

TONBRIDGE AND MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES

Thursday, 26th June, 2025

Present: Cllr Mrs A S Oakley (Chair), Cllr L Athwal (Vice-Chair), Cllr K B Tanner (Vice-Chair), Cllr Mrs S Bell, Cllr A G Bennison, Cllr T Bishop, Cllr C Brown, Cllr L Chapman, Cllr A Cope, Cllr F A Hoskins, Cllr S A Hudson, Cllr D W King, Cllr A McDermott, Cllr W E Palmer, Cllr D Thornewell and Cllr K S Tunstall

In attendance: Cllrs R P Betts*, J Clokey, M A Coffin*, R W Dalton*, D A S Davis*, D Keers*, M R Rhodes* and M Taylor were also present pursuant to Council Procedure Rule No 15.21.

(*participated via MS Teams).

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R I B Cannon, P M Hickmott and M A J Hood

PART 1 - PUBLIC

OS 25/27 NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Notification of substitute members were recorded as set out below:

- Cllr A Bennison substitute for Cllr P Hickmott;
- Cllr Tunstall substitute for Cllr R Cannon

In accordance with Council Procedure Rules 17.5 to 17.9 these Councillors had the same rights as the ordinary member of the committee for whom they were substituting.

OS 25/28 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made in accordance with the Code of Conduct.

OS 25/29 MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 3 April 2025 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

MATTERS FOR INFORMATION**OS 25/30 EMPTY HOMES**

Members were provided with an update on the work being done to monitor and return empty homes back into use. Current trends, activities and comparative data with other Kent local authorities were outlined.

As of 15 May 2025, there were 430 properties within the Borough empty for longer than six months and defined as long-term empty. It was noted that within the long-term empty property numbers there were known reasons for groups of properties being empty e.g unsold units. Members commented that the retirement property market was fragile at the moment.

It was reported that Tonbridge and Malling had the fourth lowest number of long-term empty properties in Kent. The Borough also had the largest decrease in number when compared to 2023. However, it was important to note that the decrease included any removal of properties from the Council Tax system.

Recent work included visits to empty properties, offering advice and support to owners and progressing a potential grant through the Kent County Council 'No Use Empty' Scheme. Work was also progressing on cleansing data and responding to complaints about empty homes.

Particular reference was made to the voids reported by Clarion Housing Group and as of March 2025 this was 92 voids with 50% being void for over 90 days. It was indicated that any property not allocated to a tenant, including those properties being repaired were considered void. This continued to be a priority area for discussion and the Borough Council had requested Clarion's 'unlocking voids plan' to understand the strategic detail. As soon as this information was received it would be shared with Members.

Members welcomed the successful recruitment of an Empty Homes Officer on a fixed-term contract. An update on the officer's progress including a project plan and impact assessment would be provided at a future meeting of the committee.

OS 25/31 CONSULTANT USE 2024-25

The report of the Chief Executive provided information on the spend and use of consultants by the Borough Council during 2024/25. As requested by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee of 11 September 2024, the organisation continued to closely manage use of external expertise and an ongoing review of use would be reported annually.

Members reviewed and noted the summary of consultant spend in 2024/25 (attached at Annex 1). Over half (60%) of all projects making use of consultants spent £5,000 or less in 2024/25. Only Planning, Housing and Environmental Health Services and Executive Services had engaged consultants for multi-year projects for which spend in 2024/25 was a proportion of the overall project total. These were mostly in relation to the emerging Local Plan and other significant projects requiring specialist skill.

It was noted that much of the consultant use was utilising external funding for time limited projects, without which the projects would not be feasible and the external funding potentially lost. Consultants provided expertise that was not available in house and where it was not feasible to recruit specialist staff as they would be under occupied for most of the time due to the specialist nature of the work.

OS 25/32 LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL CARE OMBUDSMAN - ANNUAL REVIEW LETTER

The annual report of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman regarding complaints received and dealt with by them over the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 was presented for information.

In summary, the Ombudsman received 15 formal complaints over that period. The one complaint investigated and upheld related to planning conditions. The remaining complaints were either not for the ombudsman or were assessed and closed.

Details of the complaints were attached at Annex 1.

Whilst the Borough Council had a good record with the Ombudsman, complaints were a valuable tool in measuring performance and reviewing processes.

OS 25/33 RECORD OF DECISIONS TAKEN BY THE EXECUTIVE

The decisions taken by the Cabinet and Cabinet Members during May and June 2025 were presented for information and noted by the Committee.

OS 25/34 NOTICE OF FORTHCOMING KEY DECISIONS

The Notice setting out Key Decisions anticipated to be taken during the period July to August 2025 was presented for information. It was also noted that the Notice was subject to change if adjustments were necessary to the reporting timetable.

If there were any issues that the Committee wished to scrutinise, they were invited to raise these with the Chair.

OS 25/35 WORK PROGRAMME

The Work Programme setting out potential matters to be scrutinised during 2025/26 was noted. Members were invited to suggest future items by liaising with the Chair of the Committee.

The Committee asked that the following issues be covered in discussions on the replacement Angel Centre:

- Consultation and public engagement;
- Facility mix compared to current facilities;
- Disability access in new building;
- Funding

In recognition that these matters were to be considered by the Tonbridge Town Centre Programme Board, it was requested that a report be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION IN PRIVATE**OS 25/36 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

The Chair moved, it was seconded by Cllr Brown and

RESOLVED: That as public discussion would disclose exempt information, the following matters be considered in private.

PART 2 - PRIVATE**MATTERS FOR INFORMATION****OS 25/37 BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC PROTECTION SOFTWARE SYSTEM**

(Reasons: Part 2 Private – LGA 1972 Sch 12A Paragraph 3 – Financial or business affairs of any particular person)

The findings of the independent review into the implementation of a new software system for the built environment and public protection services was presented.

Careful consideration was given to the findings of the review as summarised in paragraph 12 of the report and detailed in Annex 1. The actions identified to address the findings and the positive progress made at implementing these were noted.

Members were assured that the Borough Council proactively protected its infrastructure against cybersecurity threats and had mechanisms in place to ensure resilience against potential breaches. Work was also

ongoing to mitigate risks and ensure compliance with GDPR requirements.

After in-depth and robust discussion, it was recognised that better procurement processes, risk management, due diligence and project management were required. Members also felt that the Borough Council should have been quicker to recognise and address issues during the project. However, the positive progress already being made to address these areas was welcomed.

OS 25/38 RETIREMENT OF DIRECTOR OF FINANCE AND TRANSFORMATION

Whilst not a private item, Members wished to acknowledge the upcoming retirement of Sharon Shelton after 40 years with the Borough Council and 20+ years as Director of Finance and Transformation.

Gratitude was expressed for her contribution, commitment and support and appreciation was recorded for the excellent financial management of the Borough Council during this period.

The meeting ended at 9.20 pm