

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

held on 18 October.

Present:

Cllr J R Sanderson (Chairman)
Cllr S Hussain (Vice-Chair)

Cllr J Brown	Cllr R Mohammed
Cllr S Dorsett	Cllr E Nicholson
Cllr A Kirby	Cllr M I Raja
Cllr R N Leach	

Also Present: Councillor K Davis.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

2. MINUTES

Councillor Raja raised that the circulated version of the minutes of the previous meeting had an error in the attendance records. It was confirmed by the Chairman that the issue was noted and had since been rectified.

Councillor Kirby queried the minute under item 8. Scrutiny Review Proposal – Housing Infrastructure Bid and the sentence which read “It was made clear that, whilst the review would not look at how decisions had been made and why, there would be an element of background information to set the scene for the review.” which in his opinion, wrongly suggested that a limit should be put on the re-examination of decisions made regarding this project. The Chairman commented that this matter was on the agenda for the 22 November 2021 meeting and could be discussed further at that time. Some Members commented that they thought the minutes did accurately reflect the discussion at the 13 September 2021 meeting and they were keen not to duplicate work already being done by the HIF Oversight Panel.

RESOLVED

That the amended minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Monday, 13 September 2021 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

3. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MINUTES OSC21-033.

The Chairman welcomed the new format of the Matters Arising report and went through each item, noting the action needed and the status of each action.

Attention was drawn to item 3.5 and the Chairman noted that the Portfolio Holder Councillor Davis was in attendance to answer any questions, particularly on the garden waste service. A question was raised by Councillor Dorsett as to whether there were any new updates and Councillor Davis confirmed that all the latest information had been shared with Councillors and the public. Councillor Davis brought to the Committee's attention that there was evidence that residents in a particular road had been falsely logging bins as being 'missed'. Councillor Davis stated that addressing this issue would be one of his priorities. Councillor Nicholson asked whether there was a process in place to penalise residents involved in this behaviour, Councillor Davis advised that currently there was not but he would be willing to explore possibilities if the issue persisted through the November collection. Councillor Kirby asked whether this behaviour has been more prevalent in light of the current circumstances around the Country and Councillor Davis responded that this behaviour was rare.

Councillor Davis highlighted that the only foreseeable risk to the November and January collections of green waste would be if circumstances necessitated the reallocation of drivers to gritting lorries, which would take priority over the green waste collection.

Councillor Davis shared with the Committee that it was hoped that regular waste collection would resume in the Spring once the academy fast track programme yielded new drivers.

The Chairman drew attention to the review of the Housing Infrastructure Fund Scheme and invited Kevin Foster, Project Consultant, to provide an update. It was stated that the initial discussion with the internal audit providers had taken place and an update would be coming to the Committee meeting on 22 November 2021

Councillor Dorsett went on record to praise the format of this 'Matters Arising from Previous Minutes' document and thanks were extended by the Committee to Frank Jeffrey for his work in developing it.

4. URGENT BUSINESS

Councillor Nicholson asked if there was a need for the Council and Officers to review the security of Members in light of the death of Sir David Amess MP for Southend West. It was noted that this concern would be considered outside of the meeting.

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Officer Procedure Rules, the Director of Housing, Louise Strongitharm declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 9 – Rutland and Thamesway Update – arising from her position as a Council appointed director of the Thamesway Group of Companies, including Rutland Ltd. The interests was that it would not prevent Mrs Strongitharm could advise the Committee on the item.

6. WORK PROGRAMME OSC21-030.

The Chairman introduced the Work Programme for the Committee, which sought to assist Members with the overview and scrutiny role of the Council by providing an indication of the Committee's workload and the future work programme of the Executive.

The Chairman commented that the timing of the play areas provision item was still to be decided.

The Chairman went through the work programme for the upcoming meetings in November, January, February and March and briefly went over the work programme for the meetings in the next municipal year.

The Chairman referred to the Executive Forward Plan and commented again that it would be beneficial for Members to see an extended Executive Forward Plan as part of the Work Programme which allowed the Committee to view a year ahead.

RESOLVED

That the Work Programme be noted.

7. THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE'S BUDGET OSC21-029.

Officers briefly introduced this report and highlighted that the £20,000 budget would run from the 1st April to the 31st March each year. Unspent funds would be returned to the Council's reserves with any allocated funds which were not yet spent being taken forward to the next financial year. The record of expenditure would be maintained by the Scrutiny and Democratic Services Officer and the status of the budget would be included in the Committee's annual report. The Council finance team would retain records for audit purposes. If approved the budget management procedure would be added to the Overview and Scrutiny Toolkit.

RESOLVED

That the protocol for the management of the Overview and Scrutiny budget is agreed.

8. PERFORMANCE AND FINANCIAL MONITORING INFORMATION

The Chairman invited questions and comments from Members about the content of the August Performance and Financial Monitoring Information (Green Book).

