

Written evidence submitted by the Liberal Democrats on Wokingham Borough Council [OSG 125]

I am Leader of the opposition on Wokingham Borough Council. This submission is based on the personal experiences of this Group including myself.

Qu 1 Is the Scrutiny Committee at Wokingham Borough Council effective in holding decision-making to account?

Unfortunately not. Too many of the ruling Group are not prepared to even consider to scrutinise the Executive Members. When they do ask questions they are not searching enough. I am not sure of the reasons for this reluctance to question the Exec Members. Perhaps they feel threatened, I am not sure.

At the last Call-In held by this Committee no one from the ruling group even asked me a question and I was the lead witness. It was clear they had made their mind up before the meeting started and did not want to know.

For an O&SC Meeting to work, it is necessary for the Councillors to have a significant degree of autonomy and a willingness to investigate, even if it meant the senior members (colleagues) had a rough time. The Chairman & vice-Chairman were put in place by the Leader of the Council and no one felt able to ask questions. It is I believe currently a waste of time. No more than a talking shop.

Qu 2 Political Impartiality & independence from Executive.

Absolutely not. It is totally under the thumb of the Senior Ruling Group members.

Qu 3. Appointment of Chairman and committee members & effectiveness of committee

The Leader of the Ruling Group appoints their members, I appoint the opposition member(s).

The senior members of the ruling group see the O&SC process as a nuisance and do their best to minimise its independence. The odd useful bit of information does however come out on occasions. I am aware that some of the ruling group councillors are unhappy how the process is being run and want greater autonomy and independence from the senior members of their group. The opposition is all but ignored, often ridiculed for daring to raise an issue of concern. How dare we is the attitude of many (but not all) of the ruling group. There is a minority who feel the system is currently being abused. I would concur.

Our Group believes that the O&SC committee should be selected by all members of their group, independent of the Leader & Exec Members. We would like to see the Committee choose the Chairman & vice-Chairman. I see no reason why the Chairman could not be from the opposition party or parties. If the committee choose the chairman then they are more likely to have the respect of the committee.

In addition the committee should be given a free hand in deciding what is to be included on the agenda. It currently does to some extent, but I do not feel there is sufficient independence of the committee to really to go through a thorough scrutiny of an Exec Member. They are asked questions, but not really the difficult ones. As opposition councillors we only have a limited ability to delve into more detail, or different areas.

One particular concern is the position where a Husband & Wife (one of whom is an Exec member) are involved in a Scrutiny activity. It should not be possible for either party to Scrutinise their spouse (or partner). There needs to be in-built restrictions to prevent this.

The current system is ineffective and needs a major overhaul.

Yours Sincerely

Lindsay Ferris

Leader of the Liberal Democrats on Wokingham Borough Council

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