

2020/21

# Annual Report

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY AT  
ASHFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

CLlr Noel Ovenden  
Chairman

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# Chairman's Report

Councillor Ovenden

The last year has been a huge challenge for all local authorities, and both Members and Officers have worked pragmatically to reduce the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on the day to day operations of council services. The council has also had to fundamentally change the way residents are engaged in decision making, and I am pleased with how well virtual meetings have worked for all the council's public committees over the last year. From this, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was able to focus resources on areas where a positive impact could be made.

Despite the pressures on the authority relating to the Coronavirus pandemic, scrutiny at Ashford has continued and has been able to reach a wider audience than ever before. The implementation of virtual public meetings was a significant change resulting from the pandemic. Overall, this was hugely positive for the quality of debate and discussion at meetings. Holding virtual meetings allowed for more Members to attend Overview and Scrutiny meetings which has been welcomed by the Committee.

The Overview and Scrutiny Task Group has been able to deliver some quality reviews, one of which is still ongoing. The review of Digital Transformation resulted in some progressive recommendations and also ensured that the lessons learnt from remote working were carried forward in to a post Covid world.

Although the past year has been unusual in many respects, I feel Members have risen to the challenges and have tackled issues in a democratic and cooperative way. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all my colleagues on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, for their commitment and overall contribution to enabling effective scrutiny during a difficult year.

## 14

**SCRUTINY REPORTS  
& PRESENTATIONS**

## 9

**COMMITTEE MEETINGS**

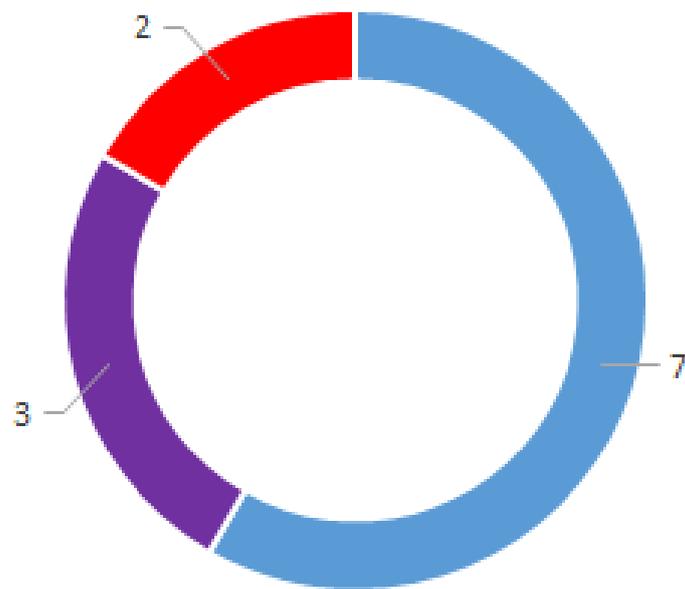
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**TASK AND FINISH GROUPS**

# Year Overview



# Committee Membership



■ Conservative   ■ Ashford Independent   ■ Labour

# Budget Scrutiny Task Group

In accordance with the council's Constitution, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has a duty to scrutinise the council's draft Capital and Revenue Budgets. The Committee constituted a Task Group made up of five Members to undertake this work, and presents its findings of the draft Budget for 2021/22 within this report.

The draft budget for 2021/22 was presented to the Task Group at its first meeting; this included all service budgets and financial risks. The purpose of this session was to assist Members in determining which areas to dedicate additional scrutiny time, these included the following:

- a. The Planning service including the budget risk regarding issues at Stodmarsh.
- b. Savings proposals relating to vacant posts, staff changes and the impact on service delivery.
- c. The risk to commercial income in light of Covid implications
- d. The impact of proposed operational savings on the delivery of council services and specifically the Legal department.
- e. Details of funding for council projects.
- f. Parish Council grants savings proposal

## **RECOMMENDATION 1**

The council's draft budget is sound and deliverable as can be at this time, recognising that the economic impact of Covid-19 is yet to be fully determined.

## **RECOMMENDATION 2**

It is recognised that there is sufficient reserves to manage the economic risks to the 2021/22 budget. It is recommended that these reserves are maintained particularly given the current uncertainties in the economy.

## **RECOMMENDATION 3**

To continue to monitor the performance of the council's commercial income units through regular budget monitoring reports whilst businesses recover from the impacts of Covid-19.

## **RECOMMENDATION 4**

Additional funding should be allocated towards the emerging Carbon Neutrality action plan, to ensure that the council is able to deliver its pledge to become carbon neutral.

## **RECOMMENDATION 5**

Cabinet should consider a one-off grant to the disproportionately affected parishes from the removal of Council Tax Support grant to help smooth the transition to full removal of the Council Tax Support Grant.

# Digital Transformation Task Group

During scrutiny of the Budget for 2020/21, the Task Group recommended to the full Overview and Scrutiny Committee that digital transformation should be included as a scrutiny review on the work programme. At the time, concerns were raised regarding the resourcing of the digital programme. An in-depth review was conducted to ascertain how far digital transformation has progressed during recent years and what the challenges and success have been throughout this process.

