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Overview and Scrutiny Committee 14 September 2020

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

held on 14 September 2020

Present:

Cllr D E Hughes (Chair)
Cllr M A Whitehand (Vice-Chair)

Cllr S Hussain	Cllr J E Bond
Cllr R Mohammed	Cllr G G Chrystie
Cllr C Rana	Cllr J R Sanderson
Cllr M I Raja	

Also Present: Ernest Amoako (Planning Policy Manager), Detective Inspector David Bentley (Surrey Police), Sandie Bolger (Youth Development Officer), Julie Fisher (Director of Community Services), Jon Herbert (Strategic Policy Development Manager), Gareth John (WBC Solicitor), Kevin Page (ROC (Redeeming Our Communities) Group), Louise Strongitharm (Director of Housing), Adam Thomas (Family and Community Services Manager), Councillors K Davis and I Johnson.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Monday, 13 July 2020 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

Some members commented on the delay in the distribution of the minutes. The Chair agreed that there was an unacceptable delay and that the process for the approval of the minutes would be looked into and to avoid it happening again in the future. The Chairman also thanked members of the Committee for working through the number of supplementary reports which also came after the distribution of the papers.

3. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MINUTES

CIL Funding

The frustrations of members were voiced as the Joint Committee would not be meeting until November, which then had a knock on effect on any potential projects using NCIL funding and it was suggested whether smaller forums could oversee the expenditure of up to approximately £10,000. The Chair added that the flowchart and short paper that

detailed the NCIL funding process would be finalised and sent to the Chair of the Joint Committee and distributed to all members. The Chair thanked all members of the Committee and Mr Amoako for their help with this.

Financial Position

The Council's financial position had been added to the agenda of the next meeting of the Finance Task Group, it was thought that the financial position of the Council would become clearer after quarter two returns.

Woking Football Club & Associated Developments Task Group

A question was raised following a resident's question to the Executive recently regarding the release of the Part II element of the Task Group's report. It was unsure whether it was within the remit of Overview and Scrutiny Committee to allow the report to be released however the Chair confirmed with Gareth John, the Committee's supporting Solicitor that it was not the case. The Chairman would liaise with Peter Bryant, Head of Democratic and Legal Services, as to whether the Part II information from the Woking Football Club & Associated Developments Task Group could be released into the public domain. The Committee had no objection to the Part II report being made public once it had the approval of WBC legal services.

Corporate Peer Challenge

Following the previous meeting of the Committee on 13 July, the Chairman had collated feedback from members on the Chief Executive's recommendations, based on the Corporate Peer Review recommendations that would be reviewed at the Executive on Thursday 16 July. The Chairman thanked the Committee for their comments and reviewing the papers at short notice. The Chairman felt the important piece of scrutiny work undertaken by the Committee was overlooked, however since the meeting it had been confirmed that the report of collated feedback had been taken to the Executive and would be attached to these minutes for information.

In the light of the issues that arose from undertaking the piece of scrutiny work, the Chairman reassured the committee that no late items of scrutiny would in future be accepted for inclusion to the agenda.

4. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business to discuss.

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

6. SURREY POLICE - YOUTH SUPPORT UPDATE

The Chairman introduced Detective Inspector David Bentley, Surrey Police, who provided a presentation on the Youth Support and Public Health within the borough. The presentation covered the five main points in the Public Health approach which included: Population, Partnership, Prevention, Data & Evidence base and the Causes of Causes.

Inspector Bentley detailed the pilot approach Surrey Police were currently using to assist with early intervention with children, and how youth experiences can impact growing up and how decision were viewed. It was explained that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) such as domestic abuse, emotional, physical, sexual abuse and neglect can have negative impacts and lasting effects on a person's health and wellbeing. There were evidential links between ACEs and mental health conditions, criminal justice, homelessness and early death. The approach aims to identify the levels of need and intervention for children by reducing childhood exploitation, reduce childhood demand on public services and address the needs of children with ACE. The aims were also discussed of partnership work with other public services to help at the first stages of trauma, and the work would be implemented to support schools and encourage engagement with the Police.