Councillor Kirby advised the Committee that some particular statistics he had obtained from Officers weren't included in this version of the Green Book but wanted to note that it was hoped these could be covered next time.

The Chairman drew attention to page 63, the level of non-decent Council Homes, noting that there had been an increase compared to prior years and highlighted that there was a desire to improve this. Louise Strongitharm was invited to comment and stated that it had been hoped to reduce this number back to zero but issues relating to contractors and supplies had prevented this. Louise Strongitharm also highlighted that the New Vision Homes contract was due to end in March 2022 and as a result the Council could not have any works partially completed at the end of that period, meaning some kitchen and bathroom replacements had been suspended. Members were advised that the non-decency rate would be around 1.5% at the end of this year but it should be reduced at the end of next year.

Following a question from the Chairman regarding household waste on page 67, Councillor Davis confirmed that the reduction in the percentage of Household Waste Recycling going down from 60% to 56% between June and July was a general month on month variation. It was noted that quarterly statistics on this matter were sent to the Chairman.

Councillor Nicholson raised a question regarding the desired recycling target and Councillor Davis stated that the Council had always aimed for a 60% recycling target and commented that it generally runs between 57% and 62%. Councillor Davis commented that he would like to see more re-use as well as achieving the recycling target.

Councillor Kirby asked whether there was any way to get metrics prior to the Joint Waste Management Performance Review item being brought to the January meeting to prepare informed questions. Councillor Davies highlighted that IT issues had caused problems with metrics to date, though it was hoped to be able to provide metrics in advance of the meeting. It intended that the Committee could be provided with all the information they require to allow them to scrutinise the topic in full.

Councillor Leach asked whether it would be better to use percentages of relative recycling and non-recycling, to better illustrate what the Council was doing. Councillor Davis stated that whilst a higher recycling rate would be ideal there were issues with recycling waste being contaminated. Councillor Leach followed up stating that it seemed it was a matter of educating people about recycling and Councillor Davis concurred, advising that he had just signed off on the latest communications material aimed at educating the public on waste and recycling.

Councillor Dorsett asked if communal bins exacerbated the issue. Councillor Davis confirmed that this was the case and that the number of contaminated bins in communal areas was significantly higher than in normal households.

Councillor Raja raised a question on page 64 of the Performance and Financial Monitoring Information, regarding the average length of stay for homeless households in bed and breakfast accommodations. He brought to the Committees attention a case of one particular household who had been living more than six years in temporary accommodation. Louise Strongitharm stated that the figures were an average of those moved on and thus those not moved on would not be included in the figures. Louise Strongitharm also said that in reference to the case of the household raised by Councillor Raja, it would be better addressed outside of the Committee and if he provided her with all the details she would happily look into the case.

Councillor Kirby asked whether there was a target for a maximum target for length of stay and whether those in Sheerwater unsecured accommodation were the most prominent in the statistics provided and whether it was anticipated that this figure would improve as the Sheerwater regeneration progressed. Louise Strongitharm highlighted that the Council had significantly reduced the number of households in temporary accommodation compared with two years ago. She also highlighted that the only specific maximum that the Council tried to work to was six weeks for families in bed and breakfast accommodations. Louise Strongitharm stated that to set targets for other forms of temporary accommodation it would most likely be a discussion on whether the Council wanted to be firmer about whether people should go into private accommodation or if a system of auto-bidding on properties needed to be brought in.

Councillor Mohammed questioned whether living standards would be maintained in the case of where a family was moved from one house to another drawing attention to a specific case of a family who had moved into a house that was in poor condition. Louise Strongitharm stated that houses should be in a safe and liveable condition and that this particular case should be addressed outside of the meeting.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Davis for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED

That the Performance and Financial Monitoring Information (August 2021) be noted.

9. RUTLAND AND THAMESWEY UPDATE OSC21-031.

The Chairman invited Officers to introduce the report. Louise Strongitharm highlighted that over the years the Council had undertaken a range of projects and as a result of these a number of Companies had been set up. External advice had now been commissioned through Thameswey, particularly around tax and company structures to feed into a review about what the Council needed going forward, primarily founded on the view that the Council may not need the number of companies that it had currently. Louise Strongitharm went on to state that in line with the normal process the Thameswey Business Plans would be going to Council in November 2021, with the recommendation to roll them forward another year so the Corporate Strategy process could be completed and business plans aligned for 2023 with the Corporate Strategy's priorities.

Councillor Hussain shared his view that the relationship between the Companies and the Council was often misunderstood and highlighted the Companies contribution to the Council's finances through the payment of interest and how there was little risk to the Authority Louise Strongitharm commented that the Companies were an asset to the Council and had enabled the authority to deliver projects for the benefit of Woking residents. The main purpose of the review was to ensure that the structures were efficient and fit for purpose for the future.

