

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held in Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **12th December 2023**.

Present:

Cllr. Bell (Chair),

Cllrs. Bartlett, Chilton (Vice-Chair), Joseph, Ledger, Shilton, C. Suddards.

In attendance:

Cllrs. Barrett, Ovenden.

Chief Executive; Deputy Chief Executive; Assistant Director Housing; Housing Operations Manager; Development Partnership Manager; Head of Housing Development; Strategic Housing Assets and Compliance Manager; Service Lead Finance; Scrutiny and Partnerships Manager; Member Services and Ombudsman Complaints Officer.

Also in Attendance (virtually)

Cllrs. Feacey, Michael.

Operations Manager – Responsive Repairs; Corporate Director of Housing, Customer, Technology and Finance; Head of Economic Development; Assistant Director of Environment, Property & Recreation; Head of Policy and Performance; Member Services Officer.

245 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 14th November 2023 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

246 Housing Delivery and Management

A joint presentation was given by the Assistant Director Housing, the Development Partnership Manager, the Operations Manager, and the Strategic Housing Assets and Compliance Manager. The presentation covered:

- The backdrop to 2023
- Proposed consumer standards
- Priorities in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA)
- Delivering new homes
- Neighbourhood Housing Service and key officers
- Legislative overview
- Tenant satisfaction measures
- The vision for tenant engagement
- Managing the Council's stock – the compliance and planned maintenance programme

- Managing the Council's stock – responding to new regulations
- Additional surveying work
- In-house repairs and performance
- Direct control of repairs.

The Chairman opened up the item for discussion and the following questions/points were raised:

- A Member noted the tenant engagement and satisfaction work underway and asked whether these measures would feed into the Council's performance management framework. The Assistant Director Housing replied that performance indicators had been identified on the Pentana system, which produced a dashboard of results. It was still necessary to identify the key performance indicators to be reported to Cabinet, and there were proposals to provide a quarterly performance report to Members.
- A Member asked about the transfer of the repairs team from the previous employer. The Assistant Director Housing explained that all appropriate employees had been TUPE'd across to the Council under their existing terms and condition of employment. She was grateful for the support from HR colleagues on this project. She went on to say that the former employer had served notice on the Council as they no longer wished to pursue the contract and she considered that this was an opportunity for the Council to take control of the service. She said that the incoming staff were excellent and had engaged fully in the on-boarding process. The ambition was to develop a smooth process in the service. Phase 1 of the new computer software was in place and phase 2 was underway at present. Much consideration was being given to how the Council could improve customer service, with an emphasis on seeing tenants as customers.
- There was a question about the £5m contingency fund. The Assistant Director Housing advised that this contingency fund was required in advance of the stock condition survey or any changes in legislation which might lead to the need for expenditure. If the funds were not required, they would be reinvested in the service. She confirmed that the funds were in the current business plan.
- A Member asked how estate management would be managed going forward. The Assistant Director Housing said that under current regulation the Council was obliged to take responsibility for maintenance of the communal areas in the HRA, and was currently using the Aspire team for this service. It was the intention to include local Ward Members in estate inspections, and where matters were reported, action would be taken.
- In response to a question, the Assistant Director Housing confirmed that social housing regulations and compliance applied to all social housing landlords. She added that the Council had engaged with other housing providers in the Borough and across the county and had identified best practice across the country. The Development Forum had been set up to engage with other social landlords wanting to develop in the Borough, and a

new Housing Management Forum was commencing to focus on discussions with management from housing associations on good practice in the area.