The importance of identifying a vulnerable child as early as possible was stressed as it allowed more invention work to be undertaken and therefore more support and guidance at a young age.

Inspector Bentley added that since the pandemic, more intervention work was undertaken online and there was a piece of research on the impact of COVID on the younger generation which would be published shortly and may be of interest to members. Members who were keen to help were encouraged to assist with engagement, identifying any cases of concern and continue partnership working.

Following a question raised, the positive work of the Bike Theft Prevention Scheme was mentioned as there had been a 30% reduction in bike theft.

Members thanked Inspector Bentley for the presentation and praised the proactive approach.

7. YOUTH SERVICE PROVISIONS

The Chairman introduced those presenting on the item which would provide an overview of the youth work in Woking, and an update following on from Surrey County Councils consultation that ended in June 2020.

Sandie Bolger, (WBC Youth Development Officer), updated the Committee on the current delivery of youth work, which had been conducted online recently due to Covid-19, to continue one to one support however as of recent, meet ups could be help outdoors, as it was classed as educational. Other activities included art project packs, gardening kits, online games and challenges, the team have had a strong presence on social media and supported families with mental health and wellbeing.

Adam Thomas, (WBC Family and Community Services Manager), shared information on how Covid had negatively affected employment for 18 to 24 year olds which then resulted in a rise of claimants of Job Seekers Allowance / Universal Credit from 250 to 644. To address this identified need, Officers were in conversations with the DWP and applying for funding to develop expanded youth provision that focuses specifically in supporting 18-24 year olds back into employment.

The Universal Youth Work undertaken by SCC that was focused towards targeted groups was explained and it was reported that interest had been shown in the leasing of Woking's three youth centres with a meeting scheduled to be held shortly, however the timeframe of completion was currently unknown.

Future priorities had been identified and summarised as the following:

- Employment support for 18 to 24 year olds
- Mental Health
- Engaging youth in resident panels
- Supporting future community delivery opportunities and utilise community centres.

Kevin Page, ROC Group, shared the groups aim and aspirations and detailed some of their work provided to the community, working alongside partners such as voluntary and faith groups. Research had shown that loneliness and mental health had been identified as the most common concerns amongst youth. Mr Page shared the future plans for the group and how to work collaboratively to help young help.

Members praised the work from all the teams involved and noted how well they had adapted to the new way of working due to Covid. The Committee also discussed the Community Youth Needs that provided important data and would be an important resource for reference looking ahead.

It was highlighted that volunteers were fully DBS checked and safeguarding process' were put into place to ensure the youth were fully supported by the appropriate mentors.

Following a question raised, Mr Thomas explained further details on the plans for the Youth hub which was likely to receive funding as the DWP had approached WBC and would offer a variety of support services for different groups. Sandie added that the Friday Night Project, which had not re-opened as of yet but once it was up and running it was hoping to be on for another night in the week too.

8. HOUSING TOPIC SCRUTINY - CURRENT POSITION

The Chairman introduced the Housing Team who would present the item, Louise Strongitharm, Director of Housing, Ernest Amoako, Planning Policy Manger and Jon Herbert, Strategic Housing Policy Development Manager, and explained the background to part one of three of the Housing Topic Scrutiny Review.

Ms Strongitharm and Mr Amoako provided an overview of the current housing position and needs of those within the borough. The Core Strategy sets out a housing requirement of at least 292 dwellings per year for the Borough, the housing requirement was informed by housing needs evidence contained in the 2009 Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA). At the time, the housing need for the Borough was 594 dwellings per year. The housing need was an objectively assessed housing need for the Borough. The housing requirements is what had been agreed with the Secretary of State to be provided taken into account environmental constraints and all other material considerations. The SHMA was reviewed in 2015, and the need had dropped to 517 dwellings per year. The Government had now introduced a new standard method for calculating the housing need. When the methodology was applied, the housing need for the Borough was 431 dwellings per year. The government decided that where a local authority could not make provision to meet its objectively assessed housing need, it would have to work with neighbouring authorities under the Duty to Cooperate for the unmet need to be provided in their areas. Given that Woking is unable to meets its need, the unmet need was presently being met by Guildford and Waverley Boroughs.

