

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Executive Summary

Each year, the Chairman of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee prepares a report outlining the activities undertaken by the Committee. This year, the Committee has reviewed a wide range of topics and has completed both scrutiny and pre-decision scrutiny of the work of the Executive and the Council as a whole. The three Task Groups of the Committee – the Economic Development, Finance and Housing Task Groups – have continued to monitor and review these three core areas of the Council's activities.

The Work Programme of the Committee continues to be developed and in the coming year the Members will be welcoming presentations from both Network Rail and South Western Trains on their plans and aspirations for their services in the Borough. The potential and management of Woking's Heathlands are to be explored in the coming months, with a presentation at the next meeting of the Committee and a site visit planned for all Councillors to Sheet's Heath.

The Committee is now invited to agree the draft report for submission to the next meeting of Council, on 5 April 2018.

Recommendations

The Committee is requested to:

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

The Committee has the authority to determine the recommendation set out above.
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Background Papers: None.

Reporting Person: Councillor I Johnson, Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Email: cllrian.johnson@woking.gov.uk

Contact Person: Councillor I Johnson, Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Email: cllrian.johnson@woking.gov.uk

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This is the 13th Annual Report made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to the Council in accordance with its constitutional provision. The report sets out the work undertaken by the Committee and its task groups over the last year.

2.0 Summary of Work Undertaken

Boiler maintenance and replacement policy of New Vision Homes.

- 2.1 The Portfolio Holder (Councillor C S Kemp) introduced a report on the review of the New Vision Homes boiler maintenance and replacement policy, making clear that there were outstanding issues which needed to be addressed. The key areas of improvement were highlighted in the report which outlined the measures proposed to address the outstanding issues, though it was noted that significant improvements had already been achieved. Members also noted that New Vision Homes (NVH) was undertaking a review of the compensation policy for breakdowns, which had been an issue for residents, and the need to improve communication with residents was understood by NVH.

Raynes Close lessons learned

- 2.2 Ian Lelliott of Thamesway Housing gave a presentation outlining the issues that had faced the residents of Raynes Close in respect of the pioneering energy efficient technology installed, including a heat exchanger, rain water harvester and the heating. Residents were also present to draw attention to their concerns and felt little progress had been made to address all the issues. It was agreed by the Committee to ask for a report to suggest solutions to all the problems raised. This was done and later in the municipal year Mr Lelliott returned to the Committee to explain what progress had been made.

Thamesway Protocol.

- 2.3 The Chairman and Councillor J Kingsbury undertook to carry out a review of the communications and reporting protocol between the Thamesway Group and the Council. This had originally been established in 2011 and required updating in view of the significant changes in the Company structure and in the light of practice. The Committee recommended a number of changes to the Executive. It was noted that few members attended Thamesway Group company meetings and they might find it helpful to do so to better understand.

Action Surrey.

- 2.4 John Scott of Thamesway Sustainable Communities Ltd (TSCL) presented information on the Action Surrey project, outlining the project's aims, initiatives and achievements. It was noted that several areas within the Borough had a higher than average level of fuel poverty because of older housing stock and a higher percentage of lower income families.
- 2.5 There would be an estimated £1.6m saved for Woking residents over the future lifetime of the measures put in place so far. The scheme relied more upon referrals from Adult Social Care and local authorities to ensure that fuel poor households were prioritised, though all residents were welcome to ask for advice. Action Surrey aimed to raise awareness of energy efficiency schemes and grants available to families and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) within the area and that more work with local SMEs was being looked into in partnership with Woking Works and Woking Chamber of Commerce and more SMEs were urged to contact Action Surrey. The Committee appreciated the work done by Action Surrey.

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Private Rented Sector Access Scheme Policy and Selective Licensing Policy- Canalside Ward

- 2.6 The Committee scrutinised proposals to introduce a policy to incentivise landlords as part of a drive to improve the supply of private sector housing and satisfy the Council's obligations to house people deemed homeless. This was part of an overall strategy to reduce homelessness. Separately the Council was seeking to introduce a licensing scheme for HMOs in Canalside ward which had been selected in view of the high proportion of rented properties and the lower standards in that area. Members supported both proposals but also asked for the costs, including staff resources and fees, to be re-considered.

Complaints

- 2.7 The Committee received and reviewed a schedule of complaints received by the Council over the 6 months to 30 September 2017. This was the first 6 monthly report and included information about complaints to New Vision Homes. Over time it would become possible to track any trends in complaints to enable the Committee to decide whether to investigate further.

