

An aerial photograph of a large, calm lake with several small, tree-covered islands. In the background, a town with various buildings and a church spire is visible. The foreground shows a grassy hillside with a dirt path. The entire image has a blue-green color cast.

# Overview and Scrutiny

## 2022/2023

### Annual Report

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Chairman:  
Cllr. Noel Ovenden

## Chairman's Report

I am pleased to present the annual report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2022/23 year. The report details work carried out by the Committee over the year in line with the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme.

The Committee prioritised two in depth reviews and concluded these by the end of 2022. Firstly, a task and finish group was set up to understand the council's approach to consultation and engagement. Members noted the ongoing work being undertaken to explore new approaches to consultation and one recommendation supported that the option to set up a citizen's panel in the Borough be considered.

Important work was also undertaken by another task group to understand the lessons learnt from the implementation of the new planning IT system with Arcus Global. Members examined the different stages of the implementation and made recommendations to help improve the way that the council rolled out transformation projects in the future.

I would like to thank Members of the Committee for their attendance and contribution at meetings. Additionally, on behalf of the Committee, thanks are extended to Officers who have taken the time to present and participate at meetings over the year and in particular during in depth reviews.

**Cllr. Noel Ovenden**

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## Introduction and Background

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.



## 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 meetings as and when appropriate.

## Call in

The call-in process allows the Chair of the Committee, or five members of the Committee, to call in a decision of the Cabinet to a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Committee is able to recommend that the Cabinet reconsiders the decision or is able to refer directly to Council.

There have been no called in items this year.

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# Hybrid Meetings and 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.

We have been encouraging involvement from residents by publishing a news item in the summer edition of the Ashford For You magazine. The item aims to inform residents how they could become involved in scrutiny and suggest potential topics for the work programme.

Some of the other ways the public could get involved include providing evidence to or at a meeting or being co-opted on to a Task Group. The Committee is keen to see more public participation both in its task and finish groups and in its committee meetings.

## Council under scrutiny

If you are interested in scrutinising the work of the council here's how to get involved...

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee looks at council decisions and requires us to be open and accountable. The committee may look at any matter affecting the borough or its residents. It is made up of 12 councillors, reflecting the political balance of the authority. You can get involved by:

- Sharing your views in writing with the committee.
- Suggesting topics for future reviews; do you have a pressing issue that is affecting your local community which you think could be looked into? Scrutiny is not a forum to raise individual complaints, as we have a separate procedure for that.
- Attending a meeting, in person or watch the meeting virtually online.

If you feel there is an issue affecting residents that the committee should look at, email [overviewandscrutiny@ashford.gov.uk](mailto:overviewandscrutiny@ashford.gov.uk) or call 01233 330394. If you want to speak at a meeting, contact our Member Services team on 01233 330491.



## Consultation and Engagement Review

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to review the council's approach to consultation and engagement. Members were particularly interested in how the council consulted with residents regarding current issues, new policies and projects. Members also wanted to understand what the challenges were with engaging hard to reach groups and compare best practice with other local authorities. It was agreed consultation and engagement would be a priority topic for the scrutiny work programme during the 2022/23 municipal year.

A scope was initially compiled for the review to establish where scrutiny could be beneficial. A scoping document was agreed which outlined 5 key aims for the review:

- What methods of engagement and communication are used by council services and could they be improved to engage with hard to reach groups?
- How is the council engaging with hard to reach groups in the Borough and what are the obstacles.
- To understand the council's public consultation process and how this contributes to decision making.
- To explore best practice and the tools used by other Local Authorities to carry out public consultations.
- Identify ways that Overview and Scrutiny could engage more with residents to increase public participation at Committee meetings.

The Task Group recognised the importance of consulting residents on various issues. Although public consultations had been undertaken for many policies, strategies and developments, a high response rate was not always received. Members agreed that new ways could be explored to help reach all types of residents in the Borough which may involve looking outside of traditional surveys and questionnaires. The creation of a Citizens Panel was also considered as a new way to increase regular engagement with residents.



