

TUNBRIDGE WELLS BOROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held at the Council Chamber, Town Hall, Royal Tunbridge Wells, TN1 1RS, at 6.30 pm on Monday, 27 September 2021

Present: Councillor Patrick Thomson (Chairman)
Councillors Chapelard, Goodship, Hayward, Hickey, Hills (Vice-Chairman), Holden and Ms Palmer

Officers in Attendance: David Candlin (Head of Economic Development and Property), Jane Clarke (Head of Policy and Governance), Terry Hughes (Community Safety Manager) and Mark O'Callaghan (Scrutiny and Engagement Officer)

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor Scott

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

OSC32/21 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bland, Everitt, Morton and Pound.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

OSC33/21 There were no disclosable pecuniary or other significant interests declared at the meeting.

NOTIFICATION OF PERSONS REGISTERED TO SPEAK

OSC34/21 Councillor Scott, as the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, was in attendance to present the report in respect of item OSC38/21.

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

MINUTES OF THE MEETING DATED 26 JULY 2021

OSC35/21 No amendments were proposed.

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting dated 26 July 2021 be approved as a correct record.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING DATED 10 AUGUST 2021

OSC36/21 The minutes were unavailable for the committee and were deferred to the next meeting. Officers explained that the delay was due to temporary staff shortages and increased workloads.

Councillor Holden noted his dissatisfaction with the absence of the minutes which should be a priority.

ITEMS CALLED-IN

OSC37/21 There were no items which had been called-in.

PORTFOLIO HOLDER UPDATE: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

OSC38/21 Councillor Scott, Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, introduced the report. Comments included:

- Grateful for the support of officers, members and in particular Councillor White since becoming portfolio holder in May 2021.
- Top priority over the past year had been the distribution of Covid support grants.
- Future priorities include:
 - modernising engagement
 - resolving property issues in the town centre
 - improving transport/congestion
 - ensuring the proper delivery of other services within the portfolio

Modernising Engagement:

- Most people appreciated the benefits of living in Tunbridge Wells and understood the need for growth. Better engagement would be important to future success.
- Overreliance on traditional consultation methods needed to change.
- Lengthy reports were often poorly understood resulting in poorly understood decisions.
- Current opportunities for the public to be involved in meetings were unsatisfactory.
- These were widespread problems often resulting in a polarity of views rather than consensus and compromise.
- People needed to be able to engage in forming ideas rather being presented with a yes/no decision.
- New software was being introduced, not a solution in itself but part of a system change.

Property Issues:

- Agreement about the future use of the town hall was demonstration that by working together solutions to difficult problems could be found.
- Retaining the town hall was a clear public priority.
- Moving quickly with plans for the town hall was important to maximise the benefits from changing work patterns and generate revenue.
- The majority of council income came from revenue rather than taxation.

Transport:

- Benefits of private transport were well appreciated but this had been at the expense of the environment.
- A long-term plan which balanced the needs of multiple stakeholders was needed.

Discussion included:

- The best form of consultation should be elections with the ruling group being enabled to carry out their policies.
- Consultations results were often random, unrepresentative with minority views being exaggerated.
- There was much attention on the town hall and town centre but more needed to be done to support the rural economy.

- Direct democracy alongside representative democracy was important and the public should be able to shape policy outside of just elections.
- Public involvement in policy making was important to avoid disastrous and costly project cancellations at late stages.
- People voted, or not, for a variety of reasons and agreement with a particular policy could not be assumed. The council needed to understand what residents wanted, from which to build policy.
- Councillor Fairweather had been appointed to Cabinet with special responsibility for rural areas to ensure Royal Tunbridge Wells did not dominate council policy.
- Economic development policies, funding and business support was available across the borough.
- Efforts to distribute government Covid support, particularly proactively tracking down potential recipients and assisting in application to reduce errors and delay was to be commended.
- There was insufficient clarity on what the council's economic policies were or would be in future.
- Since recently taking office, the immediate focus was on addressing the aforementioned priorities. Later in the year work would commence on revised economic plans.
- The report included many processes and projects but lacked defined outcomes and measures.
- Targets should be monitored and reported on periodically.

RESOLVED – That the Portfolio Holder's report be noted subject to the issues raised in the debate.

WORK PROGRAMME

OSC39/21 The chairman noted that a work programme meeting would take place following the committee meeting.

No matters were raised.

URGENT BUSINESS

OSC40/21 There was no urgent business for consideration.

DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

OSC41/21 The next meeting was scheduled for Monday 22 November 2021.

NOTE: The meeting concluded at 7.10 pm.