

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 January 2019**.

Present:

Cllr. Chilton (Chairman)
Cllr. Michael (Vice-chairman)

Cllrs. Bartlett, Buchanan, Farrell, Feacey, Krause, Mrs. Martin.

Cllr. Miss Martin contributed to the meeting via teleconference.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Burgess, Dehnel, Knowles.

Also Present:

Portfolio Holder for Finance and IT, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Property.

Director of Place & Space, Director of Finance & Economy, Senior Revenues & Benefits Officer & Welfare Reform Partnership HUB Manager, Head of Corporate Policy, Economic Development & Communications, Senior Policy & Scrutiny Officer, Member Services Officer.

298 Declarations of Interest

| Councillor | Interest | Minute No. |
|------------|--|------------|
| Bartlett | Made a "Voluntary Announcement" as he was a Member of KCC Council. | 302 |
| Farrell | Made a "Voluntary Announcement" as he was a Member of KCC Council. | 302 |

299 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 27th November 2018 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

300 Future Reviews and Report Tracker and Topic Selection Flowchart

The Senior Policy & Scrutiny Officer advised that the Tracker was scheduled to May 2019 to provide work items for the Committee up to and immediately following the local elections, after which the new membership of the Committee would determine the work programme for the 2019/20 municipal year. A suggestion was made that GP's surgeries should be added to the Tracker and referred to Kent County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee, since they were increasingly over-subscribed. Members noted that the NHS had attended the Committee previously to speak on GP surgeries in the context of the Sustainability and Transformation Plan and agreed that they would welcome investigation on this subject.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

301 Town Centre Place Making Strategy

A presentation for the Town Centre Place Making Strategy was tabled at the meeting. The Director of Place & Space and Head of Corporate Policy, Economic Development & Communications presented a slideshow to the Committee outlining the plans for the future direction of the Town Centre. The presentation covered various concepts including the principles of the Town Centre Place Making Board, previous events held, figures around footfall and funding sources, future vision and next steps.

This item was then opened up to the Committee and the following points/questions were raised:

- A Member asked if any feedback had been received from Marks & Spencer, following the recent announcement that they planned to close the store in the High Street, in particular the reasons why. The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Property explained that a meeting had been requested with Marks & Spencer. It had been announced that 100+ stores were due to be closed, and it was reputed that this was owing to financial difficulties and lack of profits. He added that Ashford did maintain 2 out of town Marks & Spencer stores, but regardless they were pursuing a meeting in the hope of reversing that decision. Another Member added that large retail chains more frequently looked at strategic positions near motorway junctions, as there was often less competition at these sites.
- The issue of acquiring unused buildings and derelict land was raised, along with the need to redecorate some of the old buildings in the Town, since many new flats due for construction would be overlooking these areas.
- A Member enquired about marketing ideas for the Town, since she had concerns that the number of visitors needed to sustain new resources, including the Picture House Cinema, would not come to fruition. The Portfolio Holder advised that footfall in the Town had increased annually and the Picture

House Cinema had signed a 20-year lease. The Council, although not accountable for the performance or profit of the Cinema or any other store, would maintain a strategic responsibility to assist where possible to encourage each retailer to succeed.

- The Committee went onto discuss the option of allowing traffic to pass in both directions along the lower High Street, but it was considered that this would raise safety concerns for pedestrians. The road and paving surface did need to be improved and a Member commented that Maidstone was a good example of attractive paving around their shopping centres. Another Member considered whether there could be an adverse effect on the High Street if Vicarage Lane Car Park were to close. The Director of Place & Space explained that any alternative parking would need to be of a high standard and sited appropriately to ensure the High Street maintained visitors.
- A Member raised their concern over the closure of some of the public conveniences in the Town Centre, and the negative impact this could have. The Portfolio Holder explained that one public toilet had been closed in Vicarage Lane but 12 others were still available. He added that signage needed improving to ensure maximum accessibility for all.

Resolved:

That the presentation be received and noted.

302 Universal Credit Operational Update Report

The Senior Revenues & Benefits Officer & Welfare Reform Partnership HUB Manager introduced this item. ABC had gone live with Universal Credit (UC) on 20th June 2018. The scheme had proven onerous with more work generated, but staff were coping and were used to fluctuating volumes of workload. They also welcomed the changes that central government had recently announced regarding a managed migration pilot scheme.

This item was then opened up to the Committee and the following points/questions were raised:

- In respect of the difference in figures (on page 18 of the report) between the Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Support (CTS) caseload, it was clarified that CTS did not fall under the UC scheme; therefore as expected these figures stayed the same, whereas the HB figures had dropped.
- A Member asked what was proactively being done to tackle the problems surrounding data sharing and incompatible computer systems. The Director of Finance & Economy explained that the protocol for data sharing was not something the Council had any influence over and DWP were equally as frustrated with this. The Portfolio Holder added that the Council Tax and Welfare Reform Task Group had previously identified some of the problems that had now arose. Two new members of staff had been recruited to assist with UC, and help address these types of issues. ABC, along with many other

Local Authorities were awaiting corrective action from DWP and/or central government. Concerning the computer system, the Senior Revenues & Benefits Officer & Welfare Reform Partnership HUB Manager advised that a new system provider was hoped to be procured by April 2019.

- A Member asked if the issue of vulnerable claimants having difficulty accessing the dedicated telephone line had been fully resolved now. It was confirmed that DWP colleagues were now fully aware of the problems and had assured ABC that a representative would be available to handle any future telephone claims.

Resolved:

That the report be received and noted.

303 Report of Budget Scrutiny Task Group

The Chairman of the Task Group introduced the report. He requested that the Committee's attention be drawn to two of the Task Group's recommendations.

The first consideration was the pest control budget, which currently stood at £12,000. The Council had assisted Public Health England in dealing with a mosquito larvae infestation that had arisen from a cross-channel lorry at Waterbrook Park in 2018. However, with the forthcoming expansion of Waterbrook, the Task Group believed there would likely be further incidents, which might need attention to prevent such mosquitoes becoming endemic in the UK. This in turn would require a larger budget. The Director of Finance & Economy explained that the General Fund, Reserves and Contingency funds were all available for these types of irregular incidents. If it were to become a regular occurrence, then the budget would need to be reviewed and extended accordingly.

304 Exclusion of the Public

The Chairman then read out the Resolution to exclude the press and public.

Resolved:

That Pursuant to Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of this item as it is likely that in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings that if members of the public were present there would be disclosure of exempt information hereinafter specified by reference to Paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of the Act, where in the circumstances the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

The second item for consideration was concerning the Tenancy Schedule for International House. Several tenancies within International House were due for expiry

in 2019/20 and Members agreed that there was a potential risk to the Council's rental income stream and the delivery of the budget if new leases were not secured. The Committee agreed to note the risk regarding the existing tenancies within their recommendations to Cabinet.

305 Report of Budget Scrutiny Task Group

The Chair of the Member Training Panel noted that at the Panel's last meeting, Members had agreed that GDPR training should be rolled out to all Councillors.

The Committee thanked Members and Officers for their input on the Budget Scrutiny Task Group, and agreed that the new format worked well and made the meetings more pertinent and enjoyable.

Resolved:

That: the report of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group be amended to include the following recommendation:

That the Cabinet note that there may be a risk to the Council's rental income if International House leases expiring in 2019/20 are not renewed.

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