- A Member noted that there were 12 schemes in the pipeline and he asked what number of units this equated to. The Development Partnership Manager undertook to provide this information to the Member outside of the meeting.
- A Member asked if there had been teething problems with the new in-house service. The Assistant Director Housing said that some issues had already been tackled in the run up to the commencement of the in-house service on 1st December. One of the main issues identified was effective communication with tenants, and well as a high rate of cancelled jobs. Both these issues were being addressed through improved technology and processes. She stressed that it was early days at the moment, and that new officers had only been in post for just over a week.
- A Member raised the issue of damp and mould and the severe health problems which could arise. The Assistant Director Housing said that there was clear guidance to local associations regarding treatment of complaints over damp and mould. Officers would inspect the property to identify if the problem was caused by the fabric of the building, in which case action would be taken. Otherwise, tenants were advised to heat and ventilate properties correctly, although it was appreciated that there may be some reluctance to do this due to the cost of living. Overcrowded homes also aggravated the problem. There were various devices available to monitor and report back to officers on the humidity in a property and the running time of boilers, and officers were currently considering market options for properties most at risk. Correct ventilation and positive pressure units were also being fitted. The electrical team had been trained to install positive ventilation installation units and these were having a positive impact on recurring mould conditions. It was also important to encourage tenants to use the suggested ventilation and heating measures correctly.
- In response to a question the Assistant Director Housing confirmed that it was likely that there were people in hospital who were unable to leave hospital because a suitable property was not available. Officers were working with social workers and the hospital to try and co-ordinate a solution. They also worked closely with KCC. A proportion of properties at Farrow Court had been provided as a step down from hospital. The team also dealt with adaptation requests relatively quickly. The Private Sector Housing team worked with Dover and Canterbury Councils to fund a Discharge Co-ordinator post at the hospital to identify appropriate solutions.
- There was a question about the number of void properties and the Assistant Director Housing advised that there was an average of 8 void properties per week, although some properties were void over the longer term as they required major reparative work.
- A Member asked about staff qualifications and incentives to gain more training. He also asked whether this area was audited. The Assistant Director Housing explained that the Council strongly supported a training

programme for staff, and many of the technical staff had appropriate qualifications. Some management staff were also members of the Chartered Institute of Housing. This area had not yet been audited as clarification was still awaited from government. It was necessary to understand and identify the skill sets required so that a training plan could be put in place in due course.

- In response to a question the Assistant Director Housing confirmed that record-keeping was a current focus for the Housing Ombudsman and the regulator. An improved computer system was in place but the Council were not pursuing any accreditation at present due other priorities. However, this would be kept under review.
- A Member noted that there were 200 households in temporary accommodation at present. He asked how this was budgeted for. The Assistant Director Housing said that this would be eased through an increase in the number of street purchases. Officers were also working with private landlords to encourage them to accept homeless tenants. The in-house social lettings agency service aimed to provide reassurance to private landlords in the management of problem tenants. There was also a focus on the prevention of homelessness through various means. This was becoming harder to achieve in the private rented sector, and therefore the street purchase option had become more pressing.
- The Chairman thanked officers for attending and delivering an excellent presentation. It was agreed that the meeting would receive an update report on the in-house repairs service in a year's time.

Resolved

That the presentation be received and noted.

247 Leader's Vision and Priorities for the next Corporate Plan

The Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council introduced this item and gave a presentation which covered:

- The current Corporate Plan 22-24 and rationale for a reduced term of the Plan
- The next Corporate Plan 24-28 – themes and important existing projects
- Stabilising finances
- Strategic projects
- Cost of living – the Council's role
- Next steps for developing the Corporate Plan

The Chairman opened up the item for discussion and the following questions/points were raised:

- A Member noted that the new Corporate Plan had been developed through discussions between the Cabinet and the Management Team. He said the

Members involved only represented a third of the Borough, and he asked why wider Member input had not been sought. The Chief Executive responded that it was necessary first to identify and formulate the delivery aspirations of the Administration. Once this had been done a first draft would be shared with a wider group for input and feedback. The intention was not to start from scratch but to take forward the work already identified in the Ashford Vision 2030. The Leader added that the intention was to carry forward projects put in place by the previous Administration. This Corporate Plan would be a light touch and would be influenced by financial considerations. There would be an opportunity for consultation with colleagues in due course. He emphasised that the agenda of the Corporate Plan would be put in place by officers, with a steer from Members. The role of Members was to represent residents and feed into the process, but to leave the actual work to officers.