The Housing Register, which detailed those seeking assistance with housing was prioritised in line with the Allocations policy (band A being those needing emergency/urgent assistance). The greatest needs of the Housing Register was identified as one and two bed properties. However the wait times were longer for three and four bed properties as

the turnover was significantly less. Overcrowding was also a concern, with over 300 applicants who were overcrowded by one or two bedrooms.

Homelessness was also discussed, noting that on average there were 100-150 people in emergency accommodation, which had been fairly steady as of recent years, however due to Covid there were now approximately 200 people in emergency accommodation. The amount of time people spent in emergency accommodation was longer than desired. On a side note Ms Strongitharm added that there were roughly a further 200 people waiting on a shared ownership property list, which was managed by Radian Housing Association. The housing stock of the Council matched the needs shown on the Housing Register. However as all the properties were currently occupied, and therefore created a challenging situation.

Members raised concern over the delivery to meet the demand and the knock-on effects of Brexit and Covid. Louise added that the Housing Strategy was due to be updated and that the topic scrutiny review of Housing would feed in to it, along with other various schemes.

Following a question raised, those needing a one bed property tend to be identified as vulnerable and/or requiring supported/sheltered housing. Ms Strongitharm explained the opportunities available for those looking to downsize and the data on homelessness which were usually families being evicted from the private sector. However due to the ban of evictions as of recent, the homeless presentations now tend to be single person households who were entrenched rough sleepers, sofa surfers, those who had lost employment or experienced a family breakdown. It was reported the team had recently submitted a bid to government for the "Next Steps Accommodation Programme", and were continuing to work with York Road Project to help the situation. Programmes such as the Sheerwater Regeneration would also have a huge impact of the amount of property available.

Members believed that further information on the demographic of those on the Housing Register and also those in Council Housing would be beneficial. A survey was also mentioned to understand more about incentives for residents looking to downsize.

It was noted that the Green Book reported WBC as meeting the housing requirement of 292 dwellings per year, but the number of affordable homes had not been met. Mr Amoako explained that the Core Strategy sets an overall target of 35% of all new homes to be Affordable Housing - this target has not been met. The main reason given by developers for not meeting the target was the viability of a development. The expectation was that the development should meet the requirement for social housing. However, in exceptional circumstances where the target could not be met, the Core Strategy allowed scope for an applicant to provide evidence of viability to justify why it could not be met. The evidence would then be submitted for independent review by the Council, which was paid for by the applicant, which officers then reported to the Planning Committee. The Council had recently introduced an overage clause to help claw back some money if a development performs better than originally anticipated by the viability assessment.

Members expressed concern that the viability argument was perhaps too easy for a developer to use. A question was raised on how the viability arguments were agreed, which Mr Amoako confirmed it was via the Planning department and the Planning Committee. The Planning Committee had the final decision and access to all documentation. Following the concerns raised, the Chairman asked if it would be possible to share some examples of this and the clawback of costs with members.

The Chairman of the Housing Task Group, summarised the points mentioned in the report, and the proactive approach to achieve the number of affordable dwellings delivered in line with aspirations.

9. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman highlighted the recommendation from the Executive to scrutinise Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership funding which would be discussed with relevant background information at the next meeting. Members were asking to note the additional meeting scheduled for 21 December, that will focus on Serco following it's deferment from the September agenda.

RESOLVED

That the Work Programme be noted.

10. PERFORMANCE AND FINANCIAL MONITORING INFORMATION

It was questioned whether a more simpler version of the Green Book, as recommended following the Corporate Peer Review, would be implemented, especially due to the time gaps between recent versions. Cllr Davis offered his assistance to work with the Chairman on the matter.

Cllr Davis, Chairman of the Finance Task Group, informed the Committee that Finance Director was wary to try to predict financial activity during this time as it would not be accurate, and hopefully by September there would be more information for members. Members were advised that if they had any questions, to email himself and members of the task group to raise on their behalf.

Members were also in agreement to zero tolerance to fly-tipping, and with the help of cameras there were more opportunities to capture evidence of fly-tipping. It was unsure on the procedure if fly-tipping had occurred on private property, and the Council may not be able to help clear the sites but can always advise private land owners and help where possible.

