

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

held on 18 March 2024

Present:

Cllr J Brown (Chair)
Cllr A Kirby (Vice-Chair)

Cllr K Davis Cllr J Morley
Cllr A Javaid Cllr M Sullivan

Also Present: Councillors Barker

Absent: Councillors H Akberali, R Leach and L Rice

PRE-ELECTION PERIOD

The Legal Officer informed Members that the Pre-Election Period was in effect following publication of the Notice of Election.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Leach and Rice. It was noted that Councillor Caulfield had recently resigned as a Councillor.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Wednesday 28 February 2024 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

3. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MINUTES OSC24-017

It was explained that the additional resource in matter 6.1 was an extra planning officer.

On matter 6.3, regarding the visiting of food premises, it was questioned what progress would be expected in the intervening time. Beverley Kuchar, Acting Strategic Director of Place, responded that an action plan had been developed by Environmental Health and approved by the Food Standards Agency. A more detailed explanation of the plan could be provided to Members.

An update on matter 6.4, risk versus issue representation was requested. Kevin Foster recognised the concern and would continue to refine the Council's approach to considering risk and issue.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

4. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business to discuss.

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

6. SAFER WOKING PARTNERSHIP - COMMUNITY SAFETY PLAN OSC24-018

The Committee welcomed Camilla Edmiston, Community Safety Officer, and Ed Lyons, Borough Commander of Woking Police.

Officers confirmed that following the organisation restructure there was provision for a part-time Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Officer but that the position was currently vacant and way yet to be advertised. Housing Services also had a vacancy in its ASB Officer role.

Depending on the type of ASB, different authorities had responsibility. Ed Lyons explained that many of the issues reported to the police were the responsibility of local authorities.

Officers considered that CCTV was in operation across the Borough, including in Byfleet, but recommended that if any Members had concerns, they contact the CCTV Manager.

Ed Lyons considered that the Safer Streets funding, received in 2021, had been used effectively. Prior to the funding there had been 50 sexual offences along the canal area over 3 years. After safeguarding improvements, including installation of CCTV, improving visibility by clearing foliage, and supporting Basingstoke Canal Watch, there had been 0 sexual offences in the previous 2 years. Police were keen to maintain the guardianship. The Borough Commander highlighted that the work was an example of the benefits of the Joint Action Group (JAG) which brought together partners to coordinate efforts to increase public safety and reduce crime.

The Borough Commander emphasised the benefits of partnership working and noted that working directly with schools aided Prevent efforts and lowered the risk of exploitation.

The Committee was informed that graffiti concerns should be addressed to the Neighbourhood team. On graffiti along Basingstoke Canal specifically, it was noted that this had been addressed through the safer streets funding and partners would be engaged to respond to any current instances.

Ed Lyons affirmed that partner organisations would be held to account and that any cuts did not put the public at risk.

The Borough Commander considered that police had not publicised reductions in crime sufficiently to help the public feel safer. It was noted that burglaries had reduced 22% in the last year and sexual offences by 40%.

In response to a query on staffing Ed Lyons noted that there had been significant recruitment within the organisation over the last several years. The neighbourhood team had 11 police constables, 2 of which were specialised in youth support. The team also had 5 Police Community Support Officers and recruiting a sixth for a full complement.

Restorative justice was used by the Police, but national rules governed what activities could be performed.

The Borough Commander welcomed Councillors reporting issues on behalf of residents but reiterated that the public could always contact the police directly.

Ed Lyons was asked if there was expected to be an increase in crime following the decision by the Council to shutter public toilets in the Borough. The situation would be monitored and responded to where necessary. Kevin Foster confirmed that the Council would continue to meet its responsibility to maintain the assets and their safety.

A concern was expressed with parking around school drop-off and pick-up times endangering children. Officers considered the issue to be the responsibility of Surrey County Council as it was connected to highways and education but agreed to request data from the County Council. Camilla Edmiston recommended that a nomination be made to the JAG to consider investigating the concern.

RESOLVED That
the report be noted.

7. THE IMPROVEMENT AND RECOVERY PLAN PROGRESS - NOVEMBER 2023 TO MARCH 2024 OSC24-019

Julie Fisher, the Chief Executive, provided a summary of the progress made so far overall and in each of the five Themes of the Improvement and Recovery Plan (IRP). Although much had been achieved it was noted that there were many more challenges that the Council would need to address.

In response to a question Officers confirmed that the sale of Victoria Gate was at the best value possible and was presented to the Executive for decision. It was confirmed that Overview and Scrutiny had been given sight of its approach on the Executive Forward Plan.

On the process to potentially sell ThamesWey Central Milton Keynes, Officers confirmed that the necessary step was for the Council to sign a confidentiality agreement and therefore a formality.

Officers were asked to explain the maturity rating score of zero for Annual accounts and crystallisation of debt, and commercial team requirements in Appendix 5 of the report.

Annual accounts and crystallisation of debt had been rated zero in recognition that the Council had not yet developed a plan and intended to address it in 2024/25.

The Commercial team was currently provided externally through financing from the transformation programme and temporary spending with capital receipts. A plan needed to be developed on how the service would be provided sustainably and in-house.

The Committee discussed the debt reduction plan rating of 2. Officers explained that greater maturity required first rationalisation of assets and council-company business plans. It was not yet known what level of debt would remain following asset rationalisation and this would impact development of the debt reduction plan.

Officers explained that the replacement of the Shareholder Advisory Groups with the Shareholder Executive Committee was intended to formalise the process of council-company oversight and make it public.