Celebrate Woking.

- 2.8 The Committee received a presentation from Riette Thomas on the Celebrate Woking events in 2017. Despite average weather, the food and drink festival had again been a huge success and the Party in the Park had been a massive success. It was noted Woking had been named as the 8th happiest place in the UK and the happiest in Surrey. Promotional videos had been made.
- 2.9 In 2018 Celebrate Woking would be focusing on the Suffragettes and Dame Ethel Smyth, as well as work on the war memorials of those who paid the ultimate price in World War 1.

Health and Wellbeing.

- 2.10 The Committee received a report which highlighted the work carried out under the Government's Syrian Refugee resettlement programme. It had taken some time for the traumas experienced by the Syrians to manifest themselves in mental ill health and there had been occasional disputes. However, it was noted that the Council had very skilled staff managing the programme.
- 2.11 (The Committee reviewed the 6 monthly treasury statements and reports from the Housing Economic Development and Finance Task Groups).

Community Support and Development Sythwood.

- 2.12 Nicola Norman, Manager of Sythwood Children's Centre, and Reverend Kate Wyles, Vicar at St Andrews Church, Goldsworth Park gave a presentation on the work being undertaken in the local community to support the residents, in particular those from an ethnic minority background, including refugee families from Syria. Through the support of the Lakeview Action Group and partner organisations, individuals unable to speak English were offered the opportunity of weekly language classes managed by a tutor from Woking College and to socialise with people from all different backgrounds. It was noted that the biggest issue faced by the Group was a lack of funding and constant waiting list for the support and that the Group had been asked to draw up a proposal on the future provision of the support for consideration by the Council.

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Online transactions.

- 2.13 David Ripley, Head of Revenues and Benefits, presented a report on the background to benefit payments and the Council's old cash desk. Initial payments of Universal credit by the government were often delayed, causing arrears in housing payments, and also more recently a change of approach by some housing associations demanding rent payments in advance which was very difficult for tenants. In relation to payments generally, 74% of council tax payments were now made by direct debit and the closure of the cash office in May 2015 had gone smoothly.

Woking 2050 and Climate Change Agenda.

- 2.14 Lara Beattie and Tracey Haskins gave a presentation explaining what the Council was doing to encourage sustainable Woking, tracing the roots of action in the Borough as far back as 1992 with the establishment of LA21. The Council seeks to lead by example and in terms of the vision to 2050 there are various projects from green sustainability and biodiversity to flood relief schemes and renewable energy all of which contribute to enhancing the Borough environment and reducing carbon footprint. Action plans are managed on a rolling three year and are overseen by the Climate Change Working Group.

Waste and Recycling Contract.

- 2.15 Representatives of the teams responsible for the new waste contract gave a performance update to the Committee in February. The number of missed collections was very small and mainly related to assisted collections. Anecdotal evidence suggested that staff were quick to rectify errors and overall members were impressed with the work done.

Air Quality Monitoring.

- 2.16 Emma Bourne, the Council's Environmental Health Manager, reported on work being carried out to monitor air quality in the Borough. There were currently 2 Air Quality Management Areas – Anchor Hill in Knaphill and Guildford Road in Mount Hermon. Technical changes to traffic signaling at Anchor Hill had been installed and data on the impact on air quality was awaited. An Action Plan for Guildford Road was being prepared and this was particularly important given the pending increase in town centre development.

Basingstoke Canal.

- 2.17 The Chief Executive presented an update on the progress in making proposals to improve the Basingstoke Canal following requests by this Committee in February 2017. There were clear plans for work in 2018/19 on the town quay and Chobham Bridge towpath subject to planning permission, while Lockfield Drive Bridge connectivity would require funding but with a target of 2019/20 for completion, and a barge at the Lighthouse was currently an aspiration for pushing forward in 2019/20. A Canal Boat basin at Brook House was another opportunity but required both funding and resolutions of Green Belt and common land legal issues.
- 2.18 The Chief Executive was thanked for the evident progress for this key asset and the Committee resolved to instruct him to investigate opportunities for both dredging the Canal and tidying up the Canal bank for the benefit of boat users and visitors generally.

