

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 14 June 2021

Present: Councillor Patrick Thomson (Chairman)
Councillors Bland, Chapelard, Everitt, Hayward, Hickey, Hills (Vice-Chairman), Holden, Morton, Ms Palmer, Pound and Stanyer

Officers in Attendance: David Candlin (Head of Economic Development and Property), Stephen Baughen (Head of Planning Services), Jane Clarke (Head of Policy and Governance) and Mark O'Callaghan (Scrutiny and Engagement Officer)

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor McDermott

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

OSC1/21 There were no absent members.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

OSC2/21 There were no disclosable pecuniary or other significant interests declared at the meeting.

NOTIFICATION OF PERSONS REGISTERED TO SPEAK

OSC3/21 Councillor McDermott, as the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transportation, was in attendance to present under OSC9/21.

There were no Visiting Members or members of the public registered to speak.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING DATED 18 JANUARY 2021

OSC4/21 No amendments were proposed.

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting dated 18 January 2021 be approved as a correct record.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING DATED 12 MARCH 2021

OSC5/21 No amendments were proposed.

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting dated 12 March 2021 be approved as a correct record.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING DATED 29 MARCH 2021

OSC6/21 No amendments were proposed.

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting dated 29 March 2021 be approved as a correct record.

ITEMS CALLED-IN

OSC7/21 There were no items which had been called-in.

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2019-20 AND 2020-21

- OSC8/21 Mark O'Callaghan, Scrutiny and Engagement Officer, introduced the report set out in the agenda, comments included:
- The report covered a 2-year period and was intended to provide a summary of main items of business over the reporting period.

Discussion included:

- Late delivery of the report was noted.

No amendments were proposed.

RESOLVED – That the Annual Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2019-20 and 2020-21, as set out at Appendix A to the report, be approved.

PORTFOLIO HOLDER UPDATE: PLANNING AND TRANSPORTATION

- OSC9/21 Councillor McDermott, Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transportation, introduced the report, comments included:
- All areas of responsibility within the portfolio were in some way related to the ongoing work on the Local Plan.
 - Delivery of the report was at short notice due to only receiving the invitation shortly after the Annual Meeting of the Council. He had expected the new Leader to be first to be called.

Discussion included –
A26 Improvements:

- Government had expressed a desire to achieve an increasing modal shift towards walking and cycling over the next 10-20 years.
- There had been two rounds of funding under the Emergency Active Travel scheme but the Council had only been successful in the first round. Members had been advised that the partly unspent budget from A26 improvement works had counted against the Council in the second round.
- £623k of the original £1.8m budget for the improvement of the London Road/Speldhurst Road/Yew Tree Road and additional works for the installation of a phase 1 cycle route along the A26 remained unspent.
- The Council had proposed to KCC to submit a bid to retain the remaining funds. With advice from KCC, the Council had worked up proposals for the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) for the funding responsibility to be transferred to the Council. KCC Officers had advised that SELEP would not accept proposals for sections already delivered by KCC. A bid to SELEP for improvements to the A26 for Birchwood Avenue to Mabledon had been submitted, a decision was expected in early July 2021.
- A wider scheme for delivery of a cycle route along the whole route had been rejected as the overall timescale was too long. SELEP was not prepared to wait for future supplementary S.106 contributions from developments along the route.
- Only small scale schemes would be considered by SELEP as they had expressed the desire for schemes which could be implemented quickly. If successful the proposed scheme would need to be completed by September 2022

- Although the aspiration for a full cycle route along the A26 was long-standing, KCC had ruled out certain sections as they were either unsafe or too narrow.
- Work was in accordance with the Council long-standing desire for a segregated cycle route. The Council's consultants PJA had been engaged to support the work of the Economic Development team to enable the Council to work on the A26 scheme and to provide expert challenge to KCC as the Highway Authority. These plans had enabled the current SELEP bid and would form the basis of future work when funding opportunities arose.
- Easier sections of the cycle route had not been implemented as KCC were unwilling to invest in a piecemeal scheme.
- At the time the report was drafted there was the possibility that the £623k may be transferred to the Borough. This had now been returned by KCC to the government and the bid to SELEP was technically new funding.
- The scheme as submitted to SELEP was for £623k and may be supplemented by £60k S.106 contributions already secured. The plans had been drawn up by the Council's consultants but were not currently in the public domain pending initial indications of agreement by KCC. The plans were high-level and based on principles established in the Local Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan and elements of the Local Plan. Once agreed in principle, funding could be released to enable further work on the finer details and to commence work on public engagement.
- The high-level plans could be made available to members but it should be remembered that any highways work could only go so far as to encourage KCC.

