

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 primarily completed both scrutiny and pre-decision scrutiny of the work of the Executive and the Council as a whole. The three long-standing 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. A further fourth Task Group – The HIF Housing Outputs Task Group which was established in January 2022, will continue to see its work through to conclusion in the 2022/2023 municipal year.

The Work Programme of the Committee is regularly reviewed and updated to take account of issues affecting the Borough at the time.

The Committee is now invited to agree the draft report for submission to the next meeting of Council, on 31 March 2022.

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.

Background Papers: None.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 This is the 16th 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

2.1 This year the Committee has made changes to enhance its governance and procedures following the implementations of recommendations from Dr Gifty Edila's report, the Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge review and the guidance from the MHCLG. It has tackled significant topics including scrutiny of the Housing Infrastructure Fund project, the Council's financial position following an independent report commissioned from EY and ongoing monitoring of performance especially in respect of waste management services. The Committee has made important recommendations in respect of these and other key topics in order to further the governance and transparency of the decision-making and performance of the Council.

2.2 Construction Site Noise Limits

2.3 The Committee received a report coming out of a Notice of Motion from Councillor Liam Lyons on Construction Site Noise Limits. After discussing the current process and the number of complaints that had been raised in the last 12 months the Committee came up with the following recommendations:

- Where a Prior Consent Notice has been submitted requesting noisy works outside of usual hours, Ward councillors are consulted, to the extent this is practically possible, before a decision is made.
- A quarterly report is prepared and submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee providing further details of noise complaints received.
- Improve the communication to local residents for upcoming noisy works by the use of the council website and social media and ensure consistency of the use of direct communication to local residents such as letters and door knocks

2.4 Health and Wellbeing Strategy

2.5 The Committee received a report from Julie Meme. The process for developing the Health and Wellbeing Strategy was discussed including the consultations undertaken, how the priorities had been identified and how, going forward, the impact would be measured and the achievements tracked. The five priority areas were mental health, isolation and loneliness, obesity, independent living, and the wellbeing of carers.

2.6 The importance of communicating the services available through the Council to all residents was emphasised, noting that some communities were hard to reach and difficult to engage with, particularly on those matters of health which still had a stigma attached to them. Ongoing public consultation and involvement would be arranged as the Strategy evolved, noting that Covid had limited the amount of public consultation in the drafting of the strategy.

2.7 The important role of the two Council Support Officers placed at St Peter's Hospital was emphasised as well as the importance of the educational aspects to tackling issues such as obesity, so that information is provided in an understandable way in a variety of different mediums. The particular impact on young people and their mental health was also raised and it was proposed that Officers could explore close working with groups such as Outline and the NW Surrey Short Stay School and also working with the Youth Council to explore options to support young people struggling with their mental health. .

2.8 Housing Services Review 2021

2.9 The Committee received an update on the Housing Services Review which had been undertaken over the past year. Following completion of the review, a new Housing Strategy had been prepared before being adopted by Council in July 2021 following a public consultation. The Housing Strategy set out the Council's vision for the period 2021 to 2026, covering the scope of the Authority's Housing Services and complementing other policies of the Council.

The priorities identified were:

- To provide well designed, high quality homes that were affordable and met local needs;
- To prevent homelessness and help those in housing need;
- To help people to achieve independence and wellbeing;
- To deliver an improved housing service to tenants and leaseholders;
- To enhance choice, standards and quality within the private rented sector.

2.10 The following items were discussed by the Committee:

- That the responses received from the public consultation had been positive, significantly higher than had been expected.
- The feedback received through the consultation exercise had led to subsequent changes to a number of the themes within the Policy, notably around prioritising social rents and further details around sustainability measures, as well as drawing out smarter objectives.
- The number of empty properties was discussed and details were requested of the number of empty properties for which double council tax was being paid, if available. It was noted that the Council was working to reduce the number of empty properties with partner organisations including Thamesway Housing, recognising that there were often complex reasons for a property being left empty which took a significant amount of time to address.

2.11 Progress on the viability assessment recommendation, which proposed a S106 agreement where a viability case results in fewer affordable homes in order to provide the option for the actual costs and values to be completed, was queried. Officers confirmed that S106 agreements were sought in such circumstances, noting that each agreement was subject to negotiations.

2.12 Overview and Scrutiny Guidance by the MHCLG

2.13 A number of recommendations were agreed by the Committee in respect of a review of the Council's arrangements in light of the guidance issued by the then Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in 2019 and identified a wide range of recommendations for the Committee as a means of strengthening the Council's overview and scrutiny work.

2.14 These included a formal opportunity for discussion between the Chairman of the Committee and the Leader of the Council be established, a draft Executive / Overview and Scrutiny Committee protocol be drawn up for agreement by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Executive, adoption of management arrangements for the release of, reporting on and audit of, the Scrutiny budget, developing a communications plan be established on the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and to look at the topic of the scrutiny of risk and commercialisation published by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny.

2.15 The Elections Bill 2021

2.16 The Committee considered a report which set out the proposals contained in the recently published Elections Bill. Included within the Bill were a number of high profile recommendations, including the introduction of ID to vote in polling stations. Woking Borough Council had participated in the Government's Voter Identification pilot in recent years, the findings of which had clearly informed some of the proposals in the new Bill. The Bill, if approved, would impact on the residents of the Borough, particularly in respect of the introduction of voter ID for polling stations, though Woking's participation in the pilot exercise in previous years would make the transition easier than would be the case in other Boroughs and Districts.

