastructure – the Council has a strong track record of delivering projects, bringing prosperity, events and heritage to the fore in the Borough. Adapt to the challenges post-coronavirus.
9. Key actions – housing delivery, leisure procurement, improve broadband.
10. Organisational Change and Workforce Development – seeking to improve customer's experience, participation in the democratic process, core values remain.
11. Green Principles – remain committed to being carbon neutral by 2030.
12. Key Actions – balance the MTFP, enable remote working and continue the digital transformation programme.
13. Delivery, Monitoring and Review – Quarterly progress and monitoring, Bi monthly Recovery Plan Monitoring Advisory Committee.
14. Next steps and recommendations.

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

- A Member queried when the Council would be in a position to set targets in regards to affordable housing. The Compliance and Data Protection Manager explained that Key Performance Indicators were longstanding and work was currently being undertaken on Pentana in relation to targets.
- In response to comments stating that the Recovery Plan was very broad and querying whether all the actions were related to recovery, the Head of Corporate Policy, ED and Communications stated that priorities had been focussed on recovery, but the plan was in effect an interim Corporate Plan. Therefore, it was important to ensure that 'business as usual' services like planning and waste collection continued to perform at an acceptable level throughout the recovery period.
- A Member remarked that the Recovery Plan failed to ask bold questions about the future and what service activities the Council would wish to engage in. The changing demographics of the Borough would inevitably affect the housing market, and the Council needed to ask were residents adequately housed. He went onto speak about public engagement and the need to review how the Council responded to petitions. Planning procedures, town centre investment and strategic parks were also areas that needed examination. Finally he queried whether any funding had been received from the latest round of South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) funding. The Head of Corporate Policy, ED & Communications responded that the Mid Term Financial Plan would encompass some of those issues and was critical

to shaping the future. Some of the strategic issues mentioned could be debated via the Overview & Scrutiny Committee. Cllr. Bartlett confirmed that two projects in Kent had been approved for SELEP funding; Jasmine Vardimon and Thanet Parkway.

Resolved

That the report be received and noted.

37 Future Reviews Tracker

The Policy & Scrutiny Officer introduced this item and confirmed that following the last Meeting she had run the topics suggested through the selection matrix and could give an update on what would be contained within the Work Programme going forward.

The Recovery Plan was a high priority and would continue to be discussed at the next O&S meeting, with recommendations being put forward to Full Council. The future Plans of Ashford College remained a high priority and it had been proposed that a briefing would be held in the Autumn that would be open to all Members. Lower scoring scrutiny topics included Decision Making over the new Lorry Site, S106 Decision Making Process and the Objectives of the Property Company. It was proposed to retain these items on the Tracker and review in early 2021.

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

- Cllr. Farrell expressed his concern that the Objectives of the Property Company was not being treated as a high priority, since there was growing public interest and concern over the direction of the Company and its financing, and he felt that the Committee should review this topic sooner than 2021.
- The Chairman reminded Members that they were invited to use the selection matrix themselves and bring their findings back to the Meeting, since each topic would have varying degrees of interest for each Member.
- Cllr. Chilton supported what Cllr. Farrell had said, and went onto say that the Lorry Park was a subject requiring serious review, as he understood that the government had unilaterally made the decision to purchase the land without consultation. The site was of huge public interest since 1000's of new homes were due for construction in close proximity to the site. The Compliance and Data Protection Manager explained that the actual process of how the site was purchased could be reviewed, with the Chairman adding that the issue of consultation and engagement could be examined and be the overarching theme. Cllr Chilton agreed with these comments.
- A Member stated that he felt there was still value in reviewing the Section 106 Decision Making Process and the Chairman encouraged Members to use the

Selection Matrix themselves with the topics they felt were a priority, and then forward their findings and comments to himself and the Policy & Scrutiny Officer.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

POST MEETING NOTE: Since the Meeting it has been clarified that S106 and the Lorry Site will stay on the Tracker. It has been agreed that the Property Company would be removed from the tracker as suggested in the report and by the matrix. However, there was the view that the Committee could revisit this at some point in the future.