

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

held on 21 December 2020

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: Councillors I Johnson and K Davis, Howard Booth (Serco), Andy Calfe (Neighbourhood Services Team Leader), Leigh Clarke (Finance Director), Gareth John (WBC Solicitor) Geoff McManus (Director of Neighbourhood Services), Ray Morgan (WBC Chief Executive)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

Prior to the commencement of the business of the meeting the Chair highlighted a change in the composition of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Since the last meeting Cllr Rana had moved to the Planning Committee and Cllr Bittleston had joined this Committee. The Chair thanked Cllr Rana for his contribution to the Committee, and especially his support to the additional Task Group and then welcomed Cllr Bittleston to the Committee.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Monday, 23 November 2020 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

3. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MINUTES

Cllr Whitehand provided an update on the CIL funding process following a meeting of the Joint Committee, members of the CIL Group had approved the Group's Terms of Reference, agreed the process, and reviewed and accepted project requests submitted by the Byfleet and West Byfleet ward councillors. The Group had agreed to meet monthly in the future, apart from January and July, and meetings would be cancelled if there were no new applications. Cllr Whitehand praised the assistance from officers - Ernest Amoako, and Nikki Thornton-Briar. The amended process flowchart and

guidance would be circulated to members, sent to neighbourhood groups etc to promote the scheme.

Cllr Whitehand also updated the Committee on the scrutiny work for the viability assessments of planning applications, using case study examples and advised that future meetings would be scheduled to meet with independent companies who assist the Council on the viability assessments. It was hoped that information on this would be included in the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 25 January 2021 and therefore conclude the Housing Scrutiny Topic review.

Following a discussion on empty homes, Mr Morgan advised that there were no objections for members to receive a list of the empty homes within the borough, broken down by ward as requested, however it would have to be GDPR compliant.

4. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business to discuss.

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

6. SERCO UPDATE

The Chairman introduced Geoff McManus, Director of Neighbourhood Services, Andy Calfe, Neighbourhood Team Leader, and Howard Booth from Serco. Mr McManus introduced the presentation which provided a general update on the planned works that were completed annually under the environmental contracts, such as grounds maintenance and tree work. The challenges faced throughout 2020 and effects from Covid-19 were discussed, however Serco had worked extremely hard to increase the cleaning schedule in the town centre and had continued to maintain services throughout the year.

The contract was monitored by fortnightly meetings, strong communication on responses to queries and complaints, and reviewing the KPIs reported into the Green Book. The contract would go out for procurement in 2023, and it was felt that solid foundations had been built around a good service and Serco were praised for their flexible approach to the work required.

Members shared their positive experience with Serco, especially the good customer service, however it was noted that the Pavilion at Byfleet was in need of some maintenance work. Following the results of a customer satisfaction survey, concern was raised however it was noted that there had been challenges from Covid-19 and the results from October's survey had improved since the results in March.

Members added that the ongoing issue with fly-tipping was continuously dealt with by Serco in a timely manner, and that Serco really does help to keep the borough looking as good as it does. Serco also assists local community groups and litter picking duties.

The flexibility of the contract arrangement resulted in no additional charges for continued services throughout Covid-19, even though the demands had increased. Mr McManus advised that the Council Arborists would prioritise urgent tree work outside of the 1-5 year rolling programme if required. Mr McManus advised that if there were any concerns over any tree's in the borough, it would be best to make the team aware so an assessment of the tree could be conducted.

The Leaf Clearing programme highlights the locations of leaf fall and predicted times of the year, however if leaves were dropping consistently for a continued period of time the clearing of the area would be prioritised. Other reasons work may be prioritised would include leaves falling on areas of high footfall or on a gradient to avoid a slippery surface, the public also bring any areas of concerns to the Council attention. The weekly playground inspections were carried out by qualified inspectors, who record safety information and report back any potential hazards.

Cllr Bond questioned who would take ownership of projects such as park benches, that have come from schemes like CIL, it was advised that WBC Engineering colleagues assist with the expenditure of CIL funding. Serco would provide the maintenance of the outcome of the projects.