2.17 Review of Rutland and Thamesway Group

2.18 The Committee received a report on the Rutland and the Thamesway Group from Louise Strongitharm in October 2021. The key items noted by the Committee were that the tax and company structures would be assessed to feed into a review about what the Council required going forward, primarily founded on the view that the Council may not need the number of companies that it had currently. The cost of the independent financial advice had been covered by Thamesway. It was quite likely that the number of Companies would be reduced after the independent review. The Thamesway Business Plans were being submitted to Council in December 2021, with the recommendation to roll them forward another year so the Corporate Strategy process could be completed and business plans aligned for 2023 with the Corporate Strategy's priorities.

2.19 Celebrate Woking Review and Forward Plan

2.20 The Committee received a report on this item from Riette Thomas. The calendar of events for 2022 was discussed with the purpose of strengthening community spirit, through promoting a positive image of Woking as a place of pride for residents, businesses and visitors, increasing participation from within the community, maximising opportunities for economic development and to leave a legacy. The centrepiece of Woking's programme of events for 2022 would be the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations such as the creation of a space in the town centre, a 12 week event programme and the screening of sports events over the summer period.

2.21 Specific items raised by the Committee included the possibility to mark the 2022 Football World Cup which is taking place between November and December 2022, consideration of a time capsule for the town as part of the celebration, the plans for the villages in Woking, the involvement of local choirs, dance schools, operatic and dramatic societies and whether it is possible to have a livestream in the town centre so people can see what is going on over the Jubilee weekend. Other ideas raised were the potential for a Platinum Queen and Platinum King as a competition and how younger age groups would be involved and other uniformed services such as the Police and Fire Brigade. The best way for local residents to find out about what is going on and how to get involved was discussed. Social media would be used to promote these upcoming events and to keep information coming out.

2.22 Freedom Leisure Performance Review

2.23 The Performance Review of Freedom Leisure was presented by Cllr Kemp to the Committee and the following points were raised and discussed:

- Historically Freedom Leisure has contributed £680,000 in management fees to the Council but that due to the pandemic the service was only open for 20% of the normal operating times and services were limited. The Council had to subsidise the service and the normal

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management fee could not be paid and the contract was operated on an open book basis, as per Sport England's guidance.

- Noting the opening of the Eastwood Leisure Centre with more than 700 members being registered so far. It was anticipated that the Council will stop supporting the contract financially in the new year and it is estimated that the Eastwood Leisure Centre will break even in 2-3 years. The membership of the Eastwood Centre was discussed and it was confirmed that membership was still rising and that young people were frequently using the centre.
- Proposed improvements to the phone service was raised. Freedom Leisure are working to develop a mobile phone application to improve the process.
- Clarification was given regarding the support being given to Freedom Leisure which involved receiving support payments, paid one month in arrears based on actual operating costs. The contract was always run with a marginal profit margin and due to low attendances the contract is not currently viable but that given the trends in the sector it is expected that the contract will return to a break-even point early in 2022.
- The areas of the pool system had not been refurbished but they would be monitored and repaired as the need arises. Providing healthier food options at the leisure centre was also raised. The safety of the inflatables was queried and what governance would be put in place on health and safety around the use of inflatables.

2.24 Treasury Management Mid-Year Review 2021/22

2.25 This review was presented by Leigh Clarke. The following points were discussed by the Committee:

- Noting the mix of short term and long term debt financing and that the Council has an ongoing need for borrowing. There is an ongoing assessment whether to continue with long-term loans or take some as short-term as there is a need for balance in treasury management activity. The decision and process to take out long-term as compared to short-term loans was clarified which are influenced by interest rate projections. This year the borrowing strategy has been focussed on mitigating interest rate risk and not having a significant amount of short-term borrowing exposing the Council to the movements on long-term rates.
- Highlighting the difference between the actual and approved borrowing limits in that the approved limits includes all the Council needs to borrow for planned projects and gives flexibility to take borrowing at a time when the rates are favourable.
- It was discussed whether the short-term borrowing could be raised higher and the long-term limit lowered to benefit the Council. However it was noted that while the Council has taken advantage of lower short term rates last year the risk of taking out short-term borrowing is the possibility of missing out on favourable long-term rates. The approach for long term borrowing is to take 50 year annuity loans to provide stability in terms of the Council's financing costs. The 50 year period matches the nature of the investments.

2.26 Financial Review

2.27 This review came out of the Notice of Motion from the Council meeting on 29 July 2021 requesting an independent comprehensive review of the Council's assets and liabilities. EY conducted this review and they presented their report at the January 2022 meeting of the Committee. The EY report provided perspective on the Council's financial position at the end of the last financial year and the report endeavoured to provide a comprehensive and objective summary with possible observations on how these could be interpreted.

2.28 There was a thorough and searching discussion between Committee Members and the EY representatives which brought out some key themes and topics arising out of the comprehensive review. These included the overall picture the report presented of the Council's financial position, the impact of COVID-19, the valuation of assets and the approach taken to different classes of assets, the Council's exposure to risk, the liquidity of Council assets, the Council's exposure to risks in retail and commercial sector and any other risks that the Council could be exposed to but not looked into.

2.29 As a result of the Committee's discussion, there were a number of key points highlighted:

- Ensuring that the Council has the appropriate skills and capability to manage the risks arising from its investments and commercial interests
- Monitoring the economic outlook as applicable to the Council
- Being aware of legislation and regulatory risk
- Further analysis of the operating cashflows for each of the Council's investments and commercial interests.

These recommendations were taken forward as part of the consideration of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy in February and March 2022.

2.30 Joint Waste Management Performance Review

2.31 The Committee received a presentation from Sarah Beck and Jo Chauhan from Joint Waste Solutions. It covered several areas such as the continued COVID-19 response, an update on the Garden Waste collections, information on driver recruitment and a waste and recycling update.

2.32 There was an extensive discussion on the garden waste collections including the impact of the shortage of HGV drivers and other Covid related disruptions in order to establish the underlying causes for the disruption to this service over the past year. It was noted that a monthly service would be restored from April onwards.

