

Report Title: Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2023/24

Chairman's introduction

1. I am pleased to present the annual report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2023/24 year. The report details work carried out by the Committee over the year in line with the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme.
2. As I hope you will see from this report, it has been a busy year for the Committee which brought forward a range of topics that matter to local people. Topics included council run services such as the waste collection contract and housing delivery as well as those provided by other organisations when we welcomed South East Water to explain the reasons for last year's water shortages and plans to mitigate these in the future.
3. 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.

Councillor Neil Bell, Overview and Scrutiny Chairman 2023/24

Background

4. 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.
5. 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 as and when appropriate.
6. In the 2023/24 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

7. Issues can be scrutinised by the Committee in the following ways:
 - a) By considering reports produced by Officers and having the opportunity to ask questions about the different aspects of the council's business.
 - b) Inviting representatives from outside organisations or Parish and Community Councils to talk about topics of interest to residents.
 - c) Using the 'call in' method to bring forward matters of urgency for considerations by the Committee, and which are of interest to the public.
8. The Committee welcomes and encourages Cabinet Members and other non-Committee Members to attend meetings as and when appropriate to answer questions or observe.

Call in

9. 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.
10. There have been no called in items this year.

Hybrid Meetings and Public Participation

11. Overview and Scrutiny is open for members of the public to attend. Throughout the year, scrutiny has been committed to being open and accessible to 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.
12. 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.

Training

13. Following the May 2023 elections, there was a change to the Committee membership and so dedicated scrutiny training was provided as part of the member training programme. The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) held several sessions for scrutiny and were open to all Members to attend. The training was focused in three workshops:
- a) Scrutiny Essentials – this covered the core knowledge and essential skills for Members to participate in scrutiny.
 - b) Using Information and Developing Effective Questioning Skills
 - c) Council Finance, Budget and Commercial Scrutiny – this was provided in September 2023 in time for the start of the council's budget scrutiny procedures.
14. Members of the Committee will receive a refresher training session specifically for budget scrutiny held internally each year prior to the start of budget scrutiny meetings. Members are also invited to attend events and seminars hosted by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny periodically. A member training budget is available to support this.

Budget Scrutiny Task Group

15. 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.
16. 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:
- a) The council's corporate property, asset condition and asset maintenance programme.
 - b) Potential risks linked to the commercial property portfolio.
 - c) Details around preparations for the Local Plan and the use of consultants as well as the impact on existing resource.
 - d) How the council are managing new regulations around planning fees and charges.
 - e) Planning enforcement resources.
 - f) The council's reserves risk and policy including significant financial risks and key income streams.
 - g) Details on the borrowing portfolio and the expected borrowing interest rate increases.

17. General information was also shared with the Task Group members but was not discussed at depth during the meetings:

- a) Copy of a housing options report recently circulated to the Senior Leadership Team.
- b) Advice from the Monitoring Officer regarding Overview and Scrutiny's involvement in the organisations structure.

18. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the report and recommendations at their meeting on 13 February 2024. 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.

19. However, additional concerns were raised by Members following the Budget Scrutiny Task Group meetings in regards to whether the budget is sound and achievable at present. Therefore, a tabled report is due to be submitted to Cabinet and will present further recommendations to outline the Committee's recent concerns, including Management Team's advice to Cabinet.

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

- I. Priority is given to exploring options to develop revenue raising assets, for example, industrial units at the Ninn Lane site subject to satisfactory business modelling.
- II. The temporary accommodation budget may now be insufficient to meeting further increased demand in homelessness representations. It is proposed that the budget is increased by £445,000 to reflect the increased demand and forecasting.

The Task Group also supports the exploring of opportunities to acquire new sites/buildings for temporary accommodation in order to reduce the long-term impact on the general fund revenue costs.
- III. The Chief Executive undertake a further review of the senior management structure during 2024/25 with the objective of making further financial savings.
- IV. The Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) showing data for planning applications is broken down to show the difference between cases currently held up by Stodmarsh, and those not.
- V. Swift action is undertaken by the Assistant Director of Planning and Development to make an appeal to central Government over the decision not to increase (double) retrospective planning fees, and lobby them to do so.

- VI. The income loss assumed as a result of the proposed increase to garden waste collection fees be revised and consider increasing this budget by £60,000.

