

Agenda Item 44.

TITLE	Monitoring of Public and Member Questions
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 22 November 2016
WARD	None Specific
DIRECTOR	Andrew Moulton, Head of Governance and Improvement Services

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Overview and Scrutiny is a key part of the checks and balances which ensure that the Council and its partners make and implement effective decisions for all the residents of the Borough. Questions submitted to the Executive and Council give an indication of issues of interest and concern. These issues may generate review topics for the Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee considers the list of questions set out at Annex A and determine whether any of the issues raised should be considered for inclusion in the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme for 2016/17.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

At its meeting on 31 May 2016, the Committee considered a report containing suggestions for improving the Overview and Scrutiny process. One of the suggestions related to the monitoring of questions submitted to the Council's Executive and Council.

Members agreed that regular monitoring reports be submitted to the Management Committee.

Background

At its meeting on 31 May 2016, the Committee considered a report containing a number of suggestions aimed at improving the Overview and Scrutiny process and developing greater public interest and involvement. One of the suggestions related to the monitoring of questions submitted to the Executive and full Council meetings.

Members and residents regularly ask questions at the Executive and Council meetings. These questions indicate areas of interest and concern and may generate ideas for Overview and Scrutiny investigation. The Committee agreed to consider regular monitoring reports on the questions submitted. Annex A contains details of the public and Member questions raised at the meeting of Council on 21 July 2016, the Executive on 28 July 2016 and the Extraordinary Executive on 1 September 2016.

Analysis of Issues

Members are requested to consider Annex A and to determine whether it contains issues requiring further consideration and inclusion in the Work Programme for 2016/17.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe financial challenges over the coming years as a result of the austerity measures implemented by the Government and subsequent reductions to public sector funding. It is estimated that Wokingham Borough Council will be required to make budget reductions in excess of £20m over the next three years and all Executive decisions should be made in this context.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	N/A	N/A	N/A

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

None

List of Background Papers

None

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1 Questions to Council on 20 September 2016

Lindsay Ferris asked the Executive Member for Highways and Transport:

With the introduction of Civil Parking Enforcement on the horizon will the Executive Member for Highways agree to start working with local members to draw up a schedule and plans for where new parking arrangements will be required across the Borough?

Answer

A review commenced early in 2016 to look at the Borough's existing traffic regulation orders, road markings and the associated parking signs to ensure they are suitable to support CPE. The review highlighted numerous improvements required to the existing TROs, to the road markings and the parking signs that needed to be implemented to ensure CPE could be enforced and that it would be robust if challenged via the parking appeals process. These improvements are being made before CPE goes live, which is currently programmed for the second half of 2017, subject of course to approval at the 28 September 2016 Executive.

With regard to new parking arrangements and changes to the existing arrangements it is considered this would be best assessed and quantified after CPE has been implemented and established, in other words we would do the existing ones first. As usual any changes or larger scale improvements to the existing arrangements would be done on a priority basis, and would be subject to appropriate availability of resources and funding.

Clive Jones asked the Executive Member for Children's Services:

There have been suggestions in the press that the new Education Secretary Justine Greening is in favour of opening more grammar schools. Does the Conservative administration in Wokingham wish to see a return to grammar schools in the Borough?

Answer

The starting point for answering this question is to remind Councillor Jones that Wokingham's comprehensive schools, maintained and academies, are among the best in the country. We see their results continue to sustain massively high standards year after year. In short pupils do well here.

There has been interest in the grammar school question since the recent development in Sevenoaks, Kent. This is where an existing grammar school was expanded in a new building on a new site. In Wokingham, as seen with many areas in our Council, we are prepared to look carefully at different ways of doing things.

If there were a change in the law reflecting the new Secretary of State's thinking, that might change the balance of pros and cons. We will work through the anticipated green paper when it is published. However it would not change my sense that we want to work with our schools and we are interested in our education system as a whole. What we wish to see in Wokingham is children doing brilliantly. Our schools achieve that for our children and I salute them for that.

Supplementary Question

I agree with you. Wokingham children do extremely well but would you agree with me that there is no evidence that grammar schools increase social mobility, and significantly in the past have had a harm on the life chances and opportunities of 80% of young children who have not been able to go to grammar schools?

