

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

held on 22 March 2021

Present:

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

Cllr D J Bittleston	Cllr J E Bond
Cllr S Hussain	Cllr G G Chrystie
Cllr R Mohammed	Cllr J R Sanderson
Cllr M I Raja	

Also Present: Detective Inspector David Bentley (Surrey Police), Camilla Edmiston (Community Safety Officer), Tracey Haskins (Green Infrastructure Manager), Gareth John (WBC Solicitor), Nicola Norman (Family Centres Team Manager), Adam Thomas (Family Services Team Manager), Councillors K Davis and K Howard.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Johnson.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Monday, 22 February 2021 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

3. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MINUTES

The Chairman provided an update on the following items, and advised the Committee that Officers would ensure that the Empty Homes list would be GDPR compliant and with ward members by next week, week commencing 29 March.

The feedback from Committee members on the Scrutiny Officer Job Description had been collated and fed back to the Chief executive and Head of HR.

Following the annual review of complaints at the previous meeting of the Committee, where members asked for a breakdown of the 'other' category. The Legal team explained that it would be difficult to breakdown and sort in a way that was requested. At the same meeting members requested a breakdown of the FOI requests that were referred on to other organisations, the report OSC-011 had been attached detailing the information. The data had been broken down by organisation, topic and month, noting no particular trends.

The Committee agreed the final version of the draft Terms of Reference for the three Task Groups that report the Committee.

4. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business to discuss.

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

6. SAFER WOKING PARTNERSHIP PLAN

The Chairman introduced Camilla Edmiston (Community Safety Officer) who advised that the Safer Woking Partnership Plan & Report was due to go to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March 2020, however the meeting was cancelled due to Covid-19. Due to other reactive work that had been undertaken by the team and other organisations that fed into it, the report had been updated as much as possible for this meeting. It was hoped that the plan would be published by April 2021, Ms Edmiston highlighted the changes to the priorities and it was noted that there would be more updates to the Action Plan.

Councillors praised the emphasis on prevention schemes in the report and felt it was key when dealing with many issues however it was difficult to measure the performance of the prevention schemes.

Following a high amount of anti-social behaviour reports in West Byfleet previously, it was noted that the number of reports had decreased and Detective Inspector David Bentley advised that further investigation would review the reasons as to why it was present in the first place, and that future plans would work towards benefiting the young people in the area. There were two main meetings that dealt with the causes and responses to issues in the borough, which included other organisations such as Surrey Police. The meetings also reviewed the support provided to victims of Anti-Social Behaviour.

Detective Inspector Bentley touched on residential burglaries which had seen a decrease in Woking, most likely due to more people being at home as a result of Covid-19. However this had resulted in more burglaries in outbuildings and garages etc. Crime areas that had increased throughout Covid-19 were domestic violence, drug offences and anti-social behaviour.

The topic of CCTV was raised, the Committee were informed that the footage captured was held for one month and was under the control of Woking Borough Council. Although CCTV was thought to be beneficial, it does only show a very small snapshot in time, can be difficult to identify people on the footage and required a lot of resources. Surrey Police recently invested in a programme that would send a notification to quickly be able to view people's own footage, such as the doorbell cameras to assist in some cases.

A series of individual matters were raised, updates were provided where possible and the outstanding matters would be looked at outside the meeting.

The Chairman and Committee members thanked the guests for joining.

RESOLVED that

The Safer Woking Partnership Plan 2021/24 be endorsed.

7. FAMILY CENTRES UPDATE

The Chairman introduced Adam Thomas (Family Support Programme Team Manager), and Nicola Norman (Family Centres Team Manager), who advised on the teams close working relationship with and links with the Community Safety Team. Mr Thomas praised the outstanding work undertaken by both teams, who supported not only the residents but also staff on their mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic. Mr Thomas also advised on the internal staffing restructure for the Family Services Team, which resulted in Ms Norman's position as Family Centres Team Manager.

Mr Thomas shared some of the very positive feedback from a recent statutory safeguarding audit with the Committee, other teams that had assisted with the audit were Housing, Community Support and HR. The Chairman praised the feedback and work by the teams.