3.0 Membership

- 3.1 The Constitution permits membership of 10 councillors. The membership this year has been: Councillor I Johnson (Chairman), Councillor K Davis (Vice-Chairman), Councillor H Addison, Councillor A-M Barker, Councillor J Bond, Councillor G Chrystie, Councillor J Kingsbury, Councillor R Mohammed, Councillor M Raja and Councillor C Rana.

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3.2 Attendance at meetings this year has been better than in 2016/17 though again the subjects for the agenda have largely arisen from the Chairman and Vice Chairman, rather than Committee members. The attendance record for the Members of the Committee is set out at Appendix 1.

4.0 Task Groups

4.1 Scrutiny of the Council's activities often takes place in task groups. There are three task groups which come under the remit of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- Economic Development Task Group (Chairman Councillor I Johnson)
- Finance Task Group, (Chairman Councillor G Chrystie)
- Housing Task Group and Economic Development Task Group (Councillor I Johnson)

4.2 Appendix 2 contains summary reports by the respective Chairs on the activities and objectives of each Task Group for the year.

5.0 Further Areas of Scrutiny

5.1 The main subjects are shown in 2.1 above. In addition the Committee monitors financial and other indicators in the "Green book" which is a monthly set of management information and also looks at the treasury mid-year review. This report is necessarily written before the meeting in March and therefore there will be items not included as part of this report. This will include a "first" in that we will be on a field trip to Sheets Heath.

6.0 Acknowledgements

6.1 As Chair I would like to thank particularly the Chief Executive for his support in putting agendas together, to officers for the administration and to my Vice-Chair, Councillor Kevin Davis, for his continued enthusiasm. The attendance of Portfolio Holders to cover their topics at meetings has been much appreciated.

7.0 Conclusions

7.1 The Committee is challenging and needs input from across the Council to be effective. Having said that, the Committee has been able to make progress on behalf of residents in a number of areas such as boiler policies, Raynes Close eco systems and the Basingstoke Canal. We have also been reassured on, most recently, the new waste contract and have been able to learn more about the environmental work of the Council.

REPORT ENDS

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Appendix 1

Attendance at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2017/18

Date	Committee Members in Attendance	
22 May 2017	Cllr Johnson (Ch) Cllr Davis (V-Ch) Cllr Mrs Addison Cllr Barker Cllr Bond	Cllr Chrystie Cllr Kingsbury Cllr Mohammed Cllr Raja Cllr Rana
24 July 2017	Cllr Johnson (Ch) Cllr Davis (V-Ch) Cllr Mrs Addison Cllr Barker Cllr Bond	Cllr Chrystie Cllr Kingsbury Cllr Mohammed Cllr Raja Cllr Rana
18 September 2017	Cllr Johnson (Ch) Cllr Davis (V-Ch) Cllr Mrs Addison Cllr Barker Cllr Bond	Cllr Chrystie Cllr Kingsbury Cllr Mohammed Cllr Rana
27 November 2017	Cllr Johnson (Ch) Cllr Davis (V-Ch) Cllr Mrs Addison Cllr Bond	Cllr Kingsbury Cllr Raja Cllr Rana
22 January 2018	Cllr Johnson (Ch) Cllr Davis (V-Ch) Cllr Mrs Addison Cllr Bond Cllr Chrystie	Cllr Kingsbury Cllr Mohammed Cllr Raja Cllr Rana
26 February 2018	Cllr Johnson (Ch) Cllr Davis (V-Ch) Cllr Bond Cllr Kingsbury	Cllr Mohammed Cllr Raja Cllr Rana

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Reports of the Task Groups

Housing Task Group

Chairman – Cllr Ian Johnson

Purpose	Membership
To review Housing issues as and when identified by the Committee, including Housing Strategy, Housing Business Plan, Housing Service Plans, Housing Revenue Account, Housing Conditions, Housing Needs, Private Sector Housing, Home Improvement Agency, Housing and Council Tax Benefits, and monitor/review progress of the PFI Scheme.	Cllrs Addison, Aziz, Barker, Bridgeman, Harlow, Johnson and Mohammed.

The year was characterised by a large volume of work due to the upcoming introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act which is the biggest piece of legislation on homelessness in 40 years. Changes to existing practices would require additional staff and team restructuring, together with training in new procedures. Woking has a good record in avoiding homelessness but the legislation will require an even more pro-active approach. The existing IT system wasn't sufficiently robust and would be upgraded in May 2018. Personal Housing Plans, including an action plan, would be introduced for clients.