2.33 The process of handling missed bins was also discussed in some detail including identifying the root causes of recurrent issues such as the movement of crews to unfamiliar areas and the use of agency staff and how this process could be further improved.

2.34 Other issues discussed were the plans for carton recycling, the process for extending subscriptions given the missed collections and how the collection service from flats could be improved.

2.35 Dr Gifty Edila's Report – Update on Recommendations

2.36 An update was given to the January meeting of the Committee of the actions in respect of the recommendations from Dr Gifty Edila's Report. Attention was drawn to the improved support being provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee including the employment of a part time scrutiny officer.

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2.37 Also discussed was the update of the recommendations of the Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge review and one item highlighted was the Peer Review of the Planning Service.

2.38 Lessons Learnt Through the Covid-19 Response

2.39 The Committee were presented this report by Emma Bourne and Andy Calfe on behalf of Geoff Mcmanus. Information was provided to Members about the various initiatives and actions that were carried out as a result of the pandemic including the establishment of the Borough Emergency Control Centre and the dedicated support to residents who were deemed as vulnerable.

2.40 The key points raised by Committee Members focussed on the Council's ability to meet the challenges of any future emergencies, including engagement with residents, established relationships with partners and the importance of stocks of personal protective equipment (PPE). The Committee was advised that the Council has strategies in place to ensure that the needs of the Borough can be met during an emergency of this scale and that the Council could respond swiftly to any sudden changes.

2.41 Thanks was extended by Members to the work of Woking Borough Council staff and also the many volunteers during this unprecedented time period.

2.42 Woking Borough Council's Support of Local Businesses During Covid-19

2.43 Chris Norrington presented this report which drew highlighted some of the measures Woking Borough Council took in order to support local business during the Covid-19 pandemic. This included the quick distribution of grants and how this in turn had impacted the relatively low number of businesses which closed in Woking and a significant number of new businesses opening up, with around half being food-related.

2.44 Work had been done to help support businesses in understanding how to manage cashflows and in particular too help support the hospitality sector, which had particularly struggled during this period, through actions such as the creation of the Woking Hospitality Alliance. Additional actions taken included hosting webinars with business experts and outlined how efforts were made to ensure that businesses in Woking were given a good chance of surviving and mitigating the impact of the pandemic.

2.45 The points raised by the Committee included what action was being taken to address grant fraud, noting that due diligence action was being done, and that there was a discretionary grant available which was to help address the challenges some businesses faced in meeting the grant criteria. 'MyTown Woking' was discussed and it was noted that there were close to 50 businesses on the platform however challenges continue around encouraging residents to use this platform so that local businesses benefit. The Digital Centre of Excellence was discussed and that the search for a partner for this project was still ongoing.

2.46 Enterprise M3

2.47 Stephen Martin from Enterprise M3 presented to the Committee a comprehensive overview of the work Enterprise M3 was carrying out in and around Woking. The investments that the organisation had made in the area, such as the Woking Town Centre Transport Infrastructure Package and the Woking Sustainable Transport Package were highlighted as well as some of the measures taken to support businesses including the provision of guidance, support and funding during the pandemic, the investment in loans and equity for high growth SMEs and the new net zero business support service. There is a focus on the high potential sectors which are space, animal health and gaming and with a looking forward view being provided, particularly around future funding and the Levelling Up White Paper review.

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Additional points that were raised by the Committee included the measures to support the transition to low carbon, supporting less affluent areas, involvement of SMEs in the governance of the LEP, its involvement with schools and colleges and how the LEP could work more closely with Woking Council and specifically in respect of the digital incubator.

2.48 Housing Infrastructure Fund

2.49 A scrutiny review of the Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) scheme was agreed by the Committee. The focus of this review was intended to provide effective constructive critical friend challenge, focussing on:

- the decisions the project was planning to make;
- how these were planned to be implemented;
- amplifying the voices and concerns of communities;
- improving outcomes; and,
- contributing to the development of a vision for the project and how this connected with related Council strategy and other change activity.

2.50 An initial review was undertaken by Internal Audit to:

- provide assurance that all the risks in respect of the scheme had been identified and that there was sufficient mitigation in place to manage the risks;
- provide assurance that due processes in decision making and project management had been applied and assess how the demands and potential conflicts of multiple major projects occurring concurrently were managed; and
- identify the wider lessons from a project of this scale with very significant external dependencies.

2.51 The internal audit report was reviewed by the Committee which noted the recommendations that would be actioned and taken forward. Some risks were identified which were not in the risk register and given that the HIF Oversight Panel does not look at the housing targets, it was agreed that this is an area that the Committee could scrutinise further, noting that there were potential risks such as a fundamental default on the funding from Homes England and also the risk of not acquiring all the property on the Triangle. There was an identified need for an oversight at a high level to monitor what should be achieved within the timescale and finance parameters, noting that the original timescale targets had not been achieved.

2.52 It was therefore agreed to set up a task group to be formed from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to scrutinise in more detail the housing outputs element of the Housing Infrastructure Fund. A report from this task group is included in Appendix 2.

2.53 Governance

2.54 Throughout the year Democratic Services provided briefing papers as part of the ongoing training of members to enable us to better understand the processes of scrutiny. In addition to the usual briefing papers the Committee received two additional papers which were the Guide to Scrutiny of Risk and Commercialisation which was published by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny and the Overview and Scrutiny Guidance which was published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Officers also developed a Protocol to manage the relationship between the Executive and Overview and Scrutiny and also allocated a budget of £20,000 to the Committee.