Supplementary Answer

I think there are different circumstances in different authorities. Here all of our schools do incredibly well for pupils and as I said to you, if this legislation goes through in Central Government, we would need to consider very carefully what it would mean for our own local circumstances here. We may not be able to influence what it actually means for us in terms of the fact that we have a Regional Schools Commissioner so we would need to consider later on down the line the pros and the cons and what it does mean for social mobility or not. At the moment our schools are doing an excellent job and I praise them for that.

Prue Bray asked the Executive Member for Economic Development and Finance:

Now that we have had three months since the EU Referendum vote (at the time of the Council meeting), can the Executive Member for Finance advise whether there has been any impact on Wokingham Borough Council as a result of the vote?

Answer

I think you asked me a similar question recently and my answer then was no and my answer today is no. The Thames Valley economy is currently in very good health.

Supplementary Question

Does that mean then that you have been given a guarantee that the European Structural and Investment Fund money that is due to come to the LEP between now and 2020 will be forthcoming?

Supplementary Answer

My understanding is that the Government has guaranteed to maintain funding that we would have otherwise got from the European Union up to 2020 so I would expect the answer to your question to be yes.

Michael Firmager asked the Executive Member for the Environment:

Would the Executive Member explain the arrangements for our residents for continuing easy access to our Household Waste Recycling Centres from 1st July?

Answer

You say easy access and I think what we have done has not provided any issues. As of 1 July, the re3 recycling centres now only accept household waste from residents living in the three Boroughs. The change was prompted by West Berkshire Council giving notice that it intended to stop the annual payment of £500,000 to the partnership councils for waste delivered to re3 recycling centres by West Berkshire residents. The partnership felt that it is unfair to ask our council tax payers to fund waste management services for residents in other local authorities. In order for onsite staff to check residency easily and enforce the access change, recycling centre visitor permits were

sent to the 182,000 households in the re3 area for use by residents when visiting the Bracknell and Reading facilities. All area residents are also able to use alternative forms of valid ID, like driving licence photocard, to access the recycling centres.

Considerable effort was put into communicating the changes, which resulted in widespread and continued coverage in the media including TV, radio, print publications, and news websites and on social media and in community-led publications. Recycling centre meet and greet staff have undergone communications training, which has been supplemented by onsite signage and leafleting, to ensure a consistent and accurate message. Communications for the next phase of changes due on 30th of this month, the introduction of a commercial vehicle permit and charges for some non-household waste are now underway and additionally, we will be carrying out traffic lane upgrades to both sites to improve access.

2 Questions to the Executive on 29 September 2016

Lindsay Ferris asked the Leader of Council:

Question

With the proposed cuts in staffing and services being proposed will WBC be in a fit state to perform as an effective Council in the future?

Answer

The 21st Century Council programme offers this Council the opportunity to change and improve the way that services are delivered to our residents by taking out inefficiency, by increasing the range of transactions residents can do remotely and digitally, using leading edge technology, by reshaping our staff team to work more across disciplines and departments, by reducing bureaucracy and the number of staff and managers. By doing these things we can protect many services that in other councils have long since been ended or cut. We can enable our staff to work differently and to advance their training and development as a direct consequence. And we can avoid the service cuts and salami-slicing you suggest in your question

So yes, I am absolutely grateful for the opportunity to confirm that by doing what we are doing we will be leaner and fitter enabling us to continue to perform as a good, strong and effective council despite the financial challenges we face.

Supplementary Question

From past history WBC has not been that good at introducing new IT services. In addition WBC has one of the highest levels of elderly people in the country. How can you ensure that these residents and others will still be able to access WBC services easily?

Supplementary Answer

As a former IT professional myself IT is always difficult to implement and I think we are no different to any other organisation. But there is a strong work ethic to make the IT work this time around. It is going to be overseen by a couple of professional IT Councillors as well to make sure that, as far as we can, we will remove any of the issues that we had previously.

In terms of access to services for the elderly and vulnerable it will not just be on the basis of IT we all know, certainly people of my age anyway, that there is a high number of elderly people that are IT literate but in two or three generations it will be virtually everyone. So we absolutely have to be able to cater for those vulnerable people who do not have IT experience.

Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey asked the Executive Member for Highways:

Question

Will you include the number of schools, railway stations, park and ride locations and other such locations when considering the number of parking warden hours allocated to a town or parish rather than just the length of yellow lines?

Answer

Yes certainly.

Supplementary Question

I realise that yellow paint must be exceedingly expensive in this country and therefore that is the reason why you think that but will you please work with the local Members to work on problem areas rather than just allocating by yellow lines?

