

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

held on 19 October 2020

Present:

Cllr D E Hughes (Chair)
Cllr M A Whitehand (Vice-Chair)

Cllr S Hussain	Cllr J R Sanderson
Cllr J E Bond	Cllr C Rana
Cllr G G Chrystie	Cllr M I Raja

Also Present: Ernest Amoako (Planning Policy Manager), Jon Herbert (Strategic Housing and Development Manager), Thomas James (Development Manager), Louise Strongitharm (Housing Director), Adam Thomas (Family Support Programme Manager), Councillors K Davis and I Johnson.

Absent: Councillors R Mohammed

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor R Mohammed.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on Monday, 14 September 2020 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

3. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MINUTES

The Chairman noted the revised process for the approval of minutes had been successful, which included the Chair to review the minutes first, prior to any review by Officers. Any changes would be returned to the Chair for final agreement with all the changes clearly marked. The other items such as NCIL and an update from the Finance task group on the Council's financial position would be addressed later this evening.

[NOTE: In accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, Councillor I Johnson declared a non-pecuniary interest in any items under which Westfield Avenue was discussed, arising from his wife's position as the Chairman of Woking Football Club. The interest was such that speaking and voting are permissible.]

Following a discussion with Peter Bryant, Head of Legal and Democratic Services, it was confirmed that the Part II Woking Football Club and Associated Developments Task Group

report would be made public in a minimally redacted form, the report would be available on the Council's website shortly.

The Chairman had liaised with Ray Morgan, Chief Executive, and other members as to whether the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was the best place to discuss the Green Book, as it had already been discussed at other various meetings before this Committee. Members were asked to feedback their thoughts on the Chairman to this, and would be followed up in the Finance Task Group.

4. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business to discuss.

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In accordance with Officer Procedure Rules, the Director of Housing, Louise Strongitharm, declared an interest in any items under which the Thamesway Group of Companies were discussed, arising from her position as a Director of the subsidiary company. The interest is such that speaking is permissible.

6. NEIGHBOURHOOD COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY

The Chairman introduced the item which followed up on the work the Committee had undertaken in preparing a report going to the next Joint Committee on 11 November on simplifying the NCIL process. It was stressed that the report would coincide with the NCIL review by the Joint Committee, aiming to make the utilisation of accessing the moneys simpler for the benefit of the community.

Mr Amoako confirmed that the flowchart included in the report under appendix 1, depicts the original process that was approved by the Joint Committee. It was agreed that the process would be reviewed after one year, to see how it was working. The effects from Covid had resulted in meetings being cancelled and therefore there were no new schemes approved. Should the process be revised by the Joint Committee then the flow chart would need to be amended to reflect this.

Following a question raised, Mr Amoako confirmed that a Neighbourhood Plan was not a requirement to submit an application. If an area had a Neighbourhood Plan in place it would receive 25% of the CIL money secured from the development in the area, whereas if there was not one in place then only 15% would be received.

Presently 5% of the CIL money was set aside to cover administration costs. Members felt that developers should be required to pay 5% more to cover the administration costs.

The arrangements as it stands, the process is led by Cllrs, Cllrs could then delegate authority to the forums however Mr Amoako felt that it was more appropriate for members to lead on the project as part of their duty.

It was confirmed that the future maintenance of the completed projects could be taken out of the NCIL funding.

Ernest advised that the Council and the Joint Committee had the obligation to consider any application and if an application were to be refused due to not meeting the criteria, there would need to be evidence of this however no appeal process had been agreed by the Joint Committee.

Following feedback from members, it was noted that the following amendments would be made:

1. "Existing" would be added to the flowchart title in order to identify the current process in place.
2. A defined timeline for the Joint Committee to review requests
3. Second to last box in the timeline – missing word at the end – "projects"
4. A mechanism for an appeal process
5. Clarity on maintenance and the 5% administrative fee
6. Confirmation on responsibility of the Ward Councillor.

The Chairman advised that the feedback from members would be included in the O&S Committee's paper to the Joint Committee to consider when undertaking the review of the NCIL process.

7. HOUSING TOPIC SCRUTINY - DELIVERY

The Chairman introduced the Housing Team who would be reporting on the item, which included Louise Strongitharm, Housing Director, Jon Herbert, Strategic Housing and Development Manager, Ernest Amoako, Planning Policy Manager, and Thomas James, Development Manager.

