

Agenda Item 56.

TITLE	Monitoring of Public and Member Questions
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 24 January 2017
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 Programmes 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 Council meeting on 17 November 2016 which may relate to issues for inclusion in the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programmes for the coming year.

Analysis of Issues

Members are requested to consider Annex A and to determine whether it contains issues requiring further consideration and inclusion in the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programmes 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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Questions to Council on 17 November 2016

Member Questions

1. Pauline Helliar-Symons asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question

Could the Executive Member provide an update on the work of the Multi-Academy Trust Working Group?

Answer

WBC has been proactive in exploring the possibility of a LA Multi-Academy Trust or MAT. Information from the Association of Directors of Children's Services suggests no more than a handful of LAs are actively developing specific plans. Because we have maintained a dialogue with the Department for Education about this, our initiative has attracted the attention of the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC), with the result that an LA/RSC meeting is anticipated by the end of the year.

We hope by this means to influence thinking in the Department, to see what support can be made available for a move by which we are trying to set a sense of direction for a community of local schools working together sustainably, and in a new partnership with the authority.

Since the White Paper early this year officers have been intent on raising awareness, clarifying opportunities and de-mythologising. Meetings have taken place for headteachers and chairs of governors; an online forum has been established to share local thinking and support communication. Wokingham schools were surveyed in the summer and over 30 attended a meeting to consider a Wokingham MAT. A smaller number is involved in a working group.

The Member group has met and planned ahead with officer support. In October 2016 it received an update on work completed so far, and considered timescales, financial implications, learning from partners and other groups, business models, and the value of working together with local schools. Planning ahead the group will be looking at legal options and accountability processes or schemes of delegation at its next meeting.

2. Charles Margetts asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question

The rate of child poverty in Wokingham Borough at 10% is well below the UK average of 28%. However, more needs to be done. Could the Executive Member set out what steps she and her department can take to continue to lift our Borough's children out of the blight of poverty?

Answer

Thank you for raising the important subject of child poverty – an area of priority for which we adopt two main approaches:

1. an immediate factor in child poverty is the lack of sufficient income from parental employment, including worklessness and working insufficient hours and / or low pay;
2. for the future, educational achievement is key to breaking the cycle of poverty.

To support families, Wokingham is part of the Troubled Families Programme, one of whose criteria is risk of worklessness. An Employment Advisor is seconded to Wokingham to work with identified families, offer advice on their benefit status and support them back into training or employment. A Specialist Health Practitioner from Berkshire Healthcare Foundation Trust will also support the family to ensure they get the right healthcare.

Our Children's Centres have worked with partners such as the Health Visiting Team, Community Development and Community Wards. The Children's Centres have engaged with and made a positive difference to the lives of the children and families living in these areas.

We are aware that being in poverty in Wokingham can lead to feelings of isolation and deprivation. So core elements of our social work practice framework are designed to breakdown feelings of isolation by working with families and their support network, encouraging them to draw on their social capital and find solutions to the difficulties they face.

For children's futures, educational achievement is key to breaking the cycle of poverty. We support schools to narrow achievement gaps and improve the performance of disadvantaged pupils. Because overall performance is very high in Wokingham, the achievement gaps are wider than elsewhere. The 2016 data isn't all released yet, but in 2015, the gap for five good GCSEs including English and maths was 31% in Wokingham, and 27% nationally. In fact though our disadvantaged pupils did better than their national peers (Our figure was 39% - it was 36% nationally). The rate of progress during secondary school was higher too in Wokingham than nationally, and we had the same success in Key Stage 1.

Officers have led action research on transition from primary to secondary school, showcased good practice, worked with partners, and brought learning back from national and regional fora. Termly meetings for narrowing the gap leaders are held, and the team is working in partnership with Wellington College to provide a training event. Officers attend meetings with other authorities, and are organising a pan-Berkshire narrowing the gap conference for the spring. Early years officers are working with school and nursery leaders, as well as colleagues in health and community development, to produce materials to support parents to ensure that their children are 'school-ready'.

The impact of all this has been recognised by the Department for Education and Ofsted. Maiden Erlegh School won the Department for Education's Pupil Premium Award for the south east region this year. Inspection reports include comments like: 'Disadvantaged pupils catch up quickly because of well-judged support. Previous gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers have closed completely.' (Winnersh Primary, May 2016) 'The proportion of disadvantaged pupils achieving expected levels in the Year 1

phonics check has doubled since the previous inspection.’ (All Saints Primary, September 2016). Officers had worked closely with these schools.

