

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 is regularly reviewed and updated to take account of issues affecting the Borough at the time. The potential and management of Woking's Heathlands involved two site visits and a presentation by officers.

The Committee is now invited to agree the draft report for submission to the next meeting of Council, on 4 April 2019.

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 14th 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

Network Rail and South Western Railway

- 2.1 The Committee were pleased to welcome James Waight, Head of Strategic Planning (Wessex Route) who gave a helpful presentation on planning for the development of the network. He understood the importance of the rail network to Woking. Concerns over the removal of trees in St Johns were due to the need to keep leaves off the line. It was noted that there was no current plan available for the flyover as options were still being developed but it was hoped the project could be delivered within the next five years. Timetable changes would take 18 months to prepare and organisations such as Bustler would be involved. Network Rail advised they had learned lessons from the difficulties caused in timetabling northern franchises.

Phil Dominey, Senior Regional Development Manager of South Western Railway (SWR) gave a presentation on the future aspirations, including investment in the travel experience such as wi-fi, rest rooms and ticket purchasing processes. SWR would be seeking to ensure that there would be minimal disruption in the event of works to Woking Station. Members raised concerns about trains being stuck between stations in emergencies and were informed that a new policy to enable trains to move forward to the next station to enable disembarkation had recently been implemented. Staff had also been provided with smart phones to access the latest travel information. Access to Brookwood station was raised by ward members as the underpass flooded and there were additional issues regarding access to Brookwood cemetery and parking. Ward councillors were to speak to SWR direct about these matters.

It was pleasing to note that WBC had excellent working relationships with both Network Rail and SWR.

Welfare Benefits and Universal Credit

- 2.2 The Committee received a presentation from Maria Zealey from Surrey Welfare Rights on concerns arising from changes to the benefits system, concerns and in particular the possible impact on certain groups of people such as the elderly and those with mental health problems. There had already been a benefits freeze in place and Universal Credit would apply to new claimants from October 2018. It was unknown how many people in Woking would eventually be impacted but estimated between 5000 and 10000. Applications had to be completed online and there was a 4 week wait for benefits to be paid. Internet access was available at the Council and in libraries.

Lorraine Buchanan of Citizens Advice Woking (CAW) stressed the impact on local people and David Ripley, the Council's Benefits Manager outlined the work the Council was doing to prepare for the changes. It was pointed out that it was the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) who were ultimately responsible for introducing Universal Credit and members resolved to ask all the agencies, including DWP, Job Centre Plus, Surrey Welfare Rights, CAW and the Council to work closely together to ensure residents were not disadvantaged.

Affordable Housing

- 2.3 Ray Morgan outlined proposals for the delivery of social housing and noted the Council's aspiration to provide additional units despite the challenges of high land and build costs. The 200 units specified in the presentation included 134 through the Housing Revenue Account, a new refuge for Your Sanctuary and additional hostel places for use by the York Road Project.

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Additionally, Thamesway were intending to provide homes through the Earn Your Deposit Scheme which were considered “affordable” under the emerging National Planning Policy Framework. Members welcomed the proposals.

Raynes Close

- 2.4 The Committee followed up discussions in the previous municipal year concerning outstanding works in the eco homes. A surveyor had made number of recommendations to repair and improve the properties and residents had been given the option to take on future maintenance themselves and opt out of the service agreement once the current works were completed. The tenants would not have to pay service charge while the works were taking place and some of the equipment would still be under guarantee and parts replaceable easily with commonly available kit.

Members were pleased that very good progress had been made since the matter was originally raised.

2.5 Basingstoke Canal

Ray Morgan updated the Committee on progress on meeting the Council’s aspirations for enhancing the canal in Woking town. The quay at WWF was almost ready while other proposals such as a tow path link bridge at Chobham Road would need planning consent and action on a gas main so would be unlikely before 2020. Another prospect was a barge gallery attached to Lightbox which had generated interest from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The Council had received an expression of interest in the building of a Hotel and leisure facility which would fund work to provide a boat basin at Brook House Common. It was hoped a contract could be signed in Spring 2019.