Other issues reviewed by the Task Group included the following:

1. a consultation by Surrey County Council (SCC) about housing-related support due to SCC seeking to save money;
2. improved compensation to tenants for boiler and heating breakdowns to reflect more fairly the additional costs incurred;
3. proposals for a new policy on service charges for leaseholders which was to be discussed by the Leaseholder Forum;
4. Housing Allocations Policy which was being updated for the first time since 2013 which proposed to amalgamate bands and the removal of age limits for sheltered accommodation, along with greater reliance on the private sector;
5. a number of units of affordable housing had been provided through the use of rooms or spaces not used to their potential;
6. the tenants of Sheerwater in the red line area were placed into Band B. The Task Group was assured that the Council was exploring all opportunities to make adequate provision for social housing but in any event, lettings would be offered on the basis of need;
7. the Task Group pre-scrutinised the Council's proposals for Selective Licensing in Canalside. There were 800 private landlords in the area;
8. 'Let's Rent' was a rebranded scheme to encourage private landlords to help address the Borough's housing need; and
9. the Transformation Agenda was looking at better ways of multi-agency working, partly to ensure effectiveness of provision and partly for reasons of financial efficiency.

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Economic Development Task Group

Chairman – Cllr Ian Johnson

Purpose	Membership
To identify and seek the implementation of measures to mitigate the impact of the economic downturn on the residents, community organisations and businesses in the Borough of Woking.	Cllrs Addison, Ali, Barker, Chrystie, Hussain, Johnson and Kingsbury.

The Task Group meets twice a year to review the progress of the Economic Strategy. The Chairman also attends ad hoc events to support the Council's public relations effort. The primary focus of the mid-year meeting was the conclusion of the previous Economic Development Strategy 2012 - 2017 and the transition to the new version for the period 2017 - 2022. Simon Matthews, who had helped with the formulation of both of our strategies, assisted us with a transition paper which highlighted how the priorities dove-tailed and how the new strategic priorities could be readily monitored.

Additionally, the Task Group discussed member concerns about the impact on local firms of development in West Byfleet. Officers confirmed they would be happy to assist wherever possible and monitor any proposals.

Towards the end of March, the Task Group would be reviewing the performance of the strategy in its first full year.

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The Finance Task Group

Chairman – Cllr Graham Chrystie

Purpose	Membership
To review Financial issues as and when identified by the Committee. Financial Performance of the Council Management and Administration of Accounts procurement Strategy, Pension fund, Financial Strategy.	Cllrs Bond, Chrystie, Davis, Hughes, Morales, Pengelly and Rana.

The programme of the Committee has continued largely upon the format adopted for several years where the Committee has monitored events which have occurred. However with the recent major increase of borrowing and large projects it has been deemed that the Committee needs to be more active at an early stage if it is to be effective in its task.

Several factors are significant and these are as follows:

1. Green Book issue is now often weeks after a month end and whilst this has recently been due to acceptable reasons, it is not wholly satisfactory. The Committee has indicated a need to be appraised as soon as possible of significant issues such as borrowing costs and loan drawdown and the Chairman proposes to regularly contact Leigh Clarke between Committee meetings.
2. Change in say the tenant position in Wolsey Place/Peacocks is significant and the Committee have regularly requested the rent role and projections. This will continue at each meeting for the foreseeable time.
3. The Committee feel that it is necessary for the E & Y model for Victoria Square to be updated and re-run from time to time.
4. The Green Book now contains a Sheerwater Regeneration page and this is useful but the Committee has asked for not only a list of THL purchases but also a list of forward legal commitments to purchase too. Whilst the Committee appreciate that THL carry out the transactions, as WBC supplies loan finance then it is necessary for the total legal commitment to be stated. Transparency is vital on all Sheerwater finance as THL are acting as WBC's agent.

Some Committee members have pointed out that the Committee seems to operate in some isolation from other WBC committees also dealing with finance and that exchange of data would be useful.

For example there is no information passed to the Committee concerning the progress of development contracts and in particular any material variation therein. The recent woes of several retailers is significant and it is hoped that professional assessment of the impact upon WBC's Victoria Square development would be available to the Committee long before its next formal meeting.

To sum up the Committee have been very pleased with the service and support from Leigh Clarke and her team. However due to the current situation of WBC's exceptional major commitments, an uncertain national finance situation due to Brexit and Global Trade concerns, increased prompt focus upon material issues seems required of the Committee.

Graham Chrystie

Chairman, Finance Task Group

11th March 2018