There existed a workstream to handle improvements to procurement and the contract register was being updated. Officers recognised that tracking procurement savings was notoriously difficult but that there were procurement savings within the budget proposals agreed by Council.

The Financial Control Panel continued to meet twice per week to consider any expenditure over £500. Officers considered that it was positively impacting the Council's interests.

Officers had worked on developing a new vision for the Council and it would be shared with Members and staff in the coming months.

The Grant Thornton Value for Money (VfM) report was discussed by the Committee. Officers emphasised that the report was independent of the Council and Grant Thornton would control release of the report. A range of views was expressed on when the report should be released.

Officers had previously confirmed that the release of Part II documents, those documents considered by the Executive, Council or its committees in confidence, would be simultaneous with the VfM report. The Chief Executive confirmed that advice would be sought on the impact of the pre-election period on release date and Grant Thornton would be informed.

The Chief Executive confirmed that on entry to the organisation senior officers were not expected to work to their own visions but rather the Council's vision. Expectation was that they would deliver the corporate plan and the IRP. There existed onboarding processes to allow new staff to understand the Council better. Exit interviews were performed but aimed at understanding how the staff member had experienced the Council and use the feedback to improve the experience for other staff.

A new organisational structure was being produced and it was hoped would be available to Members in short order.

It was confirmed that the council-company structure would be simplified.

RESOLVED That
the report be noted.

8. REVIEW OF COUNCIL MEETING STRUCTURE OSC24-020

The Chief Executive introduced the item, noting that Officers had already provided two briefings to Members expounding the proposed new council meeting structure.

A range of views were expressed as to when the new structure should be reviewed.

As part of the restructure, it was proposed that the Strategic Director of Place be delegated authority to determine Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) fund applications below £10,000 in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning. In response to concern raised Beverley Kuchar confirmed that the procedure currently followed to receive and consider the application would not be altered and only the final determination of those applications below £10,000 would shift. Ward Councillors would still be inherently involved by virtue of submitting an application and their support being a necessary step of the procedure. It was emphasised that officers were required to ensure that the proposed project met the requirements of CIL funding.

Views were expressed as to the best way to determine CIL applications; whether all should be determined only by Officers, or at Committee with cross-party representation.

Officers confirmed that Council had previously resolved that a number of training topics be made mandatory for Members to attend periodically but that there had been no resolution on enforcement. Officers stated that training was necessary to be able to sit on planning and licensing committees.

In response to concern raised that the new structure would limit the ability to scrutinise Executive decisions Officers confirmed that the structure and calendar were designed to accommodate. The proposed restructure would not impact the ability for scrutiny Chairs to call extraordinary meetings which would further mitigate concern of Executive decisions not available for scrutiny.

The extant structure kept parity between the number of meetings of the Executive and Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Under the new structure there were scheduled to be more scrutiny meetings than Executive meetings.

The Chief Executive explained that the current Constitution set out that the scrutiny Chair would normally be from a political group different from the ruling one and that Officers did not propose altering the arrangement.

It was confirmed that the proposals for the Military Covenant Advisory Panel were to remove administrative (secretariat) support only and that Officers and Members would still be involved with partners.

The focus of Overview and Scrutiny on the Executive agenda was discussed and how much the former should consider scrutiny of other issues that affect the Borough and residents.

RESOLVED That
the report be noted.

9. ANNUAL REVIEW OF COMPLAINTS - 2023 OSC24-012

The report was introduced by the Legal Officer, Kuldip Channa, on behalf of the Monitoring Officer.

The Committee discussed that housing statistics were not included in the report, having been moved to the quarterly Performance Monitoring Information, which allowed for more regular publication of data.

Officers were cognisant of the need to analyse and consider service improvements from corporate complaints and this would be considered in future.

A request was made for information on the resolutions of those reported.

RESOLVED That
the report be noted.

10. UKSPF OSC24-021

The Chief Executive introduced the report which summarised the Council's approach to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) grant that it had been provided. The allocation of funding was in relation to tier and size.

In response to a question on the allocation of funds for the community asset transfer project the Chief Executive considered that it would be used in its entirety. If there was any remaining balance it would be put towards one of the already identified reserve projects.

Query was raised as to the projects being aligned with UKSPF guidelines. Officers confirmed that DLUCH had been supportive of the changes following meeting in December 2023. Additionally, more recent initial support had been given in correspondence.

The Citizens Advice Woking transformation project was developed in consultation with the organisation and Officers undertook to provide minutes of those meetings.

The £130,000 for the Lightbox project was determined following receipt and analysis of a business case from the organisation.

RESOLVED That
the report be noted.

11. BROOKWOOD CEMETERY HS2 TASK AND FINISH GROUP REPORT OSC24-022

Councillor Davis introduced the item and confirmed that the report represented the views of both Councillors involved in the Task & Finish Group.

Councillor Davis considered that there was sufficient provision in place and the money earmarked within the Council's ledger for the term of the contract. The Council has asked that Brookwood Cemetery submit investment plans and a request for the moneys required each year.

Councillor Davis thanked Councillor Rice, finance officers, the Scrutiny Officer and Officers from Brookwood Cemetery for their work on the report and task and finish group.

RESOLVED That
the report be noted.

12. WORK PROGRAMME OSC24-016

The Committee discussed the Work Programme being taken forward should Council approve the proposed changes to the council meeting restructure.

A view was expressed that onboarding and offboarding be considered for future scrutiny.

RESOLVED

That the Work Programme be noted.

13. FINANCE WORKING GROUP UPDATE OSC24-023

The Committee received the update report of the Finance Working Group.

RESOLVED That

the report be noted.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 10.13 pm.

Chairman: _____

Date: _____