

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 21 DECEMBER 2020

CORPORATE PEER REVIEW UPDATE

Executive Summary

This report provides an update on the implementation of the recommendations of the Corporate Peer Review.

The introduction to the report sets out the resolution approved by the Executive.

Subsequent sections of the report set out the current position in respect of each of the resolutions.

In accordance with its normal practice, Officers of the Local Government Association with contact the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council during 2020/21 to follow up upon its review.

The Chief Executive will be available at the meeting to answer any questions raised by the Committee.

Recommendations

The Committee is requested to:

RESOLVE That

- (i) the Corporate Peer Review Update be noted.

The Committee has the authority to determine the recommendation(s) set out above.

Background Papers: None.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Executive at its meeting on 16 July approved the Council's response to the Local Government Association Peer Challenge and resolved that

- (i) Officers prepare a summary strategy document based on existing approved strategies and present it to Council for approval as part of the Business Plan process for 2021/22;
- (ii) following the approval by Council of the summary document of existing approved strategies, proposed at (i) above, to undertake a programme of communications with residents and stakeholders outlining the wider policy approach of the Council;
- (iii) Officers undertake a series of public engagement events to explain the framework for town centre development proposals;
- (iv) the Citizens Panel be re-established and a programme of issues upon which to consult it be established with an initial focus on the health and well-being in partnership with the Integrated Care Partnership;
- (v) a survey of Members be undertaken to establish what further information they would find helpful to include in the Green Book and what further awareness raising and/or training is required in respect of the Council's financial arrangements;
- (vi) the proposal to Council in respect of a Standards Protocol to allow Members access to commercially sensitive information in respect of Thameswey Group companies, and any other Woking Borough Council subsidiaries, be supported;
- (vii) the consideration by the Director of Finance of the appropriateness of borrowing periods be highlighted when the Council is requested to approve its annual budgets and its annual accounts;
- (viii) the Council's efficiency strategy be revitalised in two main parts, one to explore procurement savings and the other to explore operational efficiencies through automation and use of digital services;
- (ix) an Internal Audit Review be undertaken into the resources required to ensure the effectiveness of the Overview and Scrutiny function;
- (x) Officers review the extent to which customer feedback opportunities and Local Government Association case studies could be used in the management of the Council's services with a view to improving outcomes and securing efficiency improvements linked to the efficiency strategy;
- (xi) the use of Zoom, Teams and Digital services will all be expanded and continued, post Coronavirus, and form part of the efficiency strategy, use of automation; and

- (xii) in the autumn the Council should consider its longer-term management arrangements as part of its 2021/22 business planning process.

1.2 This report provides an update on progress in respect of each resolution.

2.0 Summary Strategy Document – Resolution (i) and (ii).

2.1 The summary document, described as the “Corporate Strategy” will be presented to Council at its meeting on 11 February 2021. It will reflect the established policies, strategies and service plans incorporated in the Budgets concurrently submitted for approval.

2.2 Following adoption by Council, the key messages will be publicised through the wider resident engagement activities announced by the Leader of the Council on 15 October 2020.

3.0 Public Engagement Events and Citizens Panel – Resolution (iii) and (iv)

3.1 The Leader of the Council announced at the Council meeting on 15 October of her intention to more widely engage with residents. The proposals envisaged by resolutions (iii) and (iv) will be incorporated in those arrangements.

3.2 A Community Forum will be launched in the New Year (2021) and be hosted by Peter Gordon, formerly of Eagle Radio. The Forum will provide a Platform for engagement with residents for both the Council, in respect of topics it wishes to promote, and for Residents and Business to propose for discussion. The first Council Topic will be in respect of town centre developments (Recommendation (iii)).

3.3 The Community Forum will initially have four key areas of engagement-

- The Residents’ Panel – see detail at paragraph 3.4 below;
- Shaping Woking – incorporate information and public engagement about plans for the future development of Woking;
- Planet Woking – incorporate information and public engagement about the environment; and
- Enterprise Woking – incorporate information and public engagement about activity including that undertaken by Woking Works, Woking Chamber of Commerce and Surrey Chamber.