Ms Strongitharm shared the presentation on the second topic of housing scrutiny for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee this year, which focused on the housing delivery, policy context, barriers to affordable housing and updates on housing projects.

The Core Strategy and Policy CS12 were explained and set the figure for delivering an annual target of 102 affordable dwellings per annum until 2027.

Since the Core Strategy was adopted in 2012, the Council had delivered 581 affordable dwellings, and it was reported that 19% of the affordable homes delivered within the last five years had been through Section 106. In terms of future projects, there were 436 new affordable homes planned to be delivered by 2023/24, 345 social/affordable rented units and 91 shared ownership/discounted sale dwellings. Information on the unit breakdown that was required showed that one bed units were in the highest demand.

The Sheerwater Regeneration Project would replace 573 homes with 1,142 new high quality homes of which 523 (46%) would be affordable. The long term project was phased over a 70 month period, with work on the purple phase due for completion by May 2021, it was recently advised that Covid had not effected the timeframe of the development. The Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) which included a £95 million grant from Homes England to improve the highways and rail links in the town centre and enable approximately 3,300 new homes. More information was shared on other projects such as Hale End Court (Old Woking Independent Living), Broadoaks in West Byfleet and Portugal Road in Woking.

Congratulations were given to the Housing team on the achievement of a £2 million grants towards Hale End development.

The barriers to delivering affordable housing were also discussed, noting the impact of Covid on the economy, developers using viability arguments to reduce to avoid providing affordable housing and changes with incorporating affordable housing into an infrastructure levy following the recent Government White Paper “Planning for the Future” (August 2020).

The Housing team had worked hard to secure private rented properties and created a scheme called Let’s Rent, which offered three different service levels, to encourage landlords to let homes, through the Council, to those who could face homelessness. It was reported that the scheme had a total of 210 properties, including the 53 that were secured in the current year. The Thamesway “Earn Your Deposit” scheme had helped four tenants become home owners by giving them money towards a deposit, earned through the scheme.

As requested by the Chair, Ms Strongitharm and Mr Amoako provided examples of viability assessments for the Committee, background information on why viability assessments were requested and the effect it then had on affordable dwellings were discussed. Members felt that a stronger mechanism was required to ensure that affordable housing was always provided when planned to do so.

It was highlighted that the ratio of required dwelling types for affordable housing as stated in the SHMA was different for those of market value. The Chairman requested that a breakdown of what had been provided for these groups and how it relates to the SHMA would be helpful ahead of the next meeting.

The Committee learnt that properties that were to be provided for Buy to Rent were exempt from having to provide affordable options, and it was thought that there needed to be a stronger mechanism in place to enable the Borough to deliver on social and affordable housing, and expressed disappointment that the examples given showed few affordables approved.

Members praised the work undertaken by the team, with the increased pressure from Covid.

Following questions raised by members, it was confirmed that the 3,300 planned new homes, which was part of the HIF bid, would enable the land to be unlocked. Mr Amoako stressed the increasing high demand for housing in Woking, and that the HIF scheme would provide housing beyond the 2027 Local Plan, as the need for housing would continue to grow. The infrastructure that would be provided through the HIF scheme would also enable the opportunity for Woking to cope with increase capacity and build more homes in the future.

For rough sleepers to qualify for housing support, there was a certain criteria they would need to meet, and the team would look at if their situation was intentional, how vulnerable they were and if there was a local connection. If the person did not meet the criteria they may not necessarily qualify for support, however during Covid, all rough sleepers and homeless had to be provided with housing without meeting the particular criteria. The work provided by York Road was invaluable and they also provided support by funding the return of some rough sleepers to an area where they have a connection to.

Members raised concern over the figures of dwellings provided, Mr Amoako explained the way you calculate housing need was determined by the government, and the standard method was detailed in The Government White Paper, implied that Woking’s housing need would come down to 348 dwellings per year however it was still above the 292 homes currently being provided. Government legislation advises boroughs to continue to use the 2014 projections until the method was reviewed.

It was thought that there were between 150-180 tenants still living in Sheerwater, by personal choice, and had expressed desire to move into the new properties provided by the regeneration. It was explained that depending what phase they were living in currently and what phase their new property was in, would determine how many times they would have to move, however the team were working hard to ensure tenants only moved a minimal amount of times. It was added that there would be a net gain of 75 affordable homes from the Regeneration project.