Dementia Awareness

- 2.6 Members received a presentation from Julie Meme, the Council’s Home Independence Manager, and Jade Buckingham the Health and Wellbeing Manager on work to make Woking a dementia-friendly borough. 27 Dementia Action Alliances had been formed within the borough of Surrey, the purpose of which was to support and encourage local businesses to identify changes they could make to become dementia-friendly. Dementia Friends sessions had been attended by over 100 members of the public, 70% of council staff and 35 local organisations. The work done by the team was appreciated by the Committee.

Surrey Fire and Rescue

- 2.7 The Committee was grateful to James Tigwell, North West Surrey Group Commander of Surrey Fire and Rescue, for giving a presentation on the local operational activities rather than on the consultation underway at County level which was outside his remit.

He advised the Committee on the resources available and noted that the prevention events had contributed to a reduction of 52% in fires over the last 10 years and had included events such as safe driving and youth engagement. Vulnerable people were considered most at risk and safety and wellness visits, along with the fitting of smoke alarms, helped reduce those risks. The service had been among the top three counties in the country in 13 years since 2001.

In terms of exceptional fires Commander Tigwell informed the Committee that resources could be called in whenever deemed necessary and despite budget reductions stations had been open at all times, while target response times had been achieved in well over 90% of cases across the county. It was also noted by members that recent fires on heathlands and in Goldsworth Park retail area had been promptly handled.

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Celebrate Woking.

- 2.8 The Committee received a presentation from Chris Norrington and Rose Blackley on the Celebrate Woking events in 2018 and the calendar for 2019. Visitors to the Celebrate Woking website had steadily increased over the years and although there was no theme for 2019 a variety of cultures would be the focus and any suggestions would be welcome. The food and drink festival had again been a huge success and won the 2018 Surrey Life Food and Drink Hero award and the Party in the Park had again been very popular, with its emphasis on suffragettes and work on the war memorials.
- 2.9 Members were informed that public safety and crowd control were considered carefully by the Safety Advisory Group prior to events taking place. It was agreed that events in Byfleet ought to be included in the schedule of events in 2019

Enterprise M3.

- 2.10 Dave Axam, Chairman of Enterprise M3, gave a presentation on the Group's projects, achievements and challenges. The group was submitting a bid to government for an infrastructure package for £95 million for works to the A320 south of Victoria Arch and associated works to the arch itself. The group had previously supported the Council in the provision of funding for the Sheerwater access road which had proved a great success. In total the group had completed 21 projects to date in the region delivering 1587 new jobs and 1200 new homes, with aspirations to deliver multiples of those numbers by 2030 and a local growth fund of £219.1m by then.

Grounds Maintenance

- 2.11 Geoff McManus, Assistant Director WBC and Jason Kinsella, Regional Director of Serco, gave a presentation on the management of the Council's green spaces. There was a wide-ranging discussion on a variety of aspects of the work of Serco under its contract which started in 2003 and runs until 2023 when it is to be re-tendered. It was noted that Sportsbox had been added to their responsibilities in the last few months.

Particular challenges involved maintenance of sports pitches and effects of seasonal weather, and the damage to fencing around the pond in Woking Park along with water quality. Serco confirmed that their staff were suitably qualified and consideration may be given to the appointment of apprentices or on-the-job training depending on the need for staff at the time.

Countryside Management

- 2.12 Following the visits by members to Brookwood Farm and Sheets Heath earlier in the year the Committee recognised the value of the heathlands and the need for proper management. Accordingly, the Committee had asked for proposals to countryside access and maintenance for each category of site. Accordingly, members were presented with options which could be considered at a meeting of the Climate Change Working Group. The significance of public awareness was felt to be key since the balance of diversity, habitat and the public were sometimes difficult to get across to the public. The Committee appreciated the enthusiasm and skills of Tracey Haskins, Green Infrastructure Manager, and Marcus Turley in their work on the heathlands.