Ms Norman presented some key data for Family Centres over the past year, noting there had been 168 referrals which resulted in 91% of families engaging in the support, which was a good level of engagement due to the Covid-19 restrictions. The main reasons for referrals were special educational needs, domestic abuse, parental mental health or drug and alcohol misuse. Referrals had increased over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic due to the negative impacts on some families lives such as parents losing jobs, increased stress due home-schooling, not being able to see family or friends for support and extra childcare needs. The team adapted to the restrictions by providing virtual support using online technology such as Zoom & FaceTime, partnership working and holding support sessions for parents. The feedback from families and partner organisations were shared and Ms Norman advised they would put into case studies.

As the Government guidelines continued to change Community Centres were used to engage with families and create family welcome spaces. If families were experiencing difficulty in getting to the Community Centres, then the team would go to the family to provide the support.

Following a question, Ms Norman advised on that moving forward to the future, work was focused on understanding where the families need support and where there are gaps with partners. From the feedback received a Service Delivery Plan would be created by Summer 2021 and implemented over the course of the upcoming year. The importance of face to face meetings and group work for families was emphasised and it was envisaged that these would be more possible as the restrictions ease.

The strong links with healthcare and midwifery partners was noted and was crucial to allowing early intervention and getting in contact with families. Other partnership work was discussed and included the 'Be Your Best' campaign with Active Surrey and the mental health work with charities in the borough.

The Chairman thanked them both for the presentation and information provided, and praised the links with partners and flexible working approach.

8. CLIMATE CHANGE EMERGENCY REPORT

The Chairman then introduced the Climate Change Emergency Report and Lara Beattie (Senior Policy Office). The Committee had requested the report to allow members to understand what had been done since the declaration of the Climate Change Emergency and what plans would be put into place for the future.

Ms Beattie advised that Woking Borough Council has a longstanding commitment to the environment and noted that the key milestones on the Climate Change timeline was attached as Appendix 1 of the report. Woking 2050 was the current Strategy in place to create a sustainable borough and to reduce our impact on the environment. The Action Plan was reviewed through quarterly updates to the Climate Change Working Group, which was established in 2003 and these were also published on the Council's website.

The activities held post-declaration build on strong foundation of green initiatives across the Council, the highlights were noted and included:

- Display Energy Certificates
- On-Street electric vehicle charging pilot
- The 11% reduction in greenhouse gas report from the baseline year.

Further activities were included from July 2019, such as the Rain Garden projects and living green walls that help to improve air quality. The collaborative work on projects with key stakeholders was included in the presentation, and included partnership working with Thamesway, Action Surrey and Surrey Wildlife Trust.

Ms Beattie explained the intentions behind Planet Woking which launched on 24 September 2020, it raised awareness and allows communication to the public, whilst inspiring local residents to get involved in creating a sustainable future. Webinars had been held by experts in their field, and were available on the Planet Woking website. Future plans and priorities were detailed in section 6 of the report, and further opportunities to engage with the public would see utilisation of the Residents Panel.

Following a question raised, Tracey Haskins (Green Infrastructure Manager) advised that the work undertaken within the DWP Site Allocations includes a list of key requirements for the developer to meet ahead of the development. Members were reassured that each site requirement list would include the retention of green infrastructure and also to increase green infrastructure where possible, and that certain areas were protected.

Members noted the interesting work undertaken by Ms Beattie and the team, and offered their support to the initiatives.

RESOLVED that

That the report be noted.

9. ANNUAL REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Chairman introduced the Annual Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that outlined the activities of the Committee over the municipal year, noting that the information presented in tonight's meeting was not included.

The error in paragraph 1.2 was corrected to say that the Corporate Peer Review Report was not outstanding and had been received in June 2020. Pre-scrutiny had been conducted on the Corporate Peer Review Report, and the paper highlighted the LGA recommendations.

The key points highlighted in the report was the scrutiny work undertaken on Woking Football Club and Associated Developments, Council approved the recommendations set out before them at their meeting on 30 July 2020 which focused on the decision making process around the development. The independent review provided further recommendations and were listed in the report. There are still some redactions on the

Task Group report due to commercial sensitivity, a request via our legal team for clearance to disclose is outstanding.

The Housing Scrutiny Topic Review provided a detailed three meeting update from Housing colleagues on affordable housing provision, a review of case studies of viability assessments in planning applications, projects and future aspirations. Praise was given to the Viability Case Study Group and the Housing officers involved with the work. The recommendations to Council from this review included circulation of the recommendations to the Planning department as not purely housing department related.