Creating a corporate approach to consultations was seen as key for ensuring their quality. The Task Group concluded that more could be done to guide Officers when considering consultation methods and a wider group of consultation experts in the council could be formed to help with this.

The Task Group found that public participation at public facing committees had improved due to the new hybrid working arrangements. However, it was suggested that more work could be done to engage residents with the work of the O&S Committee through social media and the council's resident magazine.

## Recommendations

I. Corporate consultation guidance be produced to provide services with good practice for setting up future consultations. The guidance should include details on the different methods of consultation and set out some minimum standards that need to be complied with before and after a consultation has concluded.

II. Non-conventional methods of consultation should continue to be explored by the council in order to increase levels of engagement from residents such as video and Hello Lamppost.

III. The use of easy-read versions of consultation papers should be considered for all public consultations.

IV. An internal advisory group should be formed for Officers to review consultations before they

are published. The group would meet informally to test and feedback to services about proposed surveys.

V. A calendar of consultations is produced to ensure that the council can oversee how many consultations are issued to residents during one period.

VI. Work to increase subscribers to ABC publications should continue to be developed by the Council.

VII. The council explore options around creating a Citizens Panel to encourage local residents to give their views and opinions on services and issues that affect the Borough.

VIII. Residents are engaged with the scrutiny work programme each year using the Council's communications channels.

## **Delivery of the Planning IT System Review**

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee identified that there had been issues with the delivery of the new planning IT system with Arcus Global. It was agreed that a review should be prioritised in the work programme and undertaken by a dedicated Task and Finish Group.

The aim for the review was to understand what issues had been experienced during the project and also what lessons could be taken forward in future transformation projects and system rollouts. In particular, Members were aware of plans in 2023 to develop the Arcus Global system further with the Planning and Development Service and also upgrade the system used by the Safety and Wellbeing Service. Therefore, it was important for the Task Group to understand the lessons that could be learnt from the delivery of the planning IT system project.

The Task Group assembled 5 Members; Cllr Ovenden (Chair), Cllr. Ledger, Cllr. Harman, Cllr. Mulholland and Cllr. Hayward to review the success of the project delivery of the new IT system in the Planning and Development service and, if required, make some recommendations to improve the process for future system rollouts or projects.

A scope was initially compiled for the review to establish where scrutiny could be most beneficial. During discussions about the scope, it was important to Members that the purpose of the review was not to apportion blame for issues that occurred throughout the project, but to understand any lessons that could be learnt to inform similar projects in future.

The Task Group agreed that speaking to key individuals involved in the project would be the best way to understand issues completely. It was proposed that three or four 'Witness Sessions' would take place for Members to have a question and answer style discussion with the various individuals involved, for example, the project manager.



## Recommendations

I. Projects of a certain size or importance require a professional project manager and this role should not be in addition to normal duties.

II. Unnecessary and historic data should not be transferred to new systems and any data migration should be considered during the early stages of a project. A data retention policy should be agreed and adopted for implementation in the project.

III. Internal and external user testing should be thoroughly scoped, agreed through PMG and carried out for any future system implementation or upgrade.

IV. Detailed scoping of Officers time should take place when considering project resources.

V. Consultation with external customers should take place at the outset of a project to inform its delivery.

VI. PMG should determine the governance arrangements of future projects, including frequency of highlight reports setting out key risks and challenges.

VII. Portfolio Holders should be kept informed of project updates for key projects in their Service on a regular basis, which is defined from the outset of a project.

VIII. System rollouts should foremost be designed to improve the customer experience and processes need to be mapped with this in mind.



## Budget Scrutiny Task Group

The budget scrutiny sessions yielded much information on the financial and resource challenges facing the authority and the Task Group focused on a number of key risks relating to the achievability of next year's budget.

The draft budget for 2023/24 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. The following topics were identified and were discussed over three meetings:

- The council's reserves positions and forecast.
- Savings within the budget not yet identified
- Details on the borrowing portfolio and the expected borrowing interest rate increases.
- Housing Revenue Account Maintenance Programme
- Homelessness provision and housing options
- The risks around the maintenance of assets.
- Risks linked to the commercial property portfolio.