Aaron Henderson outlined the current programme for upgrading play areas. It was agreed a suggestion for more adult fitness equipment should be considered as part of a review of the play strategy.

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Joint Waste Solutions.

- 2.13 In November the Committee received an update on the performance of Joint Waste Solutions on the waste collection service. Improvements to collections had taken place and the staff were responsive where residents raised concerns. Some concerns were expressed about the publicity around the Christmas collection services which appeared to have confused some residents as they weren't updated online. This would be remedied in 2019. There was a continual process of educating residents confused about bins to reduce the incidence of rejected loads. A strategy of making the producer pay for the disposal of waste from their products was being developed.

Community Services

- 2.14 Julie Meme outlined the work taking place to provide holistic support to people discharged from hospital, which now also involved a member of staff attending St Peters Hospital to discuss individual cases to plan for discharge. The scheme, named Home Safe Plus, was a collaboration between four neighbouring Boroughs and districts which was formed to provide a single point of access for health professionals to other services to assist the hospital discharge of patients. The scheme covered Meals on Wheels, Careline, Social Prescribing and the Handy Person Service among others. There had been 39 referrals to date. Notably, GPs were referring patients to WBC for social prescribing whereby we could meet patients to discuss their needs and provide a 6-week intensive service which was intended to give patients confidence to use the opportunities provided in such places as community centres. Another significant new project was a Falls Responder Service via Careline. Anyone falling and calling for an ambulance might have to wait currently for up to 8 hours depending on pressures in the ambulance service. This new service sought to respond within 45 minutes. Funding had been received from the NHS for 6 months.

Members were strongly encouraged by these innovative schemes and it was agreed that the team should report back if there became a funding issue after the initial period.

- 2.15 The role of the Council's leisure activities in supporting the health and well-being agenda provided an insight into the wide variety of opportunities for the public to get out of the house, meet people and get active. The beneficial effect was not merely physical activity as this had a knock-on effect of enabling people to socialise and feel positive. The community centres played a significant part in providing accessible activities.

Governance.

- 2.16 Scrutiny- throughout the year member services provided briefing papers as part of the ongoing training of members to enable us to better understand the processes of scrutiny. This included response to a Parliamentary committee's proposals, some of which we supported.
- 2.17 Freedom of Information- A new online logging system had been implemented on 1 October 2018. Members were surprised that in just over three months a staggering 241 requests had been received. Many requests relate to council tax and business rates, and we aim to make some of this information available online to reduce the amount of Officer time spent answering the requests. The act provides a number of reasons why a request would not be fulfilled which includes it being commercially sensitive, exceeds cost limits and repeated vexatious requests. It was agreed the Committee would review any FOI complaints submitted to the Information Commissioner as part of the complaints review process.
- 2.18 Complaints- the committee received two six monthly reports. New Vision Homes complaints had not yet been correctly provided in that the periods they supplied were of varying lengths and therefore not easily comparable. There were not seen to be any systemic concerns generally but in New Vision Homes' case the Committee was scheduled to meet them to

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discuss the responsiveness and standard of repairs which had shown in the reports as being less satisfactory than we would like.

- 2.19 Confidentiality- officers presented a paper explaining the legal basis for the decisions on whether documents should be confidential "Part II". It was noted that in Surrey, WBC had the highest number of such papers though this could be, at least in part, that as an active council we were regularly involved in new business transactions. As a result of concerns previously expressed papers, or part, which might have been part II were now more frequently in open Council debates and only the most sensitive aspects were left in Part II.
- 2.20 Thamesway Developments- The Committee had been informed that councillors would in future be notified prior to the submission of planning applications by Thamesway Developments. The concern had arisen due an application for a development of a town centre site about which only Board members had previously been aware.

