

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held as a virtual meeting on the **8<sup>th</sup> September 2020**.

### Present:

Cllr. Ovenden (Chairman)

Cllr. Chilton (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs. Blanford, Campkin, Farrell, Hayward, Iliffe, Krause, Ledger, Mulholland, White.

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

### Apologies:

Cllr. Burgess, Howard-Smith.

### Also Present:

Cllrs. Feacey, Harman, Pickering, Wright.

Head of HR & Customer Services, Head of Corporate Policy, ED & Communications, Compliance and Data Protection Manager, Policy & Scrutiny Officer, Member Services Officer.

## 43 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Chilton	Made a "Voluntary Announcement" as he was a Member of Unison	46

## 44 Minutes

### Resolved:

**That the Minutes of this Committee held on the 11<sup>th</sup> August 2020 be approved and confirmed as an accurate record.**

## 45 Recovery Plan – verbal update

The Policy and Scrutiny Officer introduced this item, and explained that following the last meeting, Members were invited to pose questions to be answered at this Meeting. One question had been received in advance: "As working from home appears to be acceptable now, and more economically viable, are we increasing

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pressure on companies supplying broadband, not only to supply to premises but also to ensure its reliability?" The Head of Corporate Policy, ED & Communications responded that Broadband was a priority in the Recovery Plan, and the Council were now looking at what resources were needed to effectively support and enable the delivery of broadband in the Borough and Cllr. Bell was championing this. Once an Action Plan had been compiled this would be reported back to the Committee through the Recovery Plan Monitoring Report.

The report was then opened up to the Committee and the following question was asked:

Following the recent guidelines by Government giving the go ahead for schools and businesses to re-open, a Member asked was there an emerging view (as part of the Council's own economic recovery) to follow this route and bring Officers back into the building, supporting the eateries and shops in the Town Centre, and where possible a hybrid arrangement for Members to return to the Council at the earliest opportunity?

The Chairman responded that the return to the office needed to be balanced with the Carbon Neutral agenda. The Head of Corporate Policy, ED & Communications confirmed that a phased return to work was underway, taking into account the business need, health and wellbeing of staff, to bring Officers safely back into the building. Following on from the Chairman's comments regarding climate change, she added that there was now an opportunity to review the way the Council worked with regards to commuting and energy efficiency of the building, and to reduce the carbon footprint of the Borough, in line with the 2025 target. The Head of HR & Customer Services went on to confirm that in order to adhere with social distancing, there would be approximately 80 desks available, out of the usual 350. A return also had to take place gradually in order to ensure equipment was available and that staff weren't conveying IT viruses back, upon their reconnection to the server.

With regards to hybrid meetings, the Chairman stated that he was supportive of the idea, but reminded the Committee that the Government were not currently encouraging public meetings to take place, but they were in support of staff safely returning to the workplace. A Member responded that the Chamber was large enough to accommodate Councillors and Officers to sit at a safe distance, and it would be beneficial to have the physical representation of the Councils democracy back open and active again. Virtual meetings were beneficial for some, but he felt that the O&S Committee should lead on this and recommend that the Cabinet consider arrangements to return to Members to the Civic Centre at the earliest opportunity on a hybrid arrangement. Other Members agreed and suggested a flexible time plan be drawn up. The Pandemic had shown that there were benefits to working flexibly from home, but there was also a social benefit to returning to the workplace, and the opportunity for those members of the public wishing to come into the Civic Centre to attend meetings. The Chairman commented that he hoped over time, if virtual meetings continued, that members of the public would take the opportunity to view meetings more frequently from the comfort of their own home.

A Member raised a point about Planning Officers returning to meeting members of the public regarding planning applications, to obtain a better impression and

understanding of the application.

The subject of start times for public meetings was also discussed and the Chairman asked Members for their views. Many Members welcomed a later start time since they worked full time, and a 6.30pm start time seemed preferable. An email would be circulated to confirm this. The Chairman added that the Committee needed to be mindful that a return to the building for public meetings would impose extra work for cleaning and facilities staff, and that there was still some IT infrastructure required before hybrid meetings could take place.

**Resolved:**

**That the report be received and noted.**

## **46 Annual Sickness Report**

The Head of HR & Customer Services introduced the report, which provided annual information on sickness absenteeism for 2019/2020, and this year also included additional data about the corporate health of the organisation. The report showed trends and correlations that might indicate poor corporate health in specific service areas. Sickness days had decreased from 10.8 days per FTE to 9.1 days per FTE, and long term sickness that had previously caused particular concern, had also reduced. Under paragraph 28, the sentence should have read “Comparison with neighbouring councils showed that Ashford was around mid-table”, so there was no suggestion that Ashford was significantly out of step with other Local Authorities. A revised sickness policy and new attendance management policy would be considered by JCC in October. Members had previously expressed concern about the levels of staff turnover in Planning, so a longer narrative was included in this report on this service area. Overall the level of turnover was ok at 11% (9% due to resignation), compared to 15% nationally. The Head of HR & Customer Services added the caveat that some turnover was positive. Regarding employment relations, overall there was no indication that any one area had a higher level of cases, with the exception of Housing where a number of inexperienced managers had required extra support.

