

ANNUAL REPORT 2021/22

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY



CHAIRMAN

CLLR. NOEL OVENDEN

REPORT AUTHOR

ABI MOFFATT

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

I am pleased to present the annual report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2021/22 year. The report details work carried out by the Committee over the year in line with the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme.

The Committee carried out a major scrutiny review of the Section 106 Process and this was conducted by a Task and Finish Group which resulted in 8 recommendations. I am pleased to note that all recommendations were endorsed by the Cabinet in November 2021. The Committee will be looking to receive an update on these recommendations later in the year.

More recently, the Budget Scrutiny Task Group also carried out another successful review of the draft budget for the 2022/23 year and all recommendations were approved by the Cabinet.

I would like to extend my thanks to all Members in and out of the Committee who have attended meetings and contributed to discussion. I would like to also thank Officers who have taken the time to present information to the Committee and Task Group, and participate in a number of question and answer sessions.

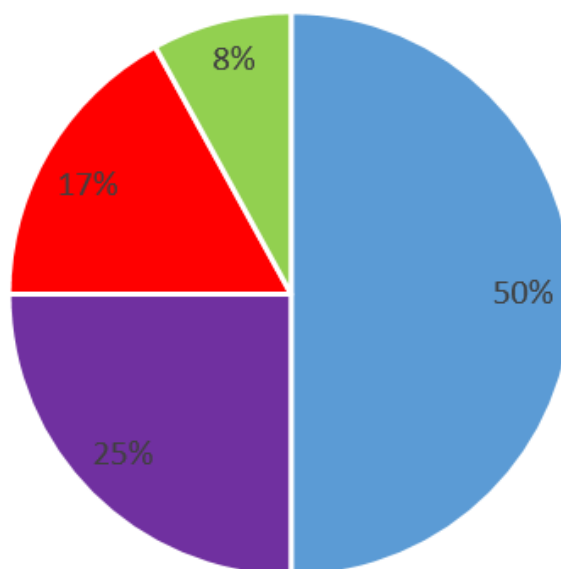
**16****SCRUTINY REPORTS
& PRESENTATIONS****7****COMMITTEE MEETINGS****2****TASK AND FINISH GROUPS**

COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Cllr Noel Ovenden (Ch)
Cllr Brendan Chilton (VCh)
Cllr. Michael Burgess
Cllr. Heather Hayward
Cllr. Kalysha Howard-Smith
Cllr. Jessamy Blanford
Cllr. Dara Farrell
Cllr. David Ledger
Cllr. Geoff Meaden
Cllr. Ken Mulholland
Cllr. Larry Krause
Cllr. Trevor Brooks

POLITICAL BALANCE

The chart shows the political balance of the 12 Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.



■ Conservative ■ Ashford Independent ■ Labour ■ Green

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.



SCRUTINY AT ASHFORD BC

Methods of Scrutiny

Issues can be scrutinised by the Committee in the following ways:

By considering reports produced by Officers and having the opportunity to ask questions about the different aspects of the council's business.

Inviting representatives from outside bodies or Parish and Community Councils to talk about topics of interest to residents.

Using the 'call in' method to bring forward matters of urgency for considerations by the Committee, and which are of interest to the public.

The Committee welcomes and encourages Cabinet Members and other non-Committee Members to attend and take part in meetings when appropriate.

Call-In

The call-in process allows the Chair of the Committee, or five members of the Council, to call in a decision which is the responsibility of the Cabinet, which has been made but not implemented. The Committee can ask the Cabinet to reconsider the decision or can refer it to Council.

There have been no called in items this year.

Public Participation

Overview and Scrutiny is open to participation from the public and involvement in the process is actively encouraged. Throughout the year, scrutiny has been committed to being open and accessible by the public and therefore has been kept as a hybrid meeting. This has meant that residents have been able to access the meeting either in person or watch live online. As of the most recent meeting in May 2022, 10 public attendees joined the live meeting held in the council's Committee Rooms and online via Microsoft Teams.

Although attendance at the actual meetings was fairly low, recordings of the meetings on YouTube received up to 45 views per video from meetings in 2022.

Some of the ways for the public to get involved include suggesting a topic for investigation as a task and finish group; providing evidence to or at a meeting; and being co-opted on to a topic group. The Committee is keen to see more public participation both in its task and finish groups and in its committee meetings.