## Recommendations

The Overview and Scrutiny Budget Task Group recommended to the Cabinet that:

- I. The council's draft budget for 2023/24 is sound and deliverable (noting recommendation II).
- II. The Task Group supports the proposal to use reserves to fund the 2023/24 deficit.
- III. The Task Group notes that in order to mitigate against the challenges presented by the current economic climate, a savings strategy needs to be developed to bridge the budget gap.
- IV. The Task Group note that work should be undertaken to assess the council's estates portfolio to determine whether assets should be retained.
- V. Resources should be allocated to ensure the council continues to deliver more than the minimum requirement of 10% for fire safety checks in homes.
- VI. A presentation is provided to the wider council regarding the Housing Revenue Account.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the report and recommendations at their meeting on 14 February 2023. It was noted that the recommendations made by the Task Group within the report reflected views of Members at the time when they met previously. However, the Committee made further recommendations to reflect the changes to the draft budget since it was scrutinised. It was additionally recommended that;

VII. The Committee approve the findings of the budget scrutiny task group at the time of writing.

VIII. That consideration should be given to increasing the council tax levels in line with government recommended levels to protect service delivery in the coming and future years.

IX. The Committee would like to monitor the delivery of the proposed savings identified on an ongoing and regular basis.

VII. £500,000 is earmarked from the Economic Resilience Reserve to safeguard against expected income from the international development company not being forthcoming.

## Other Priority Topics

### ***S106 Process Review***

#### **Process Mapping Update**

The O&S S106 Task Group set out eight recommendations, which were endorsed by Cabinet in November 2021. The first recommendation sought a process mapping exercise of the way S106 agreements are prepared from start to finish to provide clarity and guidance to Officers and Members involved in the Section 106 process. It was anticipated that this would then inform the remaining recommendations.

An update on progress was reported to the Committee in May, which concluded that a further update would be brought back to the Committee within 6 months, with the task of completing the process mapping exercise a priority.

In September 2022, a report was prepared to update the Committee in respect of the process mapping exercise. It also updated the Committee in respect of progress towards the Mid Kent Audit actions following the publication of their report into the S106 process in 2021 and other tasks that had been progressed by the Plan Making and Infrastructure Team that were relevant to the S016 review.

### ***Hybrid Working***

Members of the Committee were interested in exploring how well the hybrid arrangements were working and in particular wanted to consider this in terms of performance, customer satisfaction, savings, human resources and recruitment. A Hybrid Working update report was prepared and aimed to review the progress of hybrid working.

The overarching conclusions were that hybrid working was here to stay across the country, but it needed sustained effort to ensure it continued to work efficiently. Management Team were keen to remain agile, keeping customers' needs at the forefront of decisions and continuing to work flexibly. It was agreed that an update report would be presented to the Committee in the future.

### ***Performance Reporting***

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

# Annual Reports

## ***Corporate Sickness Report***

This report provides members with sickness absence figures for the financial year 2021/22 (01 April 21 to 31 March 22). It was noted that similar data was provided to Management Team on a six-monthly basis in order that the Council's senior management team have an up-to-date overview of key HR Metrics.

The reported figures for Ashford Borough Council employees were from sickness absences recorded on the iTrent Payroll and HR system. The figures were presented as the average number of working days lost due to sickness absence per Full Time Equivalent (FTE) employee during the year, starting 1 April 2021.

## ***Community Safety Partnership***

This report 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).

The report detailed crime statistics for the Borough and its positioning against other districts within the

county. Ashford showed 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 decrease in reports of anti-social behaviour.

The report also provided information on current community safety priorities, actions that were taken to meet priorities and raise 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 2022/2023.

## ***Safeguarding***

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.

## **Committee Membership 2022/23**

Cllr. Ovenden (Chairman)  
Cllr. Chilton (Vice Chairman)  
Cllr. Ledger  
Cllr. Hayward  
Cllr. Burgess  
Cllr. Howard-Smith  
Cllr. Blanford  
Cllr. Farrell  
Cllr. Meaden  
Cllr. Mulholland  
Cllr. Brooks  
Cllr. Barrett

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