2.55 Freedom of Information

2.56 Joanne McIntosh presented the report on Freedom of Information requests for the period. This report highlighted that the number of Freedom of Information requests received for January –

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December 2021 was 632, down from 690 in the previous year. It was noted that whilst there had been a high number of FOI's which had exceeded the statutory timescale the overall number of these was lower than in 2020. Reasons for the delays in completing the requests had largely been attributed to the re-deployment of Officers to assist other service areas during the pandemic.

2.57 Complaints

2.58 Joanne McIntosh presented the report on complaints for the period of 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021, including within this report alongside Council complaints data was data from New Vision Homes and Joint Waste Solutions. The Council received 93 complaints this year, up from 64 the previous year. It was highlighted that some of the complaints stem from the period where there had been an impact on staffing as a result of Covid-19. A request was made for:

- i. The simplification of the Joint Waste Solutions complaints data to allow for the analysis of trends
- ii. A Comparison between this year and last year for the complaints data of New Vision Homes

2.59 Tackling Climate Change Locally

2.60 The Committee received a comprehensive report written by Lara Beatie, Senior Policy Officer, and a presentation at the Committee which was delivered by Tracey Haskins, Green Infrastructure Manager. The presentation and report covered a wide-range of topics including actions which have taken place since March 2019 such as the work which had been done on transport, including the electric vehicle chargepoint pilot, Woking ranking 10th out of all the Country's district councils on a league table compiled by Climate Emergency UK which ranks the effectiveness of a council's climate emergency plans and living green walls. The presentation gave some insight into future plans and of particular note is the Climate Change Strategy Review and Continuing engagement through the Planet Woking programme and other partnership events.

2.61 The Committee raised several points during the discussions that took place such as having more details about engagement on social media, the role of renewable energy in the Council's plans and tree planting. It was agreed that the Members would be provided with further information outside of the meeting to answer any queries which could not be addressed on the night.

2.62 The Committee was unanimous in their thanks to Lara and Tracey for the work they had carried out and thanks was extended to both Councillor Howard and Councillor Davis for their roles in driving forward the work on climate change.

2.63 Performance and Financial Monitoring Information Review

2.64 Adam Walther, Head of Transformation and Digital, presented this item to the Committee and highlighted the history of the item and how it originated out of the recommendations set out in Dr Gifty Edila's report. It was noted that the review will encompass the Performance and Financial Monitoring Information ('Green Book') and other performance monitoring overall, including governance, decision making and the use of technology to improve usability and transparency.

2.65 Members were presented with a timeline of how the work will progress, with a particular highlight being the planned engagement with Members following the May 2022 election. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee are to expect an interim report at the July meeting to

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comment on, with the work expected to conclude in September when a final report will go to the Executive recommending changes.

2.66 Family Centres – Service Delivery Plan

2.67 Nicola Norman, Family Centres Manager, gave a comprehensive presentation on the provision of Family Centres and the Family Support Programme in Woking detailing the support given to vulnerable families. The impact of Covid was highlighted especially in regards to childrens' mental health, domestic abuse and social isolation. Details were also given of how the Family Services team adapted to the challenges of working through the pandemic and how their working practices have changed on a permanent basis. The importance of working with key partners such as Woking Mind and Mindworks was also emphasised. Progress has been made in key areas significantly improving the outcomes for vulnerable families.

2.68 Key points raised in the Committee's discussion included how to identify vulnerable families that require help, the effect on very young children of the various lockdowns in respect of their social skills and interactions, the increased assistance required to tackle mental health and how the Family Services team work with a mixture of an in-person and virtual meetings. The Committee very much welcomed the improved outcomes for families supported by the Family Centres.

2.69 Safer Woking Partnership – Community Safety Plan

2.70 Camilla Edmiston, Community Services Manager, presented the draft Safer Woking Partnership Plan for 2022-25 highlighting the five key priority areas of Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime, Drugs and Alcohol, Reducing Reoffending and Preventing Violent Extremism. Key themes emphasised were the increased instances of fraud and domestic abuse since the pandemic, the reduced tolerance to anti-social behaviour given more home working and the impact of organised crime especially in respect of drugs. The local police inspector Kit Moc was also in attendance.

2.71 There was a wide ranging discussion by the Committee with a number of key issues highlighted such as how to alert people to take sensible precautions but without increasing the fear of crime unnecessarily, how to tackle re-offending rates, the high public profile of anti-social behaviour and drug-taking, the perceived lack of police presence on the streets and the difficulties in communicating with the public when crimes are reported e.g. in respect of drug hotspots in order not to prejudice ongoing police investigations. The role of local ward councillors in engaging with the public and managing expectations as to what is possible to tackle and the likely timescales was also emphasised. The Committee requested that the police take a look at whether it is possible to provide more ongoing communication to the public when crimes are reported without prejudicing investigations. The Committee also welcomed the offer from Inspector Moc for walkabouts between local neighbourhood officers and members of the public in order to increase engagement with the local community. The Safer Woking Partnership Plan was endorsed with thanks given to Camila Edmiston and team and also to Inspector Moc and the local police.

3.0 Membership

3.1 The Constitution permits membership of 9 councillors. The membership this year has been: Councillor J Sanderson (Chairman), Councillor S Hussain (Vice-Chairman), Councillor J Brown, Councillor S Dorsett, Councillor R Mohammed, Councillor M I Raja, Councillor R Leach, Councillor A Kirby and Councillor E Nicholson.

3.2 Attendance at meetings this year has generally been good and there was significant participation by Committee members in setting subjects for the agenda through the year. The attendance record for the Members of the Committee is set out at Appendix 1.