More impact - the percentage of Wokingham’s disadvantaged children achieving a good level of development at foundation stage went from 35% in 2014 to 51% in 2016. The phonics result at age 6 increased from 42% in 2013 to 56% in 2015, and looks like being about 65% this year. The figure for reading, writing and maths at the end of primary school increased from 53% in 2013 to 60% in 2015 and is in line with national peers in 2016.

We know we still have work to do. Despite improvements in phonics, outcomes for disadvantaged children remain below national. In 2016, KS1 attainment for children eligible for FSM was below national, and gaps were larger. We know from Ofsted that this is a particular challenge in wealthy areas with low numbers of disadvantaged families. We are going to be part of a new working group of similar authorities looking at this.

In summary, work on reducing children living in poverty underpins the work carried out in Children’s Services. As a Council, we continue to strive to close achievement gaps and reduce the poverty rate, with the intended outcome of supporting all children and young people in Wokingham to feel listened to, be safe and have an opportunity to live their lives to their full potential.

3. Tim Holton has asked the Executive Member for Resident Services the following question:

Question

Could the Executive Member provide an update on the progress of the transition to online self-service for residents?

Answer

Since the launch of the Councils’ self-serve function named the ‘Customer Account’ in November 2015, 9476 individual accounts have been created and are in active use. A total of 17,606 transactions have been used via this method. Key benefits of self-serve are:

- Available 24/7 at a time that suits the resident
- Has the ability to keep resident automatically updated as their request progresses via Txt and/or email
- Remembers the resident so tailored information can be received and re-entering of information is kept to a minimum
- Can be used on many devices including as an App on tablets and smartphones
- Residents can log in to see where their request is and check their transaction history
- Makes the Council more open and transparent by measurement of response times and SLA’s as part of the residents progress updates

Self-serve is currently available for

- 18 high volume services for Waste
- 80 different Highways scenarios

- Registrar process for Copy Certificate Requests.

Useful proactive information is available from the customer account such as:

- Bin collections dates and personalised Councillor information

In addition to this a number of online forms have been added to the corporate website for high volume transactions like Council Tax and Benefits.

We have received many pieces of positive feedback with regards self-serve. The 21 Century Council change programme will build on this success moving more and more services on-line, expanding and promoting this service.

4. UllaKarin Clark asked the Executive Member for Health and Wellbeing the following question:

Question

Could the Executive Member update the Council on negotiations with the Government to find a solution to the funding of the Borough's Better Care Fund requirements?

Answer

As Members will be aware, the Care Act replaced a 4 tier 'Fair Access to Care Services' (FACS) with a single national eligibility threshold. Just 3 Councils (West Berkshire, Wokingham and Northumberland) were operating at the highest FACS level of 'critical' and, therefore, the introduction of the new national eligibility threshold created a far greater burden than for all other Councils who were already operating at a lower FACS level. WBC undertook this step due to the poor financial settlement offered by central government.

In May 2014 the Department of Health (DoH) published a Care Act Impact Assessment that identified one-off costs of £3m and on-going costs of £25.3m for those 3 Councils. WBC, in agreement with West Berkshire Council, reluctantly decided that due to the increased burden on the Council we had no alternative but to go out for a Judicial Review (JR). Upon issuing the JR some 18 months ago, the DoH asked that we withdraw the action and, in return, they would repay our costs and work with us to agree a satisfactory settlement.

Although we agreed to this, after a number of changes to the Minister in charge, a decision was finally made a few weeks ago that WBC and West Berkshire were advised that no further funding would be forthcoming as the DoH felt that we were not under any additional burden.

After a careful review we believe that we have a stronger case than we did originally in that we have additional data to support our case but, as any new JR is time sensitive we have consulted with our colleagues in West Berkshire and have reluctantly decided to proceed with a new application for a JR. I will of course keep Members apprised on progress.

5. Michael Firmager asked the Executive Member for Planning and Regeneration the following question:

Question

The Localism Act allows residents or community groups to nominate buildings or land as Assets of Community Value. Does the Executive Member believe that this will provide the opportunity for communities in our Borough to protect those assets that are important to residents from being sold and developed?

Answer

Within Wokingham Borough there