Following questions raised by the Chairman, the Committee were advised that the capacity was adequate for the additional work currently, however additional contractors could be used for particular works and would not be necessarily included in the FTE data.

The Green Infrastructure team works on projects such as, wild flowers, in line with the climate change emergency, the work programme promotes environmentally-friendly projects however the weather can provide difficulties at times.

Cllr Raja raised a question on food waste, which came under the AMEY contract, Cllr Davis, Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services advised that there was a recent campaign on putting out your food waste, some residents use their own compost however the residents who were still putting food waste in the black bins, were the ones the campaign was aimed towards.

The Chairman and Members praised the work undertaken by Council officers and Serco throughout the borough. Members expressed their aspirations to assist with the service, and were encouraged to communicate with officers.

7. CORPORATE PEER REVIEW FEEDBACK UPDATE

The Chairman provided the background to the item, and introduced Ray Morgan to update on the recommendations from the Corporate Peer Review Feedback.

The report sets out the activities that had been undertaken since the recommendations had been approved by the Executive. Mr Morgan advised that there would be more information on communication at the beginning of 2021, and the Corporate Overview at the time of the budget.

Following questions raised on succession planning which had appeared in the 2015 and 2019 reports, and had been outlined in the update report and noted that the Corporate Management Group had been strengthened, that the recruitment process for the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive positions had begun and the changes to the Director of Legal Services position was in hand. The work with Kornferry had strengthened all levels of the organisation. Mr Morgan explained that the effects of Covid-19 had impacted the work on the Efficiency Strategy, information had been reported to members via the Green Book and from Finance Colleagues, it was hoped that more progress could have been achieved but it was limited due to the impacts of Covid-19. The realistic efficiency targets would be set in the budget, as the type of organisational changes required to make a larger difference can be challenging, due to capacity.

Mr Morgan advised that the report from the Corporate Peer Review was extremely positive on the organisation.

The report mentions that the Green Book and its format would be kept under review by the Finance Task Group, Mr Morgan advised members who had any queries to speak to Leigh Clarke, who could assist. It was also believed that there would be little benefit in investing public money to re-format the Green Book if the same information were to still be included. The Chairman noted that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed the performance element of the Green Book, whilst the Finance task Group focused on the financial aspects and regularly report back to the Committee.

The funding for the advertising commercial was queried, to which Mr Morgan confirmed that it was funding through Victoria Square, not tax-payers money and that it was important to continue to raise the profile of the town centre, promote Woking and the services provided.

The Chairman drew attention to the first recommendation in the LGA report, regarding the Overarching Organisational Strategy, to which Mr Morgan explained that key messages (Towards, Tomorrow, Today.) and all the information on the organisational strategy was present in various areas but the Council had committed to putting it into one document and making it readily available for the public. It was hoped that the document would be drafted for the Council meeting in February.

8. TREASURY MANAGEMENT MID-YEAR REVIEW 2020/21

Leigh Clarke introduced the Treasury Management Mid-Year Review 2020/21 report, that comes to the committee annually to allow scrutiny on the treasury management for the first six months of the year against the Treasury Management Strategy and Prudential Indicators for 2020/21, Ms Clarke advised there were no areas of concern and welcomed questions from the Committee.

Following a question raised on access to the Public Works Loans Board (PWLB) , Leigh explained that the government had opened up an online form which was to be completed and signed off to say that the Council had no plans to invest primarily for yield in the investment programme, and provide analysis of the investment programme including detail covering 75% of the projects in each category. It was believed that once the form was signed off, the Council would have access to the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) at the reduced rate. The Green Book details the high level of short term borrowing currently. This is mostly from other authorities at very cheap rates, which provides a financial advantage this year however it won't secure the debt long term..

Following the 1% reduction in PWLB margin charged by the government the Council would convert short term borrowing to long term through the PWLB.

