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Overview and Scrutiny Committee 16 July 2018

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

held on 16 July 2018

Present:

Cllr I Johnson (Chairman)
Cllr D E Hughes (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Mrs H J Addison	Cllr C Rana
Cllr G G Chrystie	Cllr K Howard
Cllr S Hussain	Cllr M I Raja
Cllr R Mohammed	Cllr J E Bond

Also Present: Councillors K M Davis

Absent: Councillors

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies were received.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Monday, 18 June 2018 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

3. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, Councillor I Johnson declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item 6 – Welfare Benefits and Universal Credit – due to his wife's employment by Citizens Advice Woking. The interest was such that speaking and voting were permissible.

In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, Councillor I Johnson declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item 10 – Sheerwater Regeneration Scheme Update – arising from his wife's position as the Chairman of Woking Football Club. The interest was such that, were the Football Club to be discussed, Councillor Johnson would leave the Chamber.

In accordance with Officer Procedure Rules, the Chief Executive, Ray Morgan, declared an interest in any items under which the Thamesway Group of Companies was discussed, arising from his position as a Director of the Thamesway Group of Companies. The interest was such that speaking was permissible.

5. WORK PROGRAMME

(Note: In accordance with Officer Procedure Rules, the Chief Executive, Ray Morgan, declared an interest in any items under which the Victoria Square Development was discussed, arising from his position as a Director of Victoria Square Woking Limited. The interest was such that speaking was permissible.)

The Chairman introduced the Work Programme, noting that the review of play areas would be brought forward once the draft Play Strategy had been drawn up. It was noted that an item exploring the impact of Brexit on the Borough Council would be added to the work programme.

Councillor Bond expressed concern over potential closures of children's centres and the Chairman advised that the matter would be considered by the Housing Task Group. It was noted that Surrey County Council was currently consulting on its services and all Borough Councillors were encouraged to provide feedback to the County Council.

RESOLVED

That the Work Programme be noted.

6. WELFARE BENEFITS AND UNIVERSAL CREDIT

The Chairman welcomed Maria Zealey from Surrey Welfare Rights Unit, who gave a presentation on Welfare Benefits and Universal Credit noting the concerns and main groups that would be affected negatively such as the elderly, those with mental health issues and those who do not have access to the internet. The presentation by Maria Zealey was followed by a presentation by Lorraine Buchanan, Chief Executive Officer, Citizens Advice Woking, on the concerns of the impact of Universal Credit on the residents of Woking. David Ripley, Customer Services, Revenues and Benefits Manager at Woking Borough Council, outlined the work of the Council and the measures being considered for the introduction of Universal Credit.

The Committee raised a number of questions arising from the presentations. The Chairman sought clarification on who would be affected by the new benefits arrangements. There was a potential impact on those currently receiving disability benefits and it was noted that child support would be limited to the first two children in the family. Universal Credit would follow a period which had seen a two year freeze of benefit rates, followed by one year with an uplift. There was currently a four year freeze in benefit rates in place.

Universal Credit would be introduced to Woking in October 2018 for new claimants and the Committee was advised that, whilst the exact number of residents affected in the Borough was not known, it was estimated that in the region of between 5,000 to 10,000 would be affected. The applicant process for Universal Credit was explained and it was noted that claimants would receive a single monthly payment paid in arrears. Applications had to be completed online, and monthly updates had to be provided, and concern was expressed for those without internet access or those with disabilities. Access to computers would be available through libraries and the Council, though the likely level of demand was not known.

The Committee discussed the preparations for the introduction of Universal Credit, and expressed concern over the lack of engagement by the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP). In view of this, it was recommended that the agencies concerned namely the DWP, Job Centre Plus, Citizens Advice Woking, Surrey Welfare Rights and Woking Borough Council should seek to work closely together to mitigate the impact of Universal Credit. The Vice-Chairman further requested that the Borough Councillors be kept informed of any developments to enable them to respond to residents' questions.

RESOLVED

- That (i) the DWP, Job Centre Plus, Citizens Advice Woking, Surrey Welfare Rights and Woking Borough Council be encouraged to work closely together to mitigate the impact of Universal Credit; and
- (ii) Members be kept informed of any developments.

The Committee agreed that once a migration plan for the Universal Credit was known, a guidance paper would be prepared for Councillors to help them navigate residents and landlords through the changes. This document was also to include contact details for relevant officers and general information providing clarity on the transition.

7. AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROPOSALS

Ray Morgan outlined the proposals for the delivery of additional affordable housing in the Borough and confirmed that over the last 4 years, 1,065 new homes had been delivered, of which 479 were affordable (45%). He explained that there were anticipated challenges in the future due to the economics of developing previously developed land with high values and high build costs. However, the Committee was advised of the Council's aspirations to seek and secure more homes as follows:

Social Rent Equivalent:

- i) 69 homes through existing Housing Revenue Account (HRA) finance capacity on sites in Rydens Way, Hawthorn Road and High Street Old Woking
- ii) 65 homes through bidding for an increase in the HRA debt limits on site in Monument Way, Eden Grove Road and Lockwood Path.
- iii) 15 homes through the support for Thames Valley Housing at the former Ambulance Station in Knaphill.
- iv) New refuge to provide 13 units for use by "Your Sanctuary".
- v) New 37 bed hostel and support service accommodation for the York Road Project.