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4.0 Task Groups

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

- Economic Development Task Group (Chairman Councillor D Roberts)
- Finance Task Group, (Chairman Councillor J Sanderson)
- Housing Task Group (Chairman Councillor A Barker)
- HIF Housing Outputs Task Group (Chairman Councillor A Kirby)

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 included in the Performance and Financial Monitoring Information ("Green book") which is a monthly set of management information and also looks at the treasury mid-year review. The work programme published in the agenda for the Committee meeting on 21 March 2022 gives a view looking forward at the work of the Committee during the next municipal year. There are some items in place for the new Committee to deliberate on, such as the Communications Plan and the possibility of modifying the format of the Complaints item so that the Committee receives this report twice a year, as it had done historically. It has been left to the next Chairman and Vice-Chairman to take these considerations further.

6.0 Acknowledgements

6.1 As Chair I would like to thank all Members of the Committee for their participation and contributions through the year and particularly the Vice Chair, Cllr Saj Hussain, who ably supported the Chair.

6.2 The contributions from the Task Groups is a vital part of the Committee's work. The three standing Task Groups; Housing, Economic Development and Finance continue their important work of scrutinising these areas in more detail. I would also like to thank Members who have participated in the new Task Group on HIF Housing Outputs. This has been a key part of our scrutiny work this year.

6.3 Many thanks to the outstanding support from Officers throughout the year, in particular the new Scrutiny Officer Adam Ahmed, Giorgio Framalico, Frank Jeffrey, Kuldip Channa, Gareth John and Joanne McIntosh

6.4 The Committee would like to thank the guests who have attended the meetings through the year and enabled a more in-depth approach to the topics covered. They provided significant information and insight for further scrutiny.

6.5 Also thanks to those Portfolio Holders who attended Committee meetings to support and to add insights, in particular Cllr Kevin Davis who attended several meetings throughout the year.

7.0 Conclusions

7.1 This Committee has continued to make a significant contribution to the governance of the Council and providing robust scrutiny and challenge which will result in change to Council processes. The increased governance and support of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee itself which was put in place this year is very welcome and enables the Committee a greater

REPORT ENDS

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Appendix 1

Attendance at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2021/22

Date	Committee Members in Attendance	
24 May 2021	Cllr J Sanderson (Ch) Cllr S Hussain (V-Ch) Cllr A Kirby Cllr R Mohammed Cllr E Nicholson	Cllr S Dorsett Cllr R Leach Cllr J Brown Cllr M I Raja
07 June 2021	Cllr J Sanderson (Ch) Cllr S Hussain (V-Ch) Cllr A Kirby Cllr R Mohammed Cllr E Nicholson	Cllr S Dorsett Cllr R Leach Cllr J Brown Cllr M I Raja
12 July 2021	Cllr J Sanderson (Ch) Cllr S Hussain (V-Ch) Cllr A Kirby Cllr R Mohammed Cllr E Nicholson	Cllr S Dorsett Cllr R Leach Cllr J Brown Cllr M I Raja
13 September 2021	Cllr J Sanderson (Ch) Cllr S Hussain (V-Ch) Cllr A Kirby	Cllr S Dorsett Cllr J Brown Cllr M I Raja
18 October 2021	Cllr J Sanderson (Ch) Cllr S Hussain (V-Ch) Cllr A Kirby Cllr R Mohammed Cllr E Nicholson	Cllr S Dorsett Cllr R Leach Cllr J Brown Cllr M I Raja
22 November 2021	Cllr J Sanderson (Ch) Cllr S Hussain (V-Ch) Cllr A Kirby Cllr E Nicholson	Cllr S Dorsett Cllr R Leach Cllr J Brown Cllr M I Raja
24 January 2022	Cllr J Sanderson (Ch) Cllr S Hussain (V-Ch) Cllr A Kirby Cllr E Nicholson	Cllr S Dorsett Cllr R Leach Cllr J Brown Cllr M I Raja
21 February 2022	Cllr J Sanderson (Ch) Cllr S Hussain (V-Ch) Cllr A Kirby Cllr E Nicholson Cllr M I Raja	Cllr S Dorsett Cllr R Leach Cllr R Mohammed Cllr J Brown
21 March 2022	Cllr J Sanderson (Ch) Cllr S Hussain (V-Ch) Cllr A Kirby Cllr E Nicholson Cllr M I Raja	Cllr S Dorsett Cllr R Leach Cllr R Mohammed Cllr J Brown

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Reports of the Task Groups

Housing Task Group

Chairman – Cllr Ann-Marie Barker

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 Aziz, Barker (Ch), Bridgeman, Dorsett, Harlow, Hughes, Kirby and Whitehand (V-Ch)

Annual Summary of the Housing Task Group

Housing Strategy

The new Housing Strategy came to the first meeting of the task group. The group noted the work of all those who had contributed to the strategy and the good level of public contribution on the strategy.

Housing Services In-House

Throughout the year the task group had regular updates on progress to bring housing services back under Council control following the conclusion of the New Vision Homes contract. Content and process of the tenders for various aspects of the services provided by NVH were reviewed. Looking ahead the new service seeks to deliver an improved process, greater responsiveness, better timing of repairs and a higher proportion of first time fixes.

New Vision Homes

A number of staff have left NVH as the contract end nears but the Council is keen to retain key staff and a full TUPE programme is in place to provide job security.

Affordable Housing

A number of small schemes were delivered during the year and several others are in train with completion this year or next. The group were pleased to see the slow but steady stream of affordable delivery and the efforts of officers to meet targets for affordable homes.

Empty Homes

The group welcomed a new impetus to bring empty homes back into use after this initiative had been affected by Covid.

Housing Assistance

An updated Housing Assistance scheme was reviewed prior to going to Executive. The ability for a wide range of professionals to agree an assistance programme and the extension of the scheme to support mental health was particularly appreciated.