The viability assessment was part of the planning application, and was taken into account before the decision on the application was made. The independent consultants reviewing the viability assessments were paid for by the developer and appointed by the local authority, there would not be any interaction between the viability consultant and the developer other than the payment of fees.

Officers had looked at office to residential conversions, and was a possibility to consider ensuring it would provide a reasonable quality of life of those who could live there. Mr Amoako advised that some sites identified for housing, including those within the town centre, would be converted from commercial to residential.

It was suggested by the Committee that Planning Committee members be more involved in the viability process from an early stage and Mr James advised that he would be happy to provide the Planning Committee members further training on how viability reports were put together and followed through.

The Chairman requested whether the information of housing mix could be broken down further and asked Mr Amoako to collate the information from the Monitoring Report on the provision of all types of housing against the Council policies.

The Chairman thanked all those who assisted with discussion and provided information for members.

8. SURREY LIFELONG LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

A request had been received from the Executive, to organise a small group to scrutinise the Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership and their proposals and to consider whether it should be taken as part of the Council's service provision under the service budget, rather than be reliant on the Grant Scheme. The Chair highlighted the positive feedback detailed in the consultees comments.

Members praised the facility's presence in the Lakeview area, and discussed how it would benefit residents. Councillors Sanderson and Hussain expressed their interest in assisting with the scrutiny.

Adam Thomas, Family Support Programme Manager, suggested it could be looked at undertaking as a one off pilot, and liaise with the group as some details may have changed since the application was submitted in September 2019. Mr Thomas believed there was a need for the services provided by Surrey Lifelong Learning Partnership (SLLP) and would link with the work undertaken by the Family Services Team and the wider Health and Wellbeing agenda. Mr Thomas would be interested in helping with the work and would also involve colleague, Nicola Norman to assist.

The application would be considered outside of the 2021/22 grants timeframe and budget.

RESOLVED that Cllr Sanderson and Nicola Norman would scrutinise the SLLP proposals and if it would be suitable to progress under the Service Budget and report back to the Committee then the Executive.

9. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair highlighted the Climate Change Emergency topic that had been added to the Work Programme, which would review the actions taken to date, an update on progress made and what could members do to assist with the work.

RESOLVED

That the Work Programme be noted.

10. PERFORMANCE AND FINANCIAL MONITORING INFORMATION

The Chairman introduced the item, and shared two points about the Green Book. Firstly that following the Corporate Peer Review feedback, it was thought that the format could possibly be amended to make it easier to read, and secondly the Chairman highlighted how it was reviewed and by which groups.

Members were invited to share their view on how the Green Book was reviewed.

RESOLVED

That the Green Book be noted.

11. TASK GROUP UPDATES

Finance Task Group Update

Councillor Davis provided a brief overview of the summary note of the financial position of the Council provided by the Finance Task Group, which detailed increased expenditure on housing and other costs due to Covid.

Employees from areas that had been effected by Covid eg. Leisure Centre – closure of pools etc, were used to support Covid rather than put on the furlough scheme. It was reported that the car parks were free to use for the lockdown period, however the Government would be assisting to cover 75% the income lost.

There had been a reduction in some commercial rents, and it was noted that the footfall had increased within the town centre due to government schemes, such as “Eat out to Help Out”. Unfortunately some business had closed as a result from Covid however the positive news of new businesses starting up through the pandemic was discussed.

Members raised concern for next year’s budgets, what the tolerance was for risk and what the Council’s reserves could help cover.

The Chairman summarised that the Council had enough reserves to cover key services for the current year and thanked members for their input.

Housing Task Group Update

Councillor Johnson highlighted some points from the report, noting the progress made with the “Next Steps Accommodation” Bid to assist rough sleepers, the results from the NVH survey and that the Terms of Reference would need to be reviewed to reflect the work of the Task Group.

The task group had been working with the Housing team on the topic scrutiny for the Committee which had been very interesting and was praised by the Chairman.

Members were concerned of the long term effects of Covid on the housing support services. Ms Strongitharm informed the Committee that through a grant bid for revenue costs for short term funding support the Council received approximately £380,000, and also submitted a capital bid for further revenue funding for long term support would be announced within the coming weeks.

12. WORKING GROUPS - TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Chairman expressed the review the relationship between the three task groups (Housing, Finance and Economic Development) that report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Councillor Hughes would liaise with the task group Chairmen to see how the review could best be achieved.

RESOLVED

That an update on the task group’s terms of reference would be reported back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 10.22 am

Chairman: _____

Date: _____