The PWLB had advised that during busy periods, they could extend the amount of time from request to receipt of funds from the current 2 days. There is also the possibility that requests may be questioned prior to confirmation of the loan, however Ms Clarke felt that concerns were more likely to arise in arrears.

9. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman introduced the work programme and highlighted the changes to the report, which would see the work with Freedom Leisure deferred to the 2021/22 municipal year due to the impacts of Covid-19.

RESOLVED

That the Work Programme be noted.

10. PERFORMANCE AND FINANCIAL MONITORING INFORMATION

The Committee reviewed Octobers Green Book, and it was noted that one empty home had been put back into use, and more work was being done on this project which had been raised at a previous meeting of the committee. The concern of delivering six out of a target of 102 was added. These elements were discussed during the Housing Topic Scrutiny Review, which would be completed with feedback from members at the next meeting of the Committee.

Other items highlighted were the sickness record of Council employees which was described as being exceptional during these times, and the average days void for New Vision Homes (NVH) properties was targeted at 21 days however from April to September 2020 the figure had increased from 28 to 45 days, due to the impacts of Covid-19.

11. TASK GROUP UPDATES

Housing Task Group

Cllr Johnson, Chairman of the Housing Task Group, highlighted the activities of the group, the impacts of Covid-19, homelessness, Universal Credit and the strong link with the health and wellbeing agenda.

The work on the 'Next Steps Accommodation' Bid was praised, and had recently gone to Council. The Selective Licensing Scheme had between 2-3 years left and a review would need to be undertaken to determine the success of it and whether it met the aspirations. Questionnaire's had been sent to the residents using the selective licensing scheme to gauge their thoughts on maintenance and the scheme.

The Task Group had reviewed and updated the Terms of Reference which would go to the Committee before the end of the municipal year, the same had been done for the Economic Development Task Group Terms of Reference.

The difficulty of locating the owners of the empty properties was discussed, and it was noted that some lived over-seas. The draft Housing Strategy would be reviewed to ensure all areas were covered and if there was an opportunity to add detail on this topic.

The importance of members reporting back to their political group was stressed, and task group updates and minutes were available for all members.

Economic Development Task Group

Cllr Johnson, Chairman of the Economic Development Task Group, mentioned the concerns for the economy and increasing numbers of unemployment. The marketing campaigns and increased cleaning regime had been used to encourage footfall in the town centre and for visitors to feel safe. Webinars had been used to support businesses during difficult times.

The recent Surrey Food and Awards highlighted some of the great organisations in the borough. The five year strategy which expires in April 2022, has not changed however the last six months had been aimed at supporting businesses and helping them get back on their feet rather than selling the town centre package.

Other positives that were added, included the new Boots store, the impact that Victoria Square have on the town centre when finished and new businesses that had flourished throughout the last six months. Cllr Johnson thanked the Business Liaison team for all hard work they had put in, especially during the pandemic.

Finance Task Group

Cllr Davis provided a verbal update on what the task group had looked into at their last meeting in November, which included the general budget, fees and charges, debt reports and scrutiny of the Green Book.

Since the November Executive, where it was agreed that the Council would approach the Ministry of Local Community and Housing Government to de-capitalisation, which would allow the Council to spread the cost losses over a longer period of time and avoid the immediate use of revenue reserves. A meeting had been organised and the outcome would be provided at a future meeting of the Committee.

The recovery of commercial rents, council tax and business rates had gradually improved however there were concerns over what impacts the latest restrictions would have.

There had been many applications to the grant schemes, which were being processed and paid out as quickly as possible. The Government has since announced other schemes such as the LRSS Open Scheme for businesses that managed to remain open during lockdown but were still effected. From a Government perspective the following industries should be prioritised with the funding - Leisure, Hospitality and Accommodation. The Wet Pubs grant is also open for applications for pubs that meet the criteria, there was also an Additional Restrictions grant which would be used for targeted work up until the end of 2021.

The Chairman thanked the members and officers for the work this year and wished everyone well over the Christmas break.

The meeting commenced at 7pm
and ended at 9:35pm

Chairman: _____

Date: _____