3.0 Membership

- 3.1 The Constitution permits membership of 10 councillors. The membership this year has been: Councillor I Johnson (Chairman), Councillor Deborah Hughes (Vice-Chairman), Councillor Mrs H Addison, Councillor J Bond, Councillor G Chrystie, Councillor K Howard, Councillor S Hussain, Councillor R Mohammed, Councillor M Raja and Councillor C Rana.
- 3.2 Attendance at meetings this year continues to improve 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 K Davis)
 - 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.

6.0 Acknowledgements

- 6.1 As Chair I would like to thank officers for the administration of the Committee and to my Vice-Chair, Councillor Deborah Hughes, for her support and holding the reins at the meeting in September when I was away. The attendance of Portfolio Holders to cover their topics at meetings, and our guest presenters, 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

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of areas and followed up discussions in previous years to ensure action has been taking place, such as Raynes Close and Basingstoke Canal. We have also been impressed by the innovative work done in a number of departments and the enthusiasm of staff in dealing with their challenges.

REPORT ENDS

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Appendix 1

Attendance at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2018/19

Date	Committee Members in Attendance	
21 May 2018	Cllr I Johnson (Ch) Cllr D Hughes (V-Ch) Cllr Mrs H Addison Cllr J Bond Cllr Graham Chrystie	Cllr K Howard Cllr S Hussain Cllr R Mohammed Cllr M I Raja Cllr C Rana
18 June 2018	Cllr I Johnson (Ch) Cllr D Hughes (V-Ch) Cllr Mrs H Addison Cllr J Bond	Cllr Graham Chrystie Cllr K Howard Cllr R Mohammed Cllr C Rana
16 July 2018	Cllr I Johnson (Ch) Cllr D Hughes (V-Ch) Cllr Mrs H Addison Cllr J Bond Cllr Graham Chrystie	Cllr K Howard Cllr S Hussain Cllr R Mohammed Cllr M I Raja Cllr C Rana
17 September 2018	Cllr D Hughes (V-Ch) Cllr Mrs H Addison Cllr J Bond Cllr Graham Chrystie	Cllr K Howard Cllr S Hussain Cllr R Mohammed Cllr M I Raja
26 November 2018	Cllr I Johnson (Ch) Cllr D Hughes (V-Ch) Cllr J Bond Cllr K Howard	Cllr S Hussain Cllr R Mohammed Cllr M I Raja Cllr C Rana
21 January 2019	Cllr I Johnson (Ch) Cllr Mrs H Addison Cllr J Bond	Cllr Graham Chrystie Cllr K Howard Cllr M I Raja

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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, Bridgeman, Hughes, Johnson, Kemp and Mohammed.

As in 2017/18 the year was characterised by a large volume of work due to the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April 2018. Changes to existing practices required additional staff and team restructuring, together with training in new procedures which kept the team very busy. Woking has a good record in avoiding homelessness but the legislation requires an even more proactive approach. A new IT system involved greater automation of the housing register and improve the level of reporting. Personal Housing Plans, including an action plan, had been introduced for clients resulting in caseloads of over 300 homelessness assessments from April 2018 to November 2018 compared to 55 in the same period in 2017, emphasising the scale of the efforts of the housing team.

Other issues reviewed by the Task Group included the following:

1. The work of the Home Independence team to introduce Home from Hospital- a hospital discharge scheme which involved a holistic approach to supporting people leaving hospital- Handy Person where three persons were employed in house rather than contracted, and an innovative Relocation service, which is a paid-for service to help people move to more suitable accommodation. The work of the team had recently received a wider airing by Overview and Scrutiny;
2. The Selective Licensing Scheme in Canalside which showed that many more landlords had taken advantage of the free early registration policy than expected and only an estimated 100 remained unregistered. The budget was unsurprisingly under pressure as a result. The high early application rate and limited staffing had caused admin backlogs which were being addressed;
3. Delivery of affordable housing remains a key issue and was reviewed during the year. Dwellings of all sizes were needed and there were projects in the pipeline which would help satisfy the need. There were 945 applicants on the register for affordable units in November 2018 when the task group last met. Of these, nearly 80% needed one or two bedroom homes;
4. Member concerns over the standard and overcrowding of some temporary accommodation (TA) were discussed and expressed a wish for redevelopment wherever possible. It was recognised that demolition required a project budget and alternative accommodation for the homeless families. The length of stay in TA was running at an average of two and a half years.
5. The loss of two very senior officers had resulted in a shuffling of responsibilities pending the appointment of a new Housing Director (subsequently appointed to start in April 2019).

