

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **22nd May 2018**.

Present:

Cllr. Michael (Vice-Chairman);

Cllrs. Bartlett, Burgess, Farrell, B. Heyes, Knowles, Krause, Miss. Martin, Mrs. Martin, Mrs. Webb.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 1.2 (iii) Cllr. Heyes and Mrs. Webb attended as Substitute Members for Cllrs. Buchanan and Feacey.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Buchanan, Chilton, Feacey.

Also Present:

Cllrs. N. Bell, Galpin, Shorter.

Director of Finance & Economy, Head of Corporate Property and Projects, Head of Legal & Democracy, Head of Finance, Head of Corporate Policy, ED & Comms, Senior Accountant, Corporate Scrutiny and Overview Officer, Member Services Officer.

014 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 24th April 2018 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

015 Agenda and Tabled Papers

A Member commented that she had not received a hard copy of the agenda in the post until Saturday, and considering the large volume of papers attached to this meeting's agenda, she wondered if in future the papers could be sent out any earlier.

The Committee considered whether the meeting should be carried over to a forthcoming date owing to the large amount of papers pertaining to the meeting. Some Members expressed concerns that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee were not being given a thorough opportunity to scrutinise particular issues, in certain situations when not all of the relevant papers were available or were delayed. Another Member pointed out that there had been a large amount of questions submitted regarding the report for this agenda and this had subsequently generated a lot of work for Officers, and they had to be allowed time to undertake this extra work. He assured Members that any delays with providing papers were not intentional. The Vice Chairman in the Chair agreed to look further into this issue and report back to the Committee.

016 Corporate Performance Report – Quarter 4 2017/18

The Corporate and Scrutiny Overview Officer introduced this item and explained that the report provided an overview of performance against the Council's Corporate Plan for Quarter 4 2017/18 and the whole of 2017/18.

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

- A Member asked how the Town's vacancy rates (recorded on Page 10 of the report) compared to other Boroughs in Kent. The Corporate Scrutiny and Overview Officer confirmed that Ashford's rates were lower than other Kent Boroughs and were considered good compared to national figures.
- A question was asked querying what methods were used to measure footfall. The Corporate Scrutiny and Overview Officer explained that there were four counters placed at various sites in the town centre. An infrared sensor recorded each person that walked past it. However, one person could be counted multiple times if they were to walk back and forth in front of the counter. The figures were therefore reconciled to account for duplication. Year on year a clear increase in footfall had been seen.
- A Member asked for further detail on statistics concerning the decline in smokers in Ashford. The Corporate Scrutiny and Overview Officer advised that the figures had been sourced primarily from The Kent Public Health Observatory and Public Health England and indication was that the use of e-cigarettes had contributed to smoking cessation.
- The Member raised a concern that some of the statistics within the Performance Report were not wholly relevant and said it would be more beneficial to have sight of figures that required further examination by the Committee. The Vice Chairman in the Chair agreed that the data within the report needed to be meaningful. The Portfolio Holder for Finance and IT added that a new reporting process had been considered and would be created at Management Team level to review service performance on a monthly basis. He encouraged Members to discuss any concerns or ideas that they had with the Portfolio Holders.

- The Vice Chairman in the Chair asked if the deployment of staff across services to address capacity issues could create problems further down the line, since it was felt that staff were already working to their full capability. The Portfolio Holder explained that each situation would be discussed at Management Team level and it was continually evolving. It was a case of identifying priorities alongside any shortfalls and tackling each scenario appropriately to ensure staff were managed correctly. A Member added that concerns over staffing levels had been raised at the Overview and Scrutiny Budget Task Groups meetings and that something was drastically wrong. She suggested this issue be raised at a separate meeting. The Portfolio Holder advised that the year-end figures were due to be published shortly and the information demonstrated satisfactory outcomes for the financial year.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

017 Overview and Scrutiny 2018/18 Annual Report and 2018/19 Work Programme

The Vice Chairman in the Chair introduced this item and commented that the Committee had covered a good variety of subjects.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

018 Future Reviews and Report Tracker and Topic Selection

A Member asked whether the topic of additional resources should be included to be discussed as part of the Mid Term Financial Plan at Overview and Scrutiny in September 2018. The Vice Chairman in the Chair agreed.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

019 Exclusion of the Public

The Vice Chairman in the Chair then read the resolution to exclude the press and members of the public.

Resolved:

That pursuant to Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 members of the press and public be excluded during consideration of this item as it was likely that there would be disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 where

in the circumstances the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

020 A Better Choice for Property Limited – Trading Company

Some Members of the Committee suggested that this session be adjourned in order to provide more time for the tabled papers to be reviewed. The Vice Chairman in the Chair suggested instead that, the opportunity to hear the answers provided by Officers should be taken at this time, since many of the questions had been emailed in advance to the Committee prior to the Meeting.

The Committee then considered the exempt tabled papers that contained responses to questions submitted previously by Members, and Officers provided further detail to enquiries made at the meeting. The Vice Chairman in the Chair thanked the Officers and Portfolio Holders for their time and hard work.

Recommendations:

- That**
- i) the six monthly report to TEB should include a table setting out affordable social rented property, local needs housing and specific accommodation for vulnerable people**
 - ii) TEB's right to appoint Directors is no longer subject to approval by the Leader**
 - iii) the appointment of an experienced non-executive Director to minimise the risk of governance failings**
 - iv) a firm be appointed to carry out a review of the tax affairs of the Property Company and address whether the UK Corporate Interest Restriction rules apply to the Property Company as it is "grouped" with the Council and whether the Criminal Finances Act 2017 could apply to Councillors**
 - v) Cabinet to change the financial guidelines to ensure that a Director can no longer act singularly to purchase property**

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