Other Priority Topics

Update on Future System Upgrades with Arcus Global

20. Overview and Scrutiny had previously concluded a review of the implementation of the new Planning IT System with Arcus Global. One recommendation from this review was that the Committee reviewed the future system upgrades with Arcus Global in the Planning and Development Service and the Safety and Wellbeing Service.
21. Members received a presentation from the council's Assistant Director for Planning and Development and the Digital Transformation Manager to explain what upgrades had been delivered so far and how phase 2 of the rollout had been progressing.
22. The Committee had been particularly interested in ensuring that any lessons learnt previously had been incorporated into delivering phase 2. In particular, Members were informed that procedures were in place to ensure user acceptance testing was signed off and ratified by the Director of Health and Wellbeing and the Project Management Group.

Residents Survey and Analysis

23. The Committee received a presentation that outlined key conclusions from the last residents' survey including information on the demographics of the Borough, distribution of age groups and a summary of the results to the survey. Overall, Members noted the results of the survey and highlighted the importance of ensuring the sample used in future surveys continued to be as representative as possible.

Waste Contract Implementation

24. At the Committee's request, the Assistant Director of Environment, Property and Recreation delivered a presentation that covered key aspects of the new contract and mobilisation plans. The Committee received and noted the presentation and were invited to ask questions.
25. Members queried the changes to routes and collection days and were satisfied that these had been communicated widely with residents and with plenty of notice. Additionally, Members queried the planned increase in charges for garden

waste services and it was clarified that this would bring the council in line with charges issued by neighbouring Local Authorities and were reminded that this collection was not a statutory service.

26. Following the implementation, the Committee has requested a further update on the new contract performance which will be presented at the June 2024 meeting.

Water Supply in the Borough

27. Water Supply in the Borough was highlighted as a priority topic for the scrutiny work programme in the 2023/24 year. South East Water were invited to attend a meeting to discuss the recent outages during 2022 and 2023 and how they were going to improve resilience in the long term.
28. A presentation was shared with Members to cover the key issues and planning for the future. Members were given the opportunity to provide questions in advance to South East Water to prepare their presentation accordingly.
29. Members were informed that the risk of outages to some areas of the Borough such as Biddenden would remain in the short term whilst enhancements were implemented. Assurance was given that to try to ensure the plans were future-proof, the long term 25-year Water Resource Management Plan took into account Central Government housing/growth predictive data.
30. The Committee noted the presentation and were provided with the representative's contact details should they wish to ask further questions outside of the meeting.

Freedom Leisure at the Stour Centre

31. The Committee wished to review the current leisure contract in place at the Stour Centre with Freedom Leisure. In particular, Members wanted to receive information regarding overall service delivery and cleanliness as opposed to the internal audit of the contract.
32. A presentation was delivered by the Commercial Projects and Recreation Manager which provided an overview of the contract and the timeline, contract finance, standards and monitoring.

Housing Delivery and Management

33. The Committee requested an agenda item that focused on housing delivery and management at the council. 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.
34. Members were provided with detailed information regarding priorities in the HRA, delivering new homes and proposed consumer standards, as well as a

breakdown of the vision for tenant engagement, managing the council's stock and in house repairs and performance.

35. The Committee were pleased with the level of detail that had been provided for each topic. Members queries notably centred on social housing regulations and compliance, the new in house repairs and maintenance service and the issues around damp and mould.
36. A recommendation was passed that an update report on the in house repairs service would be brought back to Overview and Scrutiny in a year's time.

Leader's vision and priorities for the next Corporate Plan

37. Following a change in leadership at the council, Members were interested to understand the new administration's vision for the next Corporate Plan which was due to be refreshed in 2024.
38. The Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council introduced this item and gave a presentation which covered:
 - a) The current Corporate Plan 22-24 and rationale for a reduced term of the Plan
 - b) The next Corporate Plan 24-28 – themes and important existing projects
 - c) Stabilising finances
 - d) Strategic projects
 - e) Cost of living – the Council's role
 - f) Next steps for developing the Corporate Plan
39. Members were assured that the current Plan was in its first draft and wider Member input would be sought and fed back in to the plan once the consultation process had begun. Other discussion areas raised by Members related to the councils cooperative relationship with the government, future council tax and inclusion of rural areas of the Borough.