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6. Let's Rent, a rebranded scheme to encourage private sector tenants to let to council applicants had resulted in a number of additional landlords coming forward. This would help reduce B+B requirements.
7. The task group reviewed the Empty Homes Strategy. Members were asked to identify any such properties in their wards and report to the team.

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, Azad, Barker, Chrystie, Davis and Johnson.

The Task Group meets twice a year to review the progress of the Economic Strategy and discuss issues around the economic vitality of the Borough. The Chairman also attends ad hoc events to support the Council's public relations effort. The primary focus of the March meeting had been to consider the first annual report following the approval of the strategy for 2017-2022. The task group was also able to discuss with the Chief Executive plans for the town centre and in particular retail and other commercial space available. It was notable that at the end of March 2018 there was only 3% vacant retail space, and also that WBC owned around 55% of the total retail space in the town centre and approximately 22-24% of the commercial space.

The Council would be evaluating possible involvement in the Gateway project to include uses other than retail to ensure vitality of the area.

The half year report on the strategy included data showing the JSA count stood at 0.6% (395 claimants) whilst youth unemployment was 0.9% (75 people) as at August 2018. Woking's employment rate was 82% of the working age population, with 51,700 people defined as being in employment or self employment.

The strategy included working with Enterprise M3 (who have since presented to Overview and Scrutiny), Highways England and Network Rail with a view to enhancing access along the A320 and replacing Victoria Arch.

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

The Finance Task Group

Chairman – Cllr Kevin Davis

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 Ashall, Azad, Barker, Bond, Davis, Hughes and Martin.

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The Finance Task Group has had another busy year with an agenda reviewing and scrutinising the key Council financial reports. In particular:

- In July - The Council's financial statements for 2017/18 which were approved by Council by the earlier deadline of 31 July. The balance sheet at 31 March demonstrated the Council's positive position with assets exceeding borrowing and a net asset position of £235m.
- In November and January - The Medium Term Financial Strategy and budget papers including Investment Programme and Fees and Charges. Whilst it has been possible to increase contributions to reserves for 2019/20 the government funding uncertainties concerning 2020/21 onwards have been discussed regularly throughout the year.

Each meeting the Group also consider the latest Green Book, challenging the performance reported and considering any improvements which could be made to the content and presentation. For 2018/19 the Group requested information to be published on the Council's Strategic Property Investments. This is now included each month and gives a transparent picture of the decisions made and the current financial position of these assets.

The detailed rental income at Wolsey Place has been a standing item during the year with updates on changes at every other meeting. Each quarter a summary of debts written off under delegated authorities is also reviewed. Officers have updated the Group on borrowing strategy and new Long Term loans taken.

There have been a number of government consultations and changes during 2018 which the group have been briefed on, but where the impacts are currently unclear. It will be important for the Group to be updated when further announcements are made.

The timing of future meetings has been discussed as this year they have been in the week before the Executive meeting. Whilst this has meant that the Group has been briefed on the final papers ahead of the Executive decision making, it has often meant that the papers have not been available until very late making effective scrutiny more difficult.

It has been disappointing that the attendance at Finance Task Group meetings has been poor during this year. The FTG is an important part of the Council's governance and meetings should be attended by all Members of the Group.

The FTG thanks the Finance team for their help and time in assisting with committee meetings this year.