3.4 Further areas of engagement will be developed as necessary to incorporate engagement with Youth, Sports etc.; effectively a flexible framework which will enable engagement with residents and businesses.

3.5 The “Residents’ Panel” (Recommendation (iv)) will be launched in January 2021 inviting residents to enrol from the launch until the end of March 2021. The criteria for the Panel will seek to ensure that it is representative of the population of the Borough and the residents on the panel will have some flexibility over how they wish to be engaged in consultations. There will also be provision for the creation of sub sites of the Panel to address specific topics, for example Housing Revenue Account Tenants or Meals Service recipients. The Residents’ Panel will be embedded in the service culture of the Council and be used for feedback on the performance of Council services as well as seeking the view of residents on a wide range of activities affecting life in the Borough.

4.0 Survey of Members (Resolution (v)).

- 4.1 This matter has been discussed at the Finance Task Group but no specific changes have been agreed. Views vary between being simpler for public consumption and more detail but no one has yet identified what is missing.
- 4.2 An online reference resource has been acquired from CIPFA, “An Introductory Guide to Local Government Finance” and will be made available to Members in 2021. The annual survey of members, for training purposes, will continue to operate and will capture any further training needs.
- 4.3 The Finance Task Group will keep under review the adequacy of the Green Book.
- 4.4 Members may at any time ask for any additional information or training need and Officers will make the necessary arrangements.

5.0 Member Access to Subsidiary Company Commercially Sensitive Information (Resolution (vi))

- 5.1 The Protocol to allow Members access to commercially sensitive information of subsidiary companies was approved by Council on 30 July 2020.

6.0 Review of Borrowing Periods (Resolution (vii))

- 6.1 The Director of Finance is undertaking a review of the Council’s Borrowing Periods as part of the preparation of the Budgets for 2021/22.

7.0 Efficiency Strategy (Resolution (viii))

- 7.1 There has been no progress in revitalising the efficiency strategy. An initial review of staffing levels secured the current year savings target but it is acknowledged that more work will need to be undertaken in future years. The uncertainty created by the Covid-19 pandemic has required some projects and other activities to be temporarily suspended, to focus efforts on the response and to allow time to establish the immediate and medium term financial position of the Council. This will be further considered as part of the Budget process for 2021/22.

8.0 Internal Audit Review of Resources for Overview and Scrutiny (Resolution (ix))

- 8.1 The Internal Audit review will be included in the Internal Audit plan for 2021/22 with the work scheduled to be completed early in the plan.

9.0 Customer Feedback and Local Government Association Case Studies ((Resolution (x))

- 9.1 The setting up of the Residents’ Panel will provide the platform for incorporating more customer feedback into the management of services. This will become effective during 2020/21.
- 9.2 There has been no work in progressing the use of Local Government Association case studies to assist in enhancing the performance of services. This will be considered further as part of the Efficiency Savings review.

10.0 Digital Services (Resolution (xi))

- 10.1 The Council has extensively adopted Zoom in both its Member level operations and day-to-day services. It has greatly assisted in reducing the use of paper and moving towards “paperless” meetings. This will remain a feature of administration post Covid.

- 10.2 The implementation of “Teams” as part of the upgrade of the Council’s information technology services is currently in hand and will be completed during 2020/21.
- 10.3 The wider use of automation will be taken forward as part of the work on updating the Efficiency Strategy.

11.0 Management Arrangements (Resolution (xii))

- 11.1 The structure of the Corporate Management Group has been strengthened and the roles of the Chief Executive and Director of Planning are subject to a recruitment process which will see both new appointments determined by January 2021 to take effect for 1 April 2021.
- 11.2 Arrangements for the promotion of the Legal Services Manager to the role of Director of Legal and Democratic Services are in hand to take effect from 1 July 2021.

12.0 Local Government Association

- 12.1 In accordance with its normal practice Officers of the Local Government Association with contact the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council during 2020/21 to follow up on its review.

13.0 Implications

- 13.1 The report is an update and there are no implications to report.

14.0 Conclusions

- 14.1 This report is an update providing progress information on the implementation of the Corporate Peer Challenge resolutions of the Executive.

REPORT ENDS