Thamesway were programmed to build several hundred units at various sites including the former St Dunstan's, Elizabeth House Broadway and Poole Road above the new Energy Centre. The rent would be structured with market and mid market rents subsidising the target 24 units of social rent equivalent. All tenants of Thamesway properties would benefit from the "Earn Your Deposit Scheme".

The "Earn Your Deposit Scheme" was expected to be capable of being considered as affordable accommodation under the emerging new National Planning Policy Framework in the coming weeks.

8. PERFORMANCE AND FINANCIAL MONITORING INFORMATION

The Committee received the April/May Green Book.

RESOLVED

That the Green Book be noted.

9. OVERVIEW OF COMPLAINTS RECEIVED - BIENNIAL UPDATE

The Committee previously agreed that it would be helpful to receive a regular report giving brief details of formal complaints received by the Council, to enable the Committee to identify any common themes and whether these areas should be scrutinised. Included in the data were details on the complaints received by New Vision Homes (NVH).

Jacqueline Hutton, Solicitor, introduced the report and summarised the complaints received since November 2017 and how they had been dealt with. Martin Craven attended on behalf of NVH. Jacqueline Hutton advised that there did not appear to be any common trends in the complaints, for example whilst complaints in respect of parking had increased, no pattern could be seen.

The Committee were advised there had been a dip in performance by NVH following the change of a contractor which had resulted in an increase in complaints. However the main issues had been dealt with and the backlog of work had been addressed. Councillor Bond expressed concern over the increase in complaints and referred to a property in Eden Grove Road, where scaffolding work by NVH had prevented a number of the residents from opening their windows during the hot weather. Martin Craven advised that whilst there had been unexpected delays the work was on track due to be completed by the end of August. Where possible the scaffolding had been repositioned to allow the residents to open their windows.

It was suggested a similar report could be brought to the Committee on the Council's performance in respect of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. Officers undertook to bring forward a report to the Committee on FOIs later in the municipal year.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

10. SHEERWATER REGENERATION SCHEME UPDATE

The Committee had before it the minutes of the most recent meeting of the Sheerwater Regeneration Oversight Panel. Councillor Raja drew attention to the comments of the Oversight Panel's Chairman in respect of the attendance record of the Ward Councillors. The Chairman had stated at the Panel that the Ward Councillors had taken up less than 45% of the opportunities to attend the meetings. Councillor Raja was disappointed with the comments as he had attended the majority of the Panel's meetings.

Ray Morgan updated the Committee on the current position in respect of the Regeneration Scheme and explained the background to the planning application currently being considered. Details of the first works were to be undertaken would be set out in a newsletter to be circulated in the coming days.

RESOLVED

That the position be noted.

11. BRIEFING PAPER NO. 2 - CALL-IN

The Committee received a Briefing Paper which set out the Council's provisions for the call-in of decisions of the Executive. The paper formed part of the Council's programme for elected member learning and development.

RESOLVED

That the Briefing Paper be noted.

12. BRIEFING PAPER NO. 3 - COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION

The Committee received a Briefing Paper which set out the Council's provisions for "Call for Action" items raised by Councillors. The Councillor Call for Action provided Members with the opportunity to ask for discussions at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on issues where local problems had arisen. In order to qualify, Councillors had to demonstrate that all other avenues of resolution had been exhausted.

RESOLVED

That the Briefing Paper be noted.

13. TASK GROUP UPDATE - FINANCE TASK GROUP

Councillor Davis, Chairman of the Finance Task Group, had provided an update on the work of the Task Group (minute item 13, attached to the minutes) that was tabled at the meeting. The Chairman informed the Committee of the topics that had been discussed at the last Finance Task Group meeting. These had included Business Rates, draft Statement of Accounts 2017/18, the Green Book and the desire to convert loans due from term to annuity. The next meeting was set for 18 July 2018.

RESOLVED

That the update be noted.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 9.47 pm

Chairman: _____

Date: _____

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 16 JULY 2018

AGENDA ITEM 13 – FINANCE TASK GROUP UPDATE

The Finance Task Group has had one meeting this municipal year and has held discussions around the following areas:

- Business Rates and the decision of Woking Borough Council to not be part of the Business Rate Pool,
- The draft Statement of Accounts 2017/18.
- Green Book and the desire to convert loans due from term to annuity.

The next meeting is on Wednesday 18 July.

If Councillors wish to view the minutes, please contact Member Services.

Report by Chairman of the Task Group, Councillor Kevin Davis