First Homes

First Homes is a new government scheme which is intended to replace shared ownership. It offers a discount of up to 30% on home purchases, on properties up to a value of £250k. The scheme is particularly aimed at first time buyers, key workers and those who have served in the armed forces. As this scheme takes priority over others there is concern that it may impact other affordable provision. The cost of homes in the borough means a limited number of properties will be eligible for the scheme.

Selective Licensing

There have been no further developments on the Selective Licensing scheme during the year. Decisions have yet to be made on any extension of the scheme.

Moving Forward

In the year ahead it will be important for the group to carefully track progress of housing services as they are run in-house. It will need to ensure all aspects of the service deliver for residents and that there is an effective complaints process in place. The group should continue to review the delivery of affordable homes, consider the success of selective licensing and whether the scheme should be extended and track First Homes as this scheme comes on stream.

Economic Development Task Group

Chairman – Cllr Dale Roberts

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 Ali (V-Ch), Barker, Davis, Johnson, Mohammed, Roberts (Ch) and Whitehand.

Annual Summary of the Economic Development Task Group

Introduction

The Economic Development Task Group met on the 25 August, and 4th November and will meet once more, on the 23rd March, before the end of the municipal year.

A new chair, cllr Roberts and vice-chair, cllr Ali were appointed at the first meeting and the group reviewed a draft of the *Economic Development Action Plan* focused on activity that would enable local, post-pandemic economic recovery and capitalise on emerging opportunities. The plan aligns with the *Woking Town Centre Masterplan*, the *Five-Year Plan* and the *Digital Strategy* and is an interim action plan covering the period to the end of 2023.

The plan requires internal support from officers in Digital and Transformation, Estates Management, Leisure Services, the Masterplan Project Team, Integrated Transport and the Business Liaison Team. It also requires support from borough partners including Woking Chamber of Commerce, Jobcentre Plus, EM3, training providers and commercial agents and landowners.

Activity is focused on the following priorities.

1. **Focus on business.** Retaining and supporting Woking's existing businesses and attracting new businesses

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2. **Build on business advantages and skilled people.** Support for local employers to recruit and retain local talent, promoting careers in the local economy and supporting local employment.
3. **Future proofing town and village centres.** Promoting the town as a centre for living, leisure, retail, commerce, and culture. Also supporting villages as distinct communities for commerce, retail, and services.
4. **Making our place the place to be.** Making Woking a desirable place to live with a balanced focus on health, wellbeing, environment, physical and digital infrastructure.
5. **Destination Woking.** Building a unique identity for Woking that attracts investment, and visitors and encourages residents and businesses to engage with the borough and its economy.

The plan was approved in September 2021 and an update on activity follows.

Focus on Business

Priority 1 actions are designed to sustain and grow Woking's businesses. These include continuing the provision of free advice through *Start Up Woking*, continuing with the *Woking Works* business directory, and the provision of webinars and workshops including guidance for hybrid working and how to use the Google My Business platform. The borough also hosted Tedx Woking in May.

As pandemic restrictions lift, the opportunity to run in-person events is returning. The borough's hosting of the *Winter Warmer* with Woking and Surrey Chambers of Commerce was impacted by last-minute pandemic restrictions related to the omicron variant but *Woking Means Business* was able to go ahead in October 2021 located at the Woking Leisure Centre.

Since April 2021, officers in the BLT have had over 600 engagements with local businesses predominantly with those impacted by pandemic restriction such as retail and hospitality including updates on grant or support schemes. The Council Leadership Team (CLT) and BLT are also engaged with key employers including one-to-one meetings with the Council's CEO.

Significantly, officers are also exploring a Green Tech business incubator and discussions are well-progressed with a candidate provider to run it within the town centre providing support to green technology businesses.

Build on Business Advantage, People and Skills

Support has continued for Woking Works job board including promoting local recruitment events for Hilton and Mountjoy. BLT have already met with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to make introduce M&S, Hilton, Island House, and Black and Irons to promote vacancies. Discussions have also been held with Brooklands College and DWP to explore offering training for the unemployed with ambitions in the hospitality sector.

Woking Works also partnered with Woking Mind to offer mental health support for local employees returning to the office.

Future Proofing

Woking Shopping Summer Zone activities attracted attention between June and September resulted in increased footfall and anecdotal feedback has been extremely positive. The opening of Victoria Place has been delayed until later in 2022. The Council and various partner marketing teams are coordinating their preparations.

Officers continue to engage with village businesses and particularly new businesses. There are new lettings along Oyster Lane in Byfleet, Boundary Business Centre in Maybury, and Marshall Parade,

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Pyrford. Several relocations have taken place within the Sheerwater business parks, a new Sicialian café opened on Station Approach, West Byfleet. Horsell remains busy, and St Johns reports mixed views on trading levels.

Woking, the place to be

The Woking Community Memorial Tree project was approved in November 2021. Trees and landscaping were completed in the autumn in the new urban open space that forms part of Victoria Square. Urban greening has been completed in the town centre, with a second living wall at Dukes Court completed in the summer. Thameswey have installed a photovoltaic array and sedum green roof system at Elizabeth House.

Action Surrey, part of the Thameswey Group, was successful in a consortium bid on behalf of Surrey districts and Boroughs under the BEIS Green Homes Grant Local Authority Delivery Scheme. It was awarded £6.2m under Phase 1A of the funding, and a further £3m under Phase 1B. The project, Green Jump Surrey, tackles the energy efficiency of low income, fuel poor households across the county.

The Council has installed car charging points at Dukes, Sportsbox and the new Eastwood Leisure Centre. SCC Highways has submitted a 'mini Holland' cycle route scheme application to the Department of Transport, linking the Town Centre to Goldsworth Park under the Government's Tranche 3 Active Travel fund.

