

## 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 Working Groups of the Committee – the Economic Development, Finance and Housing Working Groups – have continued to monitor and review these three core areas of the Council's activities.

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

### Recommendations

The Council is requested to:

**RESOLVE That** the report be noted.

The Council has the authority to determine the recommendation set out above.
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<b>Background Papers:</b>	None.
<b>Reporting Person:</b>	Councillor Josh Brown Email: CllrJosh.Brown@woking.gov.uk
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# Annual Report of the Overview And Scrutiny Committee

## 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 working groups over the last year.

## 2.0 Summary of Work Undertaken

- 2.1 The Committee undertook overview and scrutiny of many varied topics throughout the year. The work of the Committee aided the decision-making of both the Council and Executive to ensure key decisions taken, even if not actively scrutinised by the Committee, benefitted from a critical eye not connected to those making the decision.

### Pre-Decision Scrutiny and Governance & Scrutiny

- 2.2 Throughout the year, the Committee received several items on the theme of scrutinising Council activity.
- 2.3 Members were keen to ensure that guidance on scrutinising commercial risk and company governance was utilised by both Officer and Member.
- 2.4 As part of the improvements introduced to Overview and Scrutiny at the Council several years ago, the Executive - Overview and Scrutiny Protocol has encouraged the Chairman to meet at regular intervals with the Leader of the Council to discuss upcoming decisions of the Executive. The meetings have brought several (but not limited to) items of Pre-Scrutiny to the Committee, as laid out below.

### Pre-Decision Scrutiny: Town Centre Masterplan

- 2.5 The Committee discussed the expenditure on the consultation and what outcomes were drawn from it. It was confirmed that the Council had spent £160,000 on the consultation with £60,000 having been received as a grant. The cost also included expenditure on preparations ahead of the consultation. The responses to the consultation could be used to inform the Local Plan and its three consultations which were required by law. The Committee indicated that any scrutiny of the money spent on the consultation was born of a concern for the Council's wider finances.
- 2.6 Two Members raised concern that there could be unforeseen consequences on the Borough villages derived from the Town Centre Masterplan proposing height limits for buildings and the extant Local Plan limiting green belt construction. The Committee discussed potential impact from the new Town Centre Masterplan and the Local Plan on construction across the Borough. There was particular concern from the two Members that an intensification of construction, particularly multi-storey, would occur in the Borough's villages to offset limits in building high-rise buildings in the Town Centre.

### Pre-Decision Scrutiny: Improvement and Recovery Plan

- 2.7 As part of the directions from the Secretary of State the Council was required to develop an Improvement and Recovery Plan ('the Plan'), to be agreed by the Commissioner team appointed by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and DLUHC. Once agreed it would be necessary for the Council to update Commissioners and DLUHC on the Council's progress against the Plan after three months, six months, and every six months thereafter.
- 2.8 The Improvement and Recovery Plan has had extensive discussion since first presented to the extraordinary meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in August 2023, and the

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Committee members have raised important and challenging questions about the Plan's progress to Council officers.

- 2.9 The Committee reviewed the plan and updates in August 2023, December 2023 and March 2024.

### Scrutiny Topic Proposal: Community Infrastructure Levy

- 2.10 Following the suspension of the Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Fund, the Overview and Scrutiny saw an update from Brendan Arnold, the Interim Chief Finance and Section 151 Officer.
- 2.11 It was confirmed that the Council would honour all commitments under the CIL scheme including financial liabilities. There were, therefore, no legal ramifications from the current CIL financing situation. Officers considered that the developers would have no justification to apply to reclaim their money. It was necessary, due to the Council's finances, to take a measured approach to CIL funding. Officers emphasised that such an approach did not equate to a pause or freeze of the CIL scheme. It was not yet possible to determine how much cash would be available to fund CIL applications.
- 2.12 A view was expressed that direct communication on the matter between the Council and neighbourhood forums should take place. The Committee agreed to request that Officers engage with neighbourhood forums on the subject. Councillor Lyons, Portfolio Holder for Planning and Regulatory, was committed to engaging with the neighbourhood forums.
- 2.13 The Committee agreed that it would be helpful for Officers to publish a clear, digestible position statement on the Council website to summarise the position of the CIL scheme and the anticipated direction of its funding. Officers accepted the recommendation.