Productivity, Staff Morale and Hybrid Working

40. 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. A report was provided to the Committee to review the progress of hybrid working so far.
41. The report summarised that they were a range of benefits to both the staff member and the council of supporting hybrid working. However, there was a need to strike the balance and bear in mind that one size will not fit all and there was no single way to implement hybrid working. In some cases hybrid working could not be accommodated, and in other cases its exact form was likely to vary and change and differ between services and this will require us all to be flexible and adaptable especially as technology, service design and customer

demands/needs changes, and we will need to ensure service delivery is responsive, efficient and effective.

42. Members requested that the Committee revisited the topic in 12 months' time, as the Council would then have moved to International House and working patterns may have changed once again.

Treasury Management

43. It was recommended by the Budget Scrutiny Task Group that a briefing be provided to the Committee regarding the council's treasury management to help with Member's understanding of the strategy. Representatives from Arlingclose attended a Committee meeting and covered the treasury management strategy of the council, the history of this strategy and any forecasts moving forward.
44. Following the presentation, Members were invited to ask any further queries. The Committee raised questions regarding the decisions made throughout the strategy period.

Annual Reports

Corporate Sickness Report

45. This report provided members with sickness absence figures for the financial year 2022/23 (01 April 22 to 31 March 23). Similar data is 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.
46. The reported figures for Ashford Borough Council employees are from sickness absences recorded on the iTrent Payroll and HR system. The figures are mainly presented as the average number of working days lost due to sickness absence per Full Time Equivalent (FTE) employee during the year from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.
47. The total amount of working days lost due to sickness in 2022/23 stood at 9.68 days per FTE. Absence levels had broadly returned to pre-covid norms and were in line with national levels for the public sector. Absence at Ashford was comparable with that of our neighbouring local authorities. Our largest causes of sickness absences related to Mental Ill Health and Respiratory. Additionally, long term sickness absence had reduced and this had been supported by manager and HR interventions.

Community Safety Partnership Update

48. This report provided the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the [community safety annual update](#). The Council has a duty under Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to consider the impact of all their functions and decisions

on crime and disorder in their local area. The report outlines how we work in partnership with other agencies to reduce crime and disorder, this work being progressed through the Ashford Community Safety Partnership (CSP).

49. The report detailed crime statistics for the borough and its positioning against other districts within the county. Ashford was shown as being a safe borough as the level of recorded crime remains low, and there has been a reduction in many crime types, including serious violence offences. The report nevertheless highlighted a slight increase in reports of antisocial behaviour to Kent Police. The report, which was highly positive, demonstrated the value of multi-agency working and the encouraging results that can be achieved through effective information sharing, joint decision making and coordinated activity. It showed how the partners use a wide range of interventions endorsed by the College of Policing using their crime reduction toolkit to reduce crime and disorder and to tackle issues that matter to the local community.
50. Information was provided on current community safety priorities, actions that have been taken to meet those priorities and raises awareness of emerging issues. The activity presented also supports delivery of the Police and Crime Commissioner's Police and Crime Plan (Making Kent Safer 2022 to 2025).

Safeguarding Update

51. This update provided the Committee with the council's [annual safeguarding update](#). The report detailed how Ashford Borough Council supports the delivery of the priorities set by both the Kent Safeguarding Children Multi-agency Partnership (KSCMP) and the Kent and Medway Safeguarding Adults Board (KMSAB). It had been a particularly positive year for the Council in that we received a special mention in respect of our exceptional annual report to the KMSAB. It is through these processes that we also strive to make continual improvements in this area of work to safeguard those most vulnerable, with the ever-changing landscape of challenges that are seen not only locally but are reflected nationally too.
52. This report provided information on the referrals that the Council has made to the various relevant agencies. The report also detailed the safeguarding activity that the Council has organised or participated in, including supporting the National Safeguarding Adults Awareness week, improvement to our own training packages and continued awareness raising

Quarterly Reports

Corporate Performance Reports

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

Savings Plan Progress

54. As part of the budget building process a series of budget savings were developed during the 2023/24 year to achieve savings of £1.6m, to close the budget deficit gap. Savings of £200,000 were immediately identified and applied to the 2023/24 budget, and following discussions between Officers and Members proposals for a further 1.4m were identified and developed into the following savings plan.
55. The reports updated members on the progress that had been made on the delivery of the savings schedule that was included in the 2023/24 budget report. The reports intended to be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for their comments in advance of the budget monitoring report being presented to cabinet.

Future Scrutiny

56. The Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme is due to be discussed at its first meeting in June 2024. A draft programme has been included within an appendix to this report.

Contact and Email

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