Electric vehicle charging:

- The Council was currently running a survey on the provision of off-street electric vehicle charging.
- KCC had ruled out any general on-street charging so it was likely that any future provision, if supported through the survey, would be delivered in the Council's car parks.
- Further details on how the Council was conducting the survey was requested.
- A motion had been agreed by Full Council on 16 December 2020 calling for an assessment of sites for on-street electric vehicle charging. No such report had yet been presented but it was believed that it was imminent. A date would be confirmed.

Joint Transportation Board (JTB):

- The Portfolio Holder believed the JTB was of limited value having little power but was one of the few mechanisms of engaging with KCC.
- Progress on business was often slow.
- JTB was the only forum which included all six County Councillors with a complementary six Borough Councillors and Parish Council representative.
- Its meetings were one of the few examples where there was considerable public involvement in a wide variety of topics from across the Borough that actually affected the lives of residents.
- JTB had discussed the cycle route on the A26 in the early stages and identified strong opposition to the plans by some residents. This had been taken into consideration by KCC demonstrating a practical benefit of having the Board.

- JTB suffered from the lack of a budget and support.
- The Council used to have its own Highways team but the service was taken back in-house by KCC some years ago. The Council now had only one Highway Engineer. Perhaps this arrangement needed to be reviewed.

Parking Strategy:

- The reported review of the Parking Strategy would entail parking places, fees. Placement of yellow lines was a KCC matter.

Local Plan:

- The scheme for Colts Hill, as set out in the Pre-Submission Local Plan, was intended to mitigate the impact of strategic developments at Paddock Wood and Tudeley. Previous plans for a full bypass were not deemed necessary. The new plan would involve a loop around the north-eastern part of Colts Hill from the Badsall Road roundabout to re-join the A228 via a new junction and local improvements to the existing A228.
- Natural England had previously objected to a Colts Hill bypass as it would be detrimental to the visual amenity of the area, whereas the Environment Agency had objected to the idea of putting the bypass in a cutting because of the potential impacts on the water table.
- Work on master-planning transformational expansion in Paddock Wood as part of the Local Plan had considered options for enabling active travel. A bus gate on the railway bridge had been put forward as one of several options. The public response would be taken into account in preparation of the subsequent Supplementary Planning Document.

Other matters:

- The Portfolio Holder was confident in the execution of his responsibilities, being ably supported by Officers. The Portfolio Holder maintained an overview of services and policies through regular meetings with officers and made decisions based on evidence provided by officers.
- Land Charges and Building Control were probably the service areas with least involvement by the Portfolio Holder as those services were partly provided by external agencies.
- KCC was a difficult organisation to engage with, particularly on highways matters, and there was often a disconnect between the aspirations of the County and the Borough. As the recipient of 85 per cent of locally collected taxes there should be greater scrutiny of how KCC spent its funds.
- It was the job of County Councillors and the authority's own Scrutiny Committees to hold KCC to account.
- There were several outstanding planning enforcement issues. The Council has the establishment for two Planning Investigations Officers and one Planning Compliance Officer. One of these officers had retired in March and their replacement was due to start in July.
- There had been incidents where planning enforcement actions could have been pursued more aggressively. Lack of proper and proportionate enforcement undermined the whole planning system.
- Delivery of reports only three days before the meeting did not provide adequate time for members to prepare, particularly for those who worked.

- The Portfolio Holder had arranged for a report to be prepared as soon as possible following his agreement to an invitation received shortly after the Annual Meeting. It had not been known who would be the Portfolio Holder until that point.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Committee requests a further explanation of the method of engagement of the electric vehicle charging survey;
2. That the Committee requests details of the schedule for a report on on-street electric vehicle charging in accordance with the Full Council motion on 16 December 2020 (FC42/20); and
3. That the Portfolio Holder's report be noted.

WORK PROGRAMME

OSC10/21 The Chairman, Councillor Thomson, invited topics for the work programme noting the continuing pressures on the Councils resources and suggesting that proposals be collected and a proposed schedule be put together for consideration at a later date.

Comments included:

- Waste collection service – it was proposed to bring forward the request to the Portfolio Holder for Environment to attend the next meeting.
- Cleanliness at the Council's leisure centres, particularly in Cranbrook, and an examination of how the money effectively subsidising the centres was used.
- Supply and demand for social rented housing including details of waiting times and availability of appropriately sized properties.
- Review of the delivery of the leisure contract as a whole and any outstanding financial obligations.
- The Committee could require any Portfolio Holder to report to the Committee but scheduling would need to be mutually agreed. The Committee did not have the power to require attendance on a particular date.

URGENT BUSINESS

OSC11/21 There was no urgent business for consideration.

DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

OSC12/21 The next meeting was scheduled for Monday 26 July 2021.

NOTE: The meeting concluded at 7.50 pm.