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

- A Member spoke about an incident she had witnessed whereby a member of the public had been abusive towards a Customer Services Officer. She noted that stress and depression accounted for 43% of absence within this dept., and wondered what support was in place for those members of staff to protect them from abusive interactions. The Head of HR & Customer Services explained that conflict management training had been provided to staff, risk assessments were regularly undertaken, staff worked on a rota basis to ensure they were not always customer facing and the Council had the ability to ban abusive customers from entering the building. She added that typically the absence reasons for those Officers absence were not around the job

being too stressful, but were around other indicators.

- Concern was expressed over the high figures of stress and mental health absence within the report. Members wanted to know what the Council were doing to tackle this. What was being done to reduce workloads and additionally what was being done to transform operations in order to support this reduction? It was suggested that the Committee should set an expectation that the figure should have decreased by 5 – 10% within 12 months. The Head of HR and Customer Services explained that the figures represented the time taken off, not the number of staff. In comparison to national figures for mental ill health, which were 59%, Ashford was comparatively lower. In addition, a lot of mental ill health within the report could be attributed to external factors such as bereavement and relationship issues. The Council had recognised that remote working was very accommodating for some staff when tackling issues such as childcare and caring for elderly relatives, and feedback received indicated that this was helpful in providing a better work-life balance. Reduction of workload was included within the Transformation Agenda and this topic would be explored in more detail in the future.
- A Member added that a set of targets against the KPI's would be useful to demonstrate year on year progress. The Head of HR and Customer Services confirmed that a set of targets were shared within the Corporate Performance Report and she believed the target to be around 8.7 days per FTE, which was the level the Council had achieved in the previous year. The revised policies that were going to JCC in October included some prevention measures such as earlier intervention and accessing the wellbeing tools available, in a bid to reduce those figures further. Potentially the target could be revised going forward into the next financial year.
- The Head of HR and Customer Service talked about the increase of awareness and acceptance that mental ill health was a real issue and that the stigma was no longer attached. This could attribute also to the higher figures, and it was important to remember that the Council was still significantly lower than the national trend.
- The Chairman went onto speak about working from home, and reiterated that many staff seemed to prefer remote working and the flexibility it offered. Many staff that had previously never worked from home had expressed that they were now seeing the benefits. Furthermore, they were also open to the idea of carrying on this way of working into the future, albeit for some on a hybrid basis. A question was raised regarding the negative impacts of working from home and the possibility that this could also lead to stress for some employees. The head of HR and Customer Services expanded on this and said that there some staff had said they felt isolated and that remote working was not good for them. With that in mind, those staff had been prioritised to come back into the Civic Centre. The Member agreed that it was important that staff had the choice.

- With reference to the absence figures for the Planning Department and paragraph 37 of the report, a Member asked whether the Council were able to ascertain whether there was one particular event that led to the demotivation of staff and a reduction in performance within that dept. The Head of HR and Customer Service acknowledged that there had been considerable changes within that service area, and various factors had contributed to increased turnover such as promotion opportunities not being realised as part of the restructure, increased caseloads and some staff leaving to work within the private sector, and these factors had contributed towards creating a 'perfect storm' that had impacted on staffing levels. The Planning Review had been through the approval process in 2018 and so the difficulties within the dept. had gradually built over the course of two years. The current interim Head of Service was aware of the feedback that had been received as part of the Planning Advisory Service review panel, and understood the issues that needed to be addressed to embed the structure and improve the service.

**Resolved:**

**That the report be received and noted.**

## **47 Digital Transformation Task Group verbal update**

The Policy & Scrutiny Officer updated the Committee regarding the work of the Overview & Scrutiny Digital Transformation Task Group. Topics they had reviewed included the Digital Transformation Strategy, how the data had been used and the IT response to Covid over the past few months. Recommendations had been drafted and agreed by the Group, and the final report would be brought to the next O&S Meeting.

**Resolved:**

**That the report be received and noted.**

## **48 Future Reviews Tracker**

The Chairman advised Members to email the Policy & Scrutiny Officer or himself with any ideas or comments regarding the Tracker in between meetings.

**Resolved:**

**That the report be received and noted.**

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