YEAR OVERVIEW



June 2021

- Youth Unemployment in Ashford Borough



July 2021

- Support Given to the Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector
- O&S Annual Report



September 2021

- Support Given to the Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector
- O&S Annual Report
- Young People's Mental Health



October 2021

- Carbon Neutral Action Plan
- Digital Transformation Update
- Budget Scrutiny Review
- ABC Annual Report



November 2021

- Section 106 Final Findings Report



February 2022

- Annual Safeguarding Report
- Annual CSP REport
- Corporate Performance Report
- Budget Scrutiny Final Report



March 2022

- Overview and Scrutiny Work Work Programme

SECTION 106 TASK GROUP

During April 2021, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to form a Task Group to review the Section 106 process. Members raised particular concern over not being involved or consulted on proposed Section 106 contributions, prior to a report being submitted to the Planning Committee. The Overview and Scrutiny Task Group conducted an in depth review to ascertain the various stages of the process and understand where Members and Parish Councils could have greater input.

The Task Group assembled of 7 Members; Cllr Ovenden (Chair), Cllr. Chilton, Cllr. Ledger, Cllr. Blanford, Cllr. Mulholland, Cllr. Campkin and Cllr. Farrell, to examine the Section 106 Process and make some recommendations to the full Committee.

The Overview and Scrutiny Task Group recommendations reflected discussions had during the series of Witness Sessions. Both oral and written evidence was provided by Officers and Parish Councils to help the Task Group understand the Section 106 process. The committee are looking forward to hearing regular updates on how the review recommendations are being progressed.

Members insisted that a process mapping exercise of the Section 106 process was undertaken prior to progression of the later recommendations. It was agreed that once all the stages of the Section 106 process had been mapped out, this information would inform the details necessary to implement recommendations II to VIII.

Recommendations

I. A process mapping exercise is undertaken to provide clarity and guidance to Officers and Members involved in the Section 106 process. Once completed, the process map will inform recommendations II to VIII.

II. Guidance and training is provided for Officers involved in the Section 106 process to clarify roles and responsibilities of all Officers. Additionally, a 'handbook' is created for both Members and Parish Councillors, to explain the basic concepts of Section 106.

III. Communication over Section 106 is improved between the Planning Service and Parish Councils including key contact(s) for accessing advice.

IV. Training on Section 106 should be provided to Members and Parish Councils on an annual basis. The initial programme for the training should be reviewed by the Member Training Panel in consultation with the Chair of the Section 106 Task Group.

V. The new Planning IT software is expected to provide information on the council's website about what Section 106 monies are available to individual parishes.

VI. Delivery of the Infrastructure Contributions SPD should be prioritised. The SPD should provide an up to date list of what is expected of developers within a single document. This will provide clarity for all parties involved in the Section 106 process.

VII. There is a standardising of Section 106 Agreements and use of templates where appropriate.

VIII. Legal Services are trained to use the new IT system adopted by the Planning Department, to enable them access to relevant Planning documentation and therefore streamline the process.

BUDGET SCRUTINY TASK GROUP

In accordance with the council's Constitution, the council has a duty to scrutinise its draft Capital and Revenue Budgets. The Committee constituted a Task Group made up of three Committee Members and one co-opted Member to undertake this work, and present its findings of the draft Budget for 2022/23 within a final budget scrutiny report.

The draft budget for 2022/23 was presented to the Task Group at its first meeting; this included all service budgets and financial risks. Over a series of meetings, Members decided to dedicate additional scrutiny time to the following topics:

- The Port Health Service
- The council's reserves positions and forecast
- Savings and recharges
- Planning and Development Service and the achievability of their savings target.
- Details on expected borrowing interest rate increases.
- Housing Service and delivery of savings target.
- The risks around the maintenance of assets.
- Risks linked to the commercial property portfolio.

Recommendations

The Task Group concluded budget scrutiny at a wrap up meeting and approved the following recommendations to Cabinet:

I. The council's draft budget for 2022/23 is sound and that mitigation plans are in place for any increases to borrowing interest rates during 2022/23.

II. The council's reserves position is sufficient to manage the economic risks to the 2022/23 budget.

III. The Task Group support Cabinet's recent decision to have regular monitoring of delivery against Service savings targets, through the quarterly budget monitoring reports in 2022/23.

IV. It be noted that the Task Group have concerns over the ability to deliver the savings target in the Planning and Development Service for the next budget year.

V. It be noted that delivery of the Henwood project needs to be timely in order to meet the savings targets in the next financial year.

VI. It be noted that the Task Group supports the invest-to-save approach regarding homelessness prevention proposals following the service review in 2021/22.

PRIORITY TOPICS

Youth Unemployment

Further to Member concerns around low levels of employment in young people, the Committee requested information around youth unemployment in the Borough.

External representatives included the Skills and Employability Manager at KCC who gave a presentation regarding youth unemployment in Ashford and the South East, as well as the information around the varying levels of unemployment in different areas of Ashford. Additionally, the Principal Lead for Post 16 Education at KCC also attended to provide the Committee with information around young adults who were not in education or training, and explained what was being done to help these younger people. A final presentation was given by the Partnership Manager for Ashford at the Department for Work and Pensions, who was able to advise the Committee how their team helped young people get in to employment and the work currently being done with local businesses to encourage this.