- A Member said he was glad to note that the town centre reset was still considered a high priority. He urged the Leader to involve the Central Ashford Community Forum, county and district Members in discussions on this project.
- A Member noted the income streams from parking and light industrial units. He suggested that consideration should be given to how to maximise the development and use of those units in the broader town centre area. The Chief Executive agreed that such sites had already proved a great success and had provided a growth in income streams. She confirmed that investment opportunities would be pursued. The Leader added that officers were also encouraged to consider the viability of investing in garage sites.
- A Member commented that some commercial estates further out from the town centre also drove revenue streams for the Borough but were looking run down and in need of attention. He questioned how to drive up the value of these estates to provide higher income yields. The Leader said that this theme had been raised by the Budget Scrutiny Task Group. The Commercial Property Team were currently reconsidering the Asset Management Plan and the current approach was to encourage any investment opportunities.
- A Member noted that there was no reference to a vision and priorities for the rural areas. The Leader responded that rural areas were an important part of the Borough, although these were not specifically mentioned in the Plan. Most rural areas were parished, and improvements were delivered through parish precepts. He said it was important to deliver a core set of services to rural residents, but that rural areas should also be encouraged to generate prosperity themselves. The Chief Executive added that rural prosperity information had been sent to all villages. Rural boundaries were set by government and the villages had the ability to bid for funding within their own area. Tenterden Town Council were pleased with the Council's input at the leisure centre and were currently undertaking planning of a Town Hall. The Chief Executive added that communities were engaged in interactive activities and were delivering new innovative projects. The Leader commented that many of the rural areas were affected by the issue of nutrient neutrality and the delay on the delivery of new housing. He acknowledged the need to build an economically prosperous Borough, and not focus on the town centre alone.

- A Member said that the emphasis on environmental impact was welcome. However, in light of this, he asked whether there was any plan to discourage the use of cars. The Leader said that this was not part of the Corporate Plan and that changes would only be made where they were considered affordable and deliverable and in line with the environmental theme.
- There was a question about the Stagecoach service. The Leader advised that he had worked with Stagecoach to support their service to Ashford and the surrounding rural areas. Stagecoach had had to cut some of their services due to financial considerations but had promised to reinstate services wherever possible. However, they had warned that this would be on a 'use it or lose it' basis.
- A Member noted the cost of office space and living in London. He suggested encouraging migration from London to Ashford to drive up the skills, qualifications and capacity of residents. The Head of Economic Development said that work on inward investment had been ongoing via the AshfordFOR project for a few years and it was due for a review. He confirmed that London would continue to be a target to encourage growth in Ashford with a view to greater prosperity and earnings in the Borough. He noted that the residential building around the station, together with changed working patterns arising from Covid, had already encouraged people to resettle in the area. The Chief Executive added that the UK Prosperity Fund money was now in the 3rd year which was boosting the skills agenda locally. The second phase of the Ashford College expansion was complete and the College was considering the 3rd phase, which would provide more opportunity for qualifications locally. The Levelling up Fund aspect of New Town works would also create a college facility on that site for qualifications within the creative industries. The Brompton project was an opportunity to provide engineering and management qualifications to local residents.
- A Member asked whether there were any new initiatives during this Administration. The Leader replied that it was the intention to consider the Corporate Plan halfway through its lifetime to assess the financial situation and decide whether a review was necessary.
- A Member noted that the Council had a good relationship with the government and had cooperated on a number of government schemes in the Borough. The Chief Executive confirmed that the Port Health service would commence in Ashford in April 2024. This was a significant service not just for the Borough but for the whole country, and provided an opportunity for the development of local industry related to the Port Health business. A Member noted that the Council had shown a very 'can do' attitude to various government initiatives, and this should reap benefits going forward.
- There was a question about the Administration's intentions regarding Council Tax. The Leader confirmed that a maximum increase of 2.99 percent was built into the draft budget but advised that the Council's proportion of the Council Tax increase was significantly lower than other preceptors at £5.46 per year. He emphasised that although the task group had agreed on a maximum increase, this would not necessarily be the final outcome. He

pointed out the pressure on services, together with inflation and the need to sustain quality delivery of services in balance with income. In response to a question about Council Tax in future years, the Leader replied that this was a decision to be made on a year-on-year basis and he could not comment on future figures.

Resolved

That the presentation be received and noted.

248 Schedule of Key Decisions

Resolved that the report be received and noted.

249 Work Tracker

Resolved that the report be received and noted.