11. TASK GROUP UPDATES

The Committee noted the Finance Task Group Report.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 10.20 pm

Chairman: _____

Date: _____

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Pre Scrutiny comments on the Chief Executives paper response to the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC)

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee have been requesting the peer report since the visit in November 2019. It has referred to this report on several occasions and had this scheduled for the meeting on the 13th July whether or not having the written report. The subsequent paper from Mr Morgan was presented to this committee for pre scrutiny on this recommendation to the Executive on how the recommendations in the peer review are to be implemented.

It is noted however that the wording in the CEOs report and that in the Peer Challenge is not consistent and presents at times a less impactful response. The committee requested that these recommendations be in plain English not management jargon, more in keeping with the original report.

The timeline on the production of the report was challenged in O&S. The Peer challenge occurred between the 12th and 14th of November 2019. The verbal feedback was at the conclusion of this and was available to members at the time. The chair and vice chair of the present O&S committee were not questioned in this review. Officers were asked several times in 2020 regarding the availability of the written report which was anticipated within 4 weeks of the verbal feedback, but this committee were informed that it had not yet been received by the Council.

We heard in the O&S meeting on the 13th of July that the written report had been received prior to Christmas 2019 and was discussed in CMG in early January. The feedback to the LGA was provided in July and the track changed report provided to Group Leaders on the 6th July, and the agreed final CPC report with the additional CEO paper being produced on the 9th July.

The Peer Report refers to the need for papers for members to be available in good time and for the quantity to be not too great. The presentation of a paper for pre scrutiny only 4 days prior to the committee and 8 months after the original review, 7 months after the draft report was produced is disappointing and does not bode well for the implementation of the recommendations. Also the timeframe now for the comments to the Executive to be drafted is highly pressured and does not allow them to be submitted to the Executive for pre reading in the Exec papers.

There are many positives that mentioned and highlighted in the CPC report. These were applauded by the members and congratulations to all involved on these.

We are expected, and should take forward the recommendations on how we can improve as this is a key function of this review and we should benefit from this.

Taking the recommendations of the CEO one by one and incorporating comments made by O&S members in the meeting on Monday 13th June but also received subsequently as was requested.

Recommendation 1.

It is considered that the response of amalgamating all existing strategies and collating into a summary strategy leaves short the creation of the overarching high level strategy which is referred to within the report. The report also refers to the strategy for now as well as in the future. The recommendations from the CEO paper puts this strategy into the 2021/22 business plan.

Recommendation 2.

Much clearer to keep to the original peer wording;

'Communicate the rationale for the Council's vision and priorities to all stakeholders'. This clearly indicates what we need to do, to explain the why's behind the 'what' we are planning to do.

Recommendation 3.

The wording of the Peer report is wider than the recommendations in the CEO paper. Not limited to the town centre development although this was highlighted as an area of particular concern.

Recommendation 4.

O&S highlighted the desire of the Peer Review to include other ways of communication and to include specifically the emerging Neighbourhood Forum and Residents Associations. The reinstatement of a citizens' panel was welcomed.

Recommendation 5.

O&S considered that the Peer Review's recommendation 'for elected members and officers to be aware of and understand the Council's overall financial position' was broader than just the data listed in the green book. It also considered the verbal feedback at the conclusion of the Peer Review that people (as in residents) should also be able to understand the finances, not just members and officers. It is therefore suggested that any review of the green book should be in consultation with residents also, to meet their needs and requirements for information on how the Council finances stand. With the green book showing summary information which shows the overall financial position whilst highlighting key trends on a monthly basis.

Recommendation 6.

Is taken out of sequence with the review recommendation which talks specifically of the need to 'address concerns and mistrust about a perceived lack of transparency and oversight of trading companies'. O&S is not clear on how the CEO recommendation for a Standards protocol which permits members access to commercially sensitive information in respect to the Thamesway Group and other arms' length companies is going to fully address this recommendation?

Recommendation 7.

The original recommendation is specific in which it suggests the Council structures 'future borrowing to align to the life of assets across the Council's portfolio'. This is not referred to in the recommendation.

Recommendation 8

No feedback received, but suggested that more detail is required here.