Destination Woking

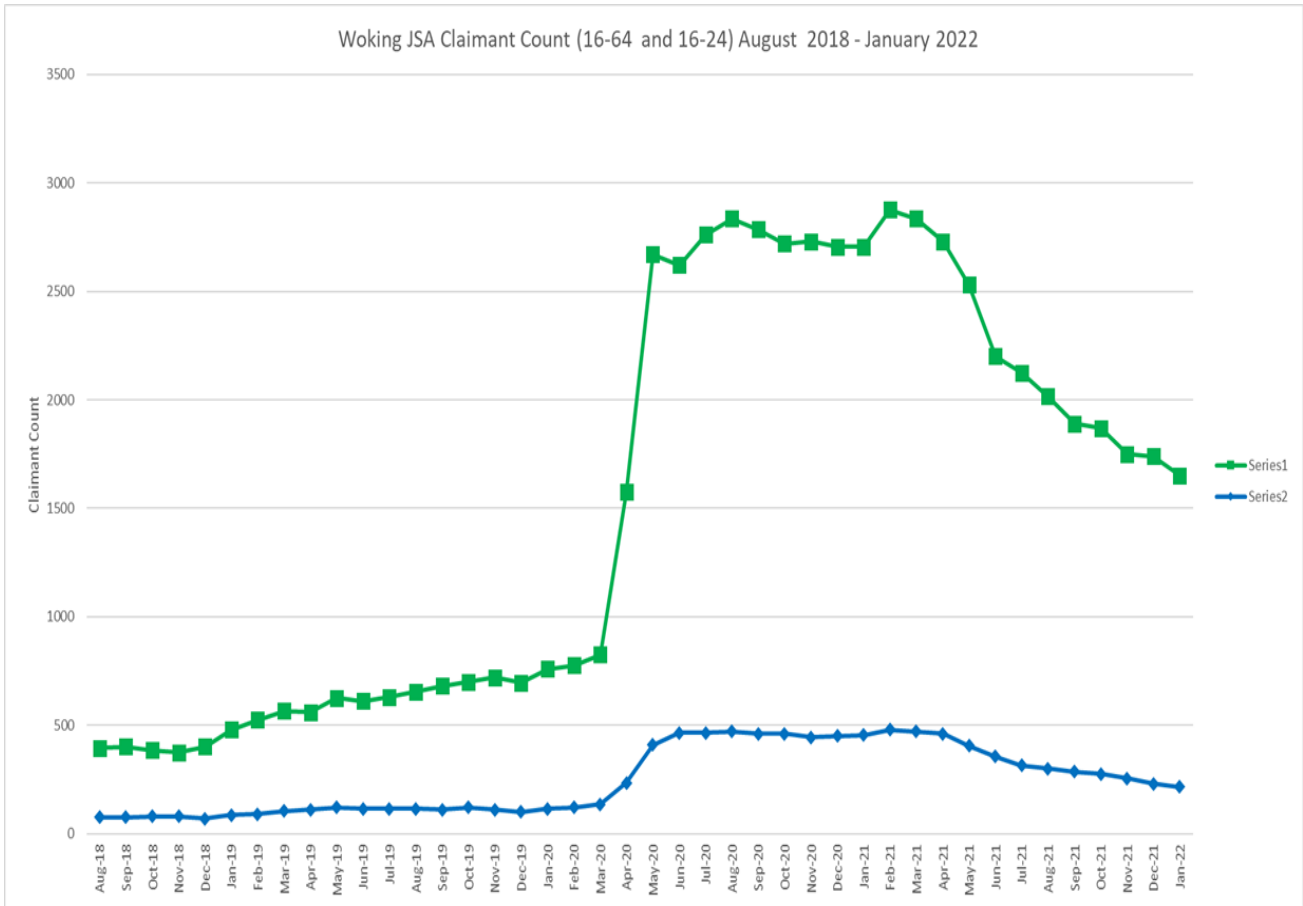
Priority 5 – Destination Woking - is scheduled to start in April 2022, with an implementation start date of September 2022.

Key Outcomes

JSA Claimant Count

March to August 2021, the JSA claimant count levels fell from the highs of the 2020 pandemic decreasing through to January 2022. However, the number is still higher than 2018-19 pre-pandemic.

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Car Park Footfall

Since March 2021, car parking footfall (Shoppers, Brewery Road and Victoria Way) has started to return to pre-pandemic levels of March 2020.

Month	2020/ Footfall	2021	2021/ Footfall	2022	Variance
Mar	62491		36577		-41%
Apr	36410		58526		61%
May	47678		54754		15%
Jun	16804		51272		205%
Jul	16103		71657		345%
Aug	69148		65313		-6%
Sep	64656		71630		11%
Oct	52893		86472		63%
Nov	36364		74658		105%
Dec	56992		111973		96%

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Jan	17833	78707	341%
Feb	16689	87453	424%

The Finance Task Group

Chairman – Cllr James Sanderson

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 Azad, Aziz, Davis (V-Ch), Johnson, Kirby, Sanderson (Ch) and Whitehand.

Annual Summary of the Finance Task Group

The task group has discussed and reviewed a number of key items through the year in the context of the increased focus on the Council's finances given the impact of the pandemic and the significant projects being undertaken.