### Pre-decision Scrutiny: Medium Term Financial Strategy: Citizens Advice Woking and Woking Community Transport

#### Citizens Advice Woking

- 2.14 Lorraine Buchanan, Laurence Oates, and Jakki Mimms, representatives of Citizens Advice Woking (CAW), provided a presentation on the organisation's work in the Borough.
- 2.15 Councillors and CAW officials discussed Citizens Advice Woking's work and progress. CAW had been applying for grants from other organisations but there was concern that the loss of Council funding could not be wholly replaced. Citizens Advice advised that Council Officers routinely signposted residents to the organisation or engaged directly for its expertise. In addition to the core funding received from the Council through the Service Level Agreement, CAW also received financial support for its work with refugees, paid by the Council from government funding for resettlement programmes. Lorraine Buchanan noted that the number of people seeking support from CAW had increased steadily over the previous several years. Citizens Advice noted that the core funding from the Council had reduced by five percent in the previous year and had been due to be reduced by the same again in each of the next two years prior to the Council's proposal to remove funding.

#### Woking Community Transport

- 2.16 Guy Padfield-Wilkins of Woking Community Transport (WCT) provided a presentation on the history and work of the organisation at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 11 December 2023. There existed a service-level agreement between Woking Borough Council and WCT which required provision of seven vehicles per day, 52 weeks of the year. WCT had been setup by Woking Borough Council and Surrey County Council. The dial-a-ride and day care passenger services were only available to its 3986 members. The membership had

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increased by 1618 members over the previous seven years. The service users of WCT included the elderly, disabled and vulnerable.

- 2.17 The proposed removal of funding from Woking Borough Council would also include ending the office and garage leases. Guy Padfield-Wilkins estimated the required replacement funding to be £270,000 per year. WCT paid a peppercorn for the office space, business rates and a commercial rate for the garage. The Committee extensively discussed the impact of any potential closure on the users of this important service.
- 2.18 Whilst the Committee did not make any formal recommendation on the basis of these presentations, the information discussed gave a useful insight into the impact of the Council's decisions on its residents and will certainly provide important context and information ahead of any further decisions.

### Scrutiny Topic Proposal: HS2 Funding at Brookwood Cemetery

- 2.19 The establishment of a task and finish group to review the financial agreement between HS2, the Council and Brookwood Cemetery for the management of the HS2 funds for the HS2 reburials at the Cemetery. The task group had been proposed by Councillor Davis who expressed concerns over the financial agreement. The task group would review the contract and seek to understand the obligations of the Council, the status of the funding, the impact, if any, of the S114 Statement and the arrangements to ensure the continued annual transfer of funds to the Cemetery for the duration adopted in the agreement.
- 2.20 At the meeting held on 18<sup>th</sup> March, the Task and Finish Group report authored by Cllr Kevin Davis and Cllr Leslie Rice came to committee for discussion. Following the fact-finding period, it was determined that WBC has sufficient provisions in place to ensure the sustainable funding of the HS2 burial site for the contract period. The Task and Finish Group was satisfied that the appropriate funding is available, and the corporate memory of this agreement will last for the duration of the contracted 100 years. Therefore, there was no formal recommendation to the Overview and Scrutiny.

## **3.0 Further Areas of Scrutiny**

- 3.1 In addition, the Committee monitors financial and other indicators included in the Performance and Financial Monitoring Information which is a monthly set of management information and also looks at the treasury management mid-year review as well as the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account Outturn. The Committee has also discussed Asset Disposals, Freedom Leisure Annual Review, amendments to the Constitution, the Council's Capital Investment Programme, committee meetings restructure, annual review of complaints, alongside having extensive oversight and scrutiny of the Council's budget and the Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

## **4.0 Acknowledgments**

- 4.1 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 Adam Kirby, who has ably supported the Chair and the Committee to ensure true and effective scrutiny.
- 4.2 I would like to give my sincerest thanks and my enormous sense of gratitude to the outstanding support from Officers throughout the year, in particular the Scrutiny Officer, Toby Nash, and also to the Committee's Legal Representative, Kuldip Channa.
- 4.3 I would also like to thank the Strategic Directors, Interim Directors of Finance, and Julie Fisher for attending our often-lengthy meetings.

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- 4.4 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.
- 4.5 I would also like to thank those Portfolio Holders who attended Committee meetings to support and to add insights, in particular Cllr Ann-Marie Barker and Cllr Dale Roberts who attended the majority of meetings throughout the year.

### **5.0 Conclusions**

- 5.1 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 capability to scrutinise topics in more detail.

### **6.0 Implications**

#### Finance and Risk

- 6.1 There are no known financial implications arising from this report.
- 6.2 There are no known risks arising from this report.

#### Equalities and Human Resources

- 6.3 There are no known equalities implications arising from this report.
- 6.4 There are no known resource implications arising from this report.

#### Legal

- 6.5 There are no known legal implications arising from this report.

### **7.0 Engagement and Consultation**

- 7.1 No engagement was considered necessary on the report.

REPORT ENDS