Other areas covered throughout the year included the Joint Waste Solutions update, play area maintenance and AMEY contract review in 2019/20. Cllr Davis advised that the JWS Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) reported in the Green Book were accurate however not always useful to councillors, after discussions it was believed that the reporting would remain the same but councillors were steered to the Surrey Environmental Partnership report which included further statistic that would be useful for members. The Chairman would share the Quarterly Report with the Committee.

The Community Infrastructure Levy was also reviewed by the Committee, and a paper went to the Joint Committee recommending more frequent review of the proposals for decision which was approved. Further scrutiny was conducted on the annual topics of the committee such as FOI and Complaints review and the Treasury Management Mid-Year Review 2020/21.

The Report also included the work undertaken by the three Task Groups in the 20/21 municipal year – Finance Task Group, Economic Development Task Group and Housing Task Group. Thanks was voiced to the Chairs and Members of the Task Groups. The Chairman thanked the guests that had participated in the Committee's tasks, including Surrey Police, Surrey County Council and ROC Representative. The Chairman then took the opportunity to thank Officers for their contribution and support to the Committee.

Cllr Whitehand, Deputy Vice-Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee thanked the Chairman for guidance provided and the work undertaken. Committee members echoed thanks to the Chair.

The Chairman then read out the following statement:

'We have just received the annual report of this Committee: in which was highlighted an issue with a pre scrutiny report undertaken by this Committee on the Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge Review on Woking Borough Council, that despite a specific request from the CEO for it to go to the Executive and despite it being on that meeting's agenda in July 2020 it was not permitted to be heard or discussed at that Executive. This was a gross discourtesy to this O&S Committee.

Despite representations to various people and the chair of the Executive no apology has been forthcoming. O&S is a statutory body, the Council is required to have this committee by law and its reports have a legal right to be heard.

So as no resolution has been forthcoming as chair of this O&S committee I will tell you now that I did submit a complaint regarding this omission and the way in which our report was handled in this Executive meeting. What has happened raises serious questions on the way in which complaints are managed.

The member on member complaints process in this council seems shrouded in secrecy and seeming threats of breaching confidentiality. I completely agree that a complaint that has not been fully and independently investigated should be kept confidential until the findings are known. , as there may be no case to answer, or the complaint may be shown to be vexatious, and no one would wish any member to undergo the stress of this being disclosed.

But when the complaint is upheld, especially when upheld by an external independent investigator, as in this case, this should be disclosed and it is in the public interest for it to be so. If not, how will we as a Council learn, and how will we improve our ways of working and interactions? How will misdemeanors be properly addressed? How will there be any resolution? And how will the public we represent know that such failings are properly managed?

At this point the Standards and Audit meeting in March had been cancelled. The last meeting of the municipal year of O&S is tonight. As a final attempt for closure I asked for local resolution via a public apology prior to or at this meeting to this committee.

This has now been forthcoming, long overdue, and as the apology is to the committee and to myself for how we were treated at this eleventh hour this acknowledgement of fault is accepted.

The independent investigator's report upholds the complaints stating that they find evidence to show breaches of the Council's code of Conduct and a failure to maintain high standards of conduct as set out in paragraph 1.3 of the Code in relation to Integrity and Leadership.

The committee deserved recognition and respect by the Executive and its chairman, But this committee's work was slighted and its voice gagged in July, and unless something is said now you will never know that those insults to this Committee during that Executive meeting have been deemed by an independent detailed investigation to be in breach of the Council's code of conduct.

The inability to properly disclose the outcome of an independent investigation when a complaint has been upheld shows that the Council complaint process needs review as soon as possible.'

RESOLVED that

The report be submitted to the next meeting of Council subject to any comments made by Members of the Committee.

10. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee reviewed the Work Programme that included suggested items ahead of the 2021/22 municipal year along with the items addressed in the Annual Report of the Overview an Scrutiny Committee.

It was confirmed that the Housing Topic Scrutiny Review Report would go to Council on 8 April 2021.

RESOLVED

That the Work Programme be noted.

11. PERFORMANCE AND FINANCIAL MONITORING INFORMATION

The Committee reviewed the January Green Book, that had been reviewed by the Finance Task Group within the recent weeks. No further comments were raised.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 10.00 pm

Chairman: _____

Date: _____