The Task Group felt that investigating the progress of digital transformation would benefit all staff and Members by assessing ways of improving the digital aspects to remote working and virtual meetings. Also, the group saw the benefit of reviewing the digital programme prior to Full Council's adoption of the Recovery Plan in October 2020. The Task Group assembled 4 Members; Cllr Ovenden (Chair), Cllr. Iliffe, Cllr. Ledger and Cllr. Spain to examine the progression of the digital transformation so far , over the course of several evidence sessions. The Task Group's recommendations are listed below:

## **RECOMMENDATION 1**

Note the implementation of the digital strategy to date and endorse the emerging digital programme to be delivered up until 2025.

## **RECOMMENDATION 2**

That a digital survey regarding homeworking and virtual meetings is conducted for Members, to find out what lessons have been learnt since new arrangements were introduced in March 2020 as a result of Covid-19 and what Page 55 can be improved for the future.

## **RECOMMENDATION 3**

To continue to support homeworking, virtual meetings and hybrid meetings as valid ways of running council services and meetings in the future and ensure that there are adequate IT systems in place to deliver these efficiently.

## **RECOMMENDATION 4**

Create a Corporate Etiquette protocol for Microsoft Teams that covers making calls, leaving messages and showing availability.

## **RECOMMENDATION 5**

That the online calendar function on Mod.gov is updated regularly to inform Members of future meetings for at least the next six months.

## **RECOMMENDATION 6**

Proceed with creating an online central database for local and national data that residents are able to access and view statistics regarding Ashford Borough.

## **RECOMMENDATION 7**

That a fact sheet is produced for all Members and staff with advice on broadband and how to check your connectivity whilst working remotely.

## **RECOMMENDATION 8**

Prioritise completion of an IT asset register to ensure that all council owned equipment is logged and returned to the Civic Centre when appropriate.

# Priority Topics

## HOMELESSNESS

The Committee were provided with a comprehensive summary of progress since the impact of Covid 19 in 2020/21 and progress made since the Homelessness Reduction Act was implemented in 2018.

Members were given the opportunity to ask questions. Some of these highlighted how the Council were going to manage the predicted increase in cases owing to the pandemic, the monitoring of cases and the costs associated with increase demand for resources in this area.

## THE RECOVERY PLAN

Before adoption by Cabinet planned for September 2020, O&S requested that details of the plan were presented to its Members.

Over August and September 2020, several presentations were given to the Committee.

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.

Discussion was opened up to Members and some questions were asked as to how contact was being made with the public regarding the pandemic and the accuracy of data being received at the time. Other discussion points raised were in regards to how the council were supporting officers with home working arrangements.

Overall, the Committee were satisfied with the information provided and noted the plan.

# Priority Topics

## **VICARAGE LANE**

The Committee requested an update on the Vicarage Lane Project in March 2021 in light of the roadmap out of the pandemic outlined by the Government.

The Commercial Development and Regeneration Manager explained that the project had been considered by the Design Review Panel and had received positive feedback. There will be a public consultation on the proposals before consideration by Cabinet later in 2021. Members were happy to note the verbal update provided to the Committee.

## **EXTERNAL PROCUREMENT**

Members expressed interest in scrutinising the council's external procurement process. A summary presentation was provided to the Committee in November 2020 and Members were able to query any aspects of the process.

Following the presentation, it was requested that a written paper be shared on the procurement process, specifically in regards to some questions raised after presentation to O&S in November 2020.

In response, Officers from the Corporate Property and Projects service produced a follow up paper covering the following:

- a. Member involvement in relation to high value in procurement
- b. Detail centralised procurement
- c. Detail procurement procedures, and the ability to negotiate on price.

Members were confident with information provided regarding procurement.

## **FUNDING VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC**

Members asked for a report to be presented to the Committee regarding the grants given given to voluntary organisations during the pandemic. Members requested reassurance on the processes for monitoring grants provided to our Voluntary, Community and Faith sector, particularly over the pandemic period.

Additional information will be made available to the Committee at a later meeting in 2021.

# Annual Reports

## **CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORTS**

Quarterly reports are presented to the Committee to demonstrate the council's performance across all services and highlight any areas of concern.

## **ANNUAL SICKNESS REPORT AND CORPORATE HEALTH**

This report provided annual information on sickness absenteeism for 2019/20 and wider data that provided a picture of general corporate health in the council.

## **SAFEGUARDING ANNUAL UPDATE**

This update provided the Committee with the council's annual safeguarding update. The report paid particular regard to the council's obligation to work in partnership to protect children, young people and adults at risk from abuse or neglect, preventing impairment of their health and development. It provided information on the safeguarding activity that has been undertaken and raises awareness of emerging issues. It also supported the delivery of the priorities set by the Kent Safeguarding Children's Multi-agency Partnership and the Kent and Medway Safeguarding Adults Board.

## **COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL UPDATE**

This update provided the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the community safety annual update. The report paid particular regard to the council's statutory obligation to work in partnership to reduce crime and disorder, this work being progressed through the Ashford Community Safety Partnership (CSP). It provided information on current community safety priorities, actions that have been taken to meet the priorities and raises awareness of emerging issues. It also supported the delivery of the priorities set by the Police and Crime Commissioner through his Safer in Kent plan.