- The ongoing impact of the pandemic on the Council's finances in particular the collection of commercial rents, car parking income and the overall financial position was a key theme of the Task Group's focus this year and it received regular updates through the year.
- The continued delay in the completion of the audit of the prior year (2019/20) accounts of Woking Council was highlighted and dissatisfaction expressed of the current situation. The 2020/21 accounts were reviewed and the adjustment to the fair value of commercial properties of £43m and higher pension liabilities were highlighted.
- The General Fund, Investment Programme and Medium Term Financial Strategy papers were reviewed in advance of their approval by the Executive and Full Council. The progress of the Fit for the Future programme and an update of the savings targets over the next 3 years were noted. An improved reserves position was welcomed but there is still a gap between income and expenditure that would require the use of reserves. A lower Covid provision for 2022/23 being required for car parking income and commercial rents was also noted.
- Additional points noted as part of this review were that the Government Funding settlement was only for one year and similar to last year and there is a potential change to Minimum Revenue Provision rules which could impact current and future borrowing of Woking Council.
- The Comprehensive Statement prepared by EY was discussed by the Task Group following the review by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the issue of cashflows for the operating companies was highlighted.
- Review of Fees and Charges was covered by the Task Group noting there was a significant proportion of the proposed increases related to car parking and there were inherent uncertainties post pandemic. Also noted was the encouragement of electric vehicles by having no current charge in place.
- There has been an ongoing review of the Victoria Square project specifically in respect of the delays in this project. An updated financial model will be reviewed by the Task Group once

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available. There is also a review of the Governance and Strategic options of this project being conducted by EY.

The Task Group also covered other standing items such as:

- Review of the Performance and Financial Monitoring (Green Book) reports with major items highlighted.
- Report of Irrecoverable Debts which is reviewed each quarter and no major issues were noted.
- Bi-annual review of Treasury Management noting the Council benefiting from low interest rates from short term borrowing earlier in the year that has been switched to long term loans as the year has progressed.
- The review of commercial rents was particularly relevant given the effect of the pandemic. It has been in line with the revised forecast for the non-recoverability of rents included in the Covid provision.

HIF Housing Outputs Task Group

Chairman – Cllr Adam Kiirby

Purpose	Membership
The HIF Housing Outputs Task Group had been established following the decision to set-up a task group to look at the housing element of the Housing Infrastructure Fund.	Cllrs Aziz, Forster, Harlow, Johnson, Kirby (Ch), Mohammed, Whitehand (V-Ch).

Annual Summary of the HIF Housing Outputs Task Group

Introduction

As of 14th March 2022 the group had already met twice – on 2nd February and 1st March. The group is due to meet for a final time this municipal year on 17 March 2022 and following this meeting an interim Chairman's report will be brought to the last meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee of the municipal year, to take place on 21st March 2022. Given the short timeframe in the latter part of this effective municipal year, both officers and members have worked hard to fit in these three meetings into less than two calendar months – alongside considerable work in between these formal meetings of the group.

Outcomes of 2 February Meeting

The group's interim objectives has been to list and assess relevant risks, link these areas of investigation to other relevant WBC activities and mitigations, and provide an interim report.

In the first meeting members received an initial briefing on the legal framework of the HIF agreement, setting out areas for further investigation into the legal aspects of housing delivery under HIF. Members also received an initial briefing of the headline approximate financial numbers of the HIF agreement, including the £95m grant total from Homes England, £10m agreed contribution by Network Rail, and around £10m in initially planned borrowing by WBC to support housing elements of the scheme.

Members agreed to cover a further range of relevant sub-topics to help understand HIF housing outputs and any risks to these:

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- Planning implications and linkages/independence from HIF
- Housing strategy and affordable housing elements
- Development viability and site design
- A legal briefing in further detail
- Financial implications of different housing delivery and legal outcomes

Officers were also tasked with supporting the group and Chairman with an interim 'SWOT' analysis, briefing from Homes England, and an initial consideration of a comparative study with other local authorities making the most of the HIF funding.

Outcomes of 1 March Meeting

Our second meeting to date focused on a briefing from Jonathan Medlin, representing Homes England which runs the central-government instituted Housing Infrastructure Fund, from the bidding stage until completions. Jon has been a major point of contact for WBC during the ongoing work to envisage and now to deliver the HIF housing outputs.

As the main focus of this meeting, the group has now been briefed on the perspective of Homes England on Woking's HIF housing outputs, but also on how Homes England treats any such scheme – and on this organisation's metrics of success and a good partnership relationship. This discussion enabled an initial comparison of Woking's HIF housing elements with other schemes nationally, including its similarities and many differences. The group has also now explored the relationship between HIF and planning – separate issues though highly interlinked – and the implications of HIF housing outputs for the borough's other sites and broader housing targets.

Members have also now been able to query the timeline of the HIF housing outputs as originally conceived and taking an initial look at how that has evolved since. Members were able to link initial examples of 'default' under the scheme and options for mitigating this risk, as well as the implications of those mitigations (e.g. changes to timeframe).

The group has also been able to further clarify its understanding of the difference between WBC-owned and unowned sites, alongside the legal differences in terms of HIF housing outputs.

Outcomes of 17 March Meeting

The group's final meeting of the year focused on summing up work conducted by members and officers to date, in relation to the Terms of Reference, and ahead of the Chairman's oral update to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The group discussed their thoughts on the Homes England presentation, and it was noted that a good focus for the group should be on the risk to the Council on 'owned' sites, given that with regards to the non-owned sites the Council had to work to their 'best endeavours'. A further point of discussion was regarding a comparative study and whilst it was highlighted that Woking was unique with its HIF project a task for officers to complete in time for the June meeting would be to look into other HIF sites and analyse their processes, challenges, risks and learnings which could be taken away and applied to the Woking project.

The group considered the implications of a 'SWOT' analysis completed by officers outlining in list form the major Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats posed by HIF Housing Outputs. The group had a useful discussion on various elements of the SWOT analysis, with particular attention being drawn to the Masterplan, the planning process and the types of properties being developed.

A discussion took place on affordable housing in relation to the HIF project and the group focused their discussion on themes ranging from planning permission relating to the affordable housing sites,

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the percentage of affordable housing on owned sites and observations on the affordable element in general such as the reduction in size of 'the Triangle site'.

The task group agreed that the next meeting should be held on the 15 June 2022 and a full interim report is likely to be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 6 June 2022.