-A question and answer style session was opened up to Members who wanted to gain a better understanding of the barriers preventing young people from taking up jobs. Other lines of inquiry included the impact of the pandemic for 16 to 18 year olds and how different sectors were hit worse than others.

The Committee endorsed the work done internally towards improving youth unemployment in Ashford and supported the programme of work at KCC and the DWP.

Young People's Mental Health

The Committee requested information around young people's mental health and the provision that was available for young people with mental health issues. Members welcomed the Associate Director of Children and Maternity at the NHS Kent and Medway CCG to a Committee meeting, who gave a detailed presentation which covered the following themes:

- Spotlight: Impact of Covid
- System Response
- Continuing Challenges
- Services in Ashford
- Ashford children and young people's mental health and neurodevelopment services
- KOOTH online counselling
- Mind and Body early-intervention self-harm support
- NELFT locality (MH) waiting times
- NELFT ND assessment waiting
- Local Transformation Plan

Members had the opportunity to ask questions in addition to the presentation. In particular, Members asked about the relationship between the NHS CCG and the council. Further discussion was also had around the waiting times for mental health services for young people and the resources available to assist child refugees.

PRIORITY TOPICS

Carbon Neutral Action Plan

The Carbon Neutral Action Plan was received by the Committee as Members felt it would be beneficial to scrutinise this prior to its adoption at Cabinet. The Strategy and Policy Development Manager gave a presentation to the Committee, which provided a recap of the Plan and an overview of the consultation outcomes. It included details around the overall aim of the plan, the eight priorities and the recently conducted public consultation.

Members were invited to ask questions regarding the Action Plan. Members suggested that targets should be included in the Plan going forward. Members also raised questions around how the council was going to help improve air quality and carbon offsetting. The Committee noted and supported the Action Plan.

Digital Transformation Recommendations Update

In June 2020, the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group formed to conduct a review on the progress of digital transformation across council services. The review resulted in eight recommendations and these were approved by Cabinet in October 2020. In October 2021, the Committee wished to review the progress made for each of the actions since they were approved.

Members noted that since Cabinet approved the digital recommendations last year, good progress was made for some of the actions. Several actions had been completed so far and any outstanding were expected to be delivered by the end of 2021 or during 2022.

Although Members were pleased that progress had been made, some Members expressed some concern that the progress on some of the recommendations had been slow. However, Members were advised that the IT & Digital Transformation Advisory Committee would be happy to look in to some specific queries Members had.

ANNUAL REPORTS

Annual Sickness Report

This report provided annual information on sickness absenteeism for 2020/21 and wider data that provided a picture of the council's general corporate health.

Safeguarding Update

This update provided the Committee with the council's annual safeguarding update. The report focused on 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 gave information on the safeguarding activity that had been undertaken and raised 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 (CSP) Update

This report provided the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the community safety annual update. The report referred to the council's statutory obligation to work in partnership to reduce crime and disorder, the work being progressed through the Ashford Community Safety Partnership (CSP).

The report detailed crime statistics for the borough and positioning against other districts within the county. Ashford was shown as being a safe borough as the level of recorded crime remained low and there was a reduction in many crime types including serious violence offences.

The report highlighted an overall reduction in reports of anti-social behaviour with the exception of the town centre ward. It gave information on current community safety priorities, actions that had been taken to meet the priorities and raised 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 2021/2022. Two major CSP projects were spotlighted. The Safer Streets Project that aims to make our public spaces safer and help women and girls feel safe, and the Charlton Athletic Community Trust (CACT) which empowers communities and changes lives by improving health, education and employment and reducing crime.

ANNUAL REPORTS

Corporate Performance Reports

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



WORK PROGRAMME

2022/23

Topic	Scope of what is to be scrutinised	Date
Consultation and Engagement	A Task and Finish group will be set up to examine how the council engages with residents and look at the consultation process for corporate issues.	Spring/Summer 2022
Hybrid Working	A report will be brought forward for Members to explore how well the hybrid arrangements have been working and in particular consider this in terms of performance, customer satisfaction, savings, human resources and recruitment.	July 2022
Annual Sickness Report	The Committee expect to receive a report providing the Committee with annual sickness information for the recent year.	July 2022
Freedom Leisure	Members have requested to review the council's new leisure operator. Scrutiny of this topic will look to examine how the service has been running, the savings made to the council and the levels of customer satisfaction with the service.	September 2022
Planning Service Progress Update	During scrutiny of the draft budget for 2022/23, Members agreed that it was important to closely monitor the progress of the Service and an update report on this in later 2022 has been requested by the Committee.	November 2022
Budget Scrutiny Meetings	Scrutiny of the draft budget 2022/23 will take place over three or four Task Group meetings during December and a final report is expected to the Committee to summarise the findings.	December to January 2022/23