Recommendation 9.

This was an interesting one to be presented to the O&S committee as relates to this entity. Significant debate around the wording and the unfortunate use of the word function was explored as this inferred an internal audit review into the TOR of the committee which is defined in the constitution.

A review of the resources was broadly welcomed by the committee, and it was noted how this committee started in 2019/20 municipal year with excellent training put on by the South East Coast Employers and that the TOR for the committee has been reviewed by members. Resources in terms of financial support would also be welcomed and it was noted that the budget that O&S used to have control of was removed sometime in 2018 and that an internal audit review would help to see what would be appropriate here moving forwards.

Wording in the recommendation was agreed to be changed to reflect the committees concerns and to truly reflect those recommendations of the CPC report.

Recommendation 10.

The CPC report suggests that the Council use customer feedback and benchmarking to inform our performance management. Rec 10 is a difficult read and lacks the clarity of the original wording.

Recommendation 11

The committee would be interested to hear of innovative ideas that have developed over this period of crisis that can improve the efficiencies of the Council moving forwards.

Recommendation 12

This relates to succession planning and clearly names in the CPC report the 3 senior officers who are approaching retirement, they are concerned about having a plan in place.

O&S understood that the CEO contract was set to terminate at the end of March 2021, if this is not the case then clarity on this need to be provided. Whether the contract for this role and the two other positions specifically mentioned are due to end at that date or later the wording in the CEO report seems nebulous and does not explicitly mention the 3 key officers, but refers to CMG and communities function.

What is also clear from the report and the verbal feedback is the concern of the Peer Challenge team in how much the CEO is central to everything which happens within the Council, with the suggestion that this should be 'rebalanced'.

The recommendation of the CPC was to 'bring to a conclusion your succession plans', the suggestion that we start in the autumn to consider how this may look appears late and lacks the urgency that an imminent change could bring.

Additional recommendations.

O&S members also felt that there were elements in the CPC report which were not picked up in the recommendations to the Executive.

The key one here was the recommendation of the review team for the Council to 'Enhance the role and profile of political leadership in the Council and in the community'. Whilst it was acknowledged in the debate on the 13th July O&S meeting that an Officer could not be expected to comment on this political component it is an important recommendation and therefore should be included in a recommendation to the Executive, even if in the original form of the CPC itself.

Another area mentioned in the CPC report but not pulled through was the challenge to members of late papers and the onerous amount of papers sometimes produced. This is evident from the challenge presented to O&S this week that this still needs to be addressed. There is apparently guidance on the preparation and distribution of papers for committees and the timeframes involved, but this is not consistently adhered to.

Financial risks were identified and the status of this Council in relationship to its borrowing. The CPC suggested that there should be increased transparency in how the financial risks are structured. This would be helpful for members and the public in providing assurance.

The information provided to members was also an element highlighted by the CPC. 'The Council may wish to reflect on the appropriate level of information provided and the process of member briefing prior to formal decisions being made'. Questions were raised on the part 2 elements in the Council papers and request that all papers should be deemed public unless commercially sensitive and these are reviewed on a regular basis, being removed as soon as possible.

It would be good to see these additional recommendations also included in the recommendation to the Executive.

Conclusion

It is considered that the recommendations as originally stated by the Corporate Peer Challenge should stand as they are and not be translated and hence modified in their context and substance. The thoughts of the CEO are helpful to support his thinking in this paper, but need to be taken in context of the original Peer Report not in isolation.

Some elements of recommendations refer to similar recommendations made by the Review team in their report of the visit made in 2015. It is suggested that these should be noted. O&S has requested the action plan and recommendations from this 2015 CRC for comparison.

It is disappointing that O&S has only had the chance to see this report 7 months after the draft publication, leaving very little time for the pre scrutiny report to be written and circulated. The opportunity for some of the recommendations to have been implemented earlier has been missed. O&S will take follow up on the implementation of the recommendations within its work programme for this year. The O&S committee applaud the work of the LGA in its preparation of the Peer Challenge Report and would suggest that the option for a revisit at 12/18 months post the CPC be taken up.

Cllr Deborah Hughes

Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

15.7.20