Following a question from Councillor Kirby regarding risk, Louise Strongitharm advised that the risks were managed through a risk register that was considered at every Thameswey meeting. Although it was not possible to say these Companies were risk free, they were very well managed and allowed the Council to take a longer term view on some projects, which would otherwise not be possible.

The Chairman asked Louise Strongitharm to explain in more depth why the Thameswey Business Plans would be rolled forward. Louise Strongitharm advised that to ensure that the Business Plans were aligned with the Council corporate priorities it made sense to do a more thorough review next year and in addition to this the findings of the review on the Companies structure would be available, meaning that a more comprehensive review could be completed in the following year.

The Chairman queried if the cost of the independent financial advice had been covered by Thameswey and Louise Strongitharm confirmed that this was the case.

The Chairman asked if it would be likely that there would be fewer companies following the review. Louise Strongitharm stated that it was quite likely that the number of Companies would be reduced, although it was more important to understand the Companies purpose moving forward and ensure that purpose aligned with Council's Corporate Priorities. The Chairman followed this up asking when it was expected that this review would take place and Louise Strongitharm stated that some advice was imminent, specifically on tax elements, however further advice would be needed after that, and a specific date could not be provided at this moment.

RESOLVED

That the Rutland and Thameswey Update be noted.

10. FINANCIAL REVIEW MONTHLY UPDATE OSC21-032.

Kevin Foster was invited to introduce the item and provided some context to the report. Kevin Foster noted that this commission came out of the Notice of Motion from the Council meeting on 29 July 2021 and Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Kevin Foster advised that a contract award had been made in the previous week and that a mobilisation meeting was being set up later in the week. The commitment was to provide monthly updates to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as per the terms of the Notice of Motion and report back to the Committee in January 2022 with the outcomes as part of the Medium Term Financial Strategy Report.

The Chairman wished to add that he had been kept updated on the process of this review since August.

Councillor Hussain asked if there was an open book cost for the reviewers and Kevin Foster confirmed that there was a final contract price and no ceiling was had been put on the bid.

Councillor Kirby noted that there was a £500,000 cost allocated at the time and suggested that it may be worth approving additional funds in due course to be used on this project if need be to provide a clearer picture.

The Chairman closed discussions on this item and advised that he would be meeting with the Auditor and would provide an update at the next meeting on 22 November 2021 and that the report would be on the agenda for the Committee's consideration in January 2022.

RESOLVED

That the Financial Review Monthly Update be noted.

11. FINANCE TASK GROUP UPDATE OSC21-034.

The Chairman introduced the report from the Finance Task Group. He drew attention to the outstanding audit of the Council accounts, highlighting that the pandemic was partially responsible but also that the audit was already behind prior to the pandemic and it had been emphasised to be completed as soon as possible. The Chairman also noted that there was a forecast improvement in the financial performance.

Following a point raised by Councillor Kirby on noting the costs of the planning enquiry and the financial review Kevin Foster clarified that the commissioned financial review is costing significantly less than £500,000 and that the £500,000 is a budget delegated to the Chief Executive to support the Fit for the Future Programme and associated corporate change activity and this budget is being used to fund the Financial Review.

RESOLVED

That the Finance Task Group Update be noted.

12. HOUSING TASK GROUP UPDATE OSC21-035

Louise Strongitharm highlighted the standard items which appeared on the Housing Task Group Update. She shared that the main topic that had been considered at the last meeting was the new first homes tenure, noting that it was a significant change to the tenure given that 25% of affordable housing had to be sold to first time buyers at a 30% discount, with the discount price being capped at £250,000.

The Chairman queried if it was a minimum 25% of homes to be offered to first time buyers and Louise Strongitharm clarified that it was 25% of affordable homes and through an example stated that if there were viability issues the percentage of homes to be sold on this first homes tenure would be proportional.

Councillor Hussain stated that on the viability aspect, there were not many coming forward on new developments but there was an issue on getting the viability sorted to ensure that the affordable housing was delivered. Louise Strongitharm stated that she believed there would be better affordable housing delivery out of the Greenfield sites which were being released through the DPD. Mrs Strongitharm stated that the Council was awaiting further clarity on elements on the first homes tenure as there was uncertainty as to whether this applied to schemes the Council brought forward itself.

Councillor Kirby raised the question of whom was expected to provide the 30% subsidy, whether it is the developer or the Council. Louise Strongitharm responded that it was the developer who provides the subsidises. Councillor Kirby followed up by stating that this came back to the viability issue, highlighting that this made viability more difficult and that the £250,000 maximum price was unrealistic for Woking.

RESOLVED

The Housing Task Group Update be noted.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 8.35 pm

Chairman: _____

Date: _____