Supplementary Answer

It is not just by yellow lines it is by a whole range of factors including the ones you mentioned and more and they will of course be considered as they always are on these TROs.

3 Questions to the Executive on 27 October 2016

Peter Humphreys asked the Leader of the Council:

Question

The negotiations with Aldi to secure a supermarket to anchor the proposed Elms Field development are taking an inordinately long time. Bearing in mind the recent publicity surrounding the Irish government giving state aid to Apple through tax breaks would the Leader of the Council please confirm that WBC in its desperation to secure a deal will not be providing financial incentives of any kind to get a supermarket on Elms Field? I use the term "council" to include any companies it controls and "incentives" in its broadest meaning to include rents below market value, rent-free periods etc. and other creative inducements or concessions. A lot of public money is at stake and thus it is important that the people of Wokingham are assured we are not subsidising a commercial company.

Answer

Desperation is a rather an emotional word. There is absolutely no way that this Council is desperate in the way you propose in your question.

The negotiations with the potential food store operator are progressing well and in line with the project programme. The terms being discussed are aligned with the Letting Strategy adopted by the Executive, which is very much based on current market value. As you would expect I am unable to go into detail on this matter but any incentives

being discussed are wholly in line with market requirements and will achieve the 'market value'.

Supplementary Question

Obviously you are using the commercially confidential clause to sort of conceal information from your fellow councillors and the public but it is already in the public domain; albeit hard to locate that 15 shops and restaurants have been given free rent periods and that the cinema fit-out is, and I quote, "a loss leader". It is also publicly known that incentives have been given to the Premier Inn as well as to Aldi so the more pertinent question is probably if no financial incentives are given to the potential commercial tenants of Elms Field would the proposed budget cuts and increased charges for refuse disposal not necessarily be appropriate or approximately how many social housing units could be constructed with that money?

Supplementary Answer

The fact is that the market requirements dictate certain actions and we are doing those actions and we are not doing anything different than anybody else in this area.

Lindsay Ferris asked the Leader of the Council:

Question

Can you advise the main differences between this approach and more conventional shared service arrangements?

Answer

The key difference is that Optalis is a limited company, with directors registered at Companies' House. A shared service is simply an arrangement agreed between two or more councils to provide that service through a single managed team, rather than do it separately within each council.

In this model The Royal Borough acquires 45% of the shares of the company and the company more than doubles in size increasing its resilience, its foothold in the market, and its ability to recruit and retain staff as you move from two councils trying to find staff to one organisation trying to find staff. Both councils share the risks and the benefits of the new company as it grows and delivers services to both councils, and beyond, to other authorities and to private clients as well.

Supplementary Question

We note that The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead has a target of between £1.8m and £2m in the reduction of costs of delivery of these adult social services over the next three years. Does the Optalis merged company, as I call it, pick up any debt arising out of any shortfall in achieving this target?

Supplementary Answer

Absolutely not.

Prue Bray asked the Executive Member for Economic Development and Finance:

Question

With the Revenue Monitoring report showing a current year projected overspend of £494K, which represents approximately the equivalent of a Council Tax rise of 0.5%, will this not put added pressure on meeting service needs in 2017/18?

Answer

The short answer is yes and I will not get into trouble for that. The detail is as follows. A key purpose of the budget monitoring is to inform our budget plans for the following year. This counts for both overspends and underspends. The budget overspends revealing themselves in this years' budget monitoring are in respect of the usual suspects; statutory demand lead services. Although we will continue to do all we can to contain these pressures this is often the best we can do, at least in the short term. They will therefore inevitably add to the spending pressures in 17/18 along with the other large budget challenges we face; such as losing a large slice of Government Grant.

We will therefore need to apply our usual level of financial diligence and service innovation in formulating our proposals for 17/18 and setting a balanced budget.

Supplementary Question

In July the overspend was forecast at £354k. You identified the two usual suspect areas. Other areas have managed to make savings so the underlying pressure in those two areas is even worse than is reflected. What are you going to do to pull this back?

Supplementary Answer

I think given that substantial amounts of this excessive expenditure is either on homelessness or looked after children I suspect in the current year it is probably very difficult to pull them back but I am sure that Charlotte will do all she can and Julian will do all he can to do that. As we look at next year's budgets the base level of spending in those areas, if it is as it is currently, then we are going to have to find a way of financing it because they are, as I said, demand led services to vulnerable and needy parts of our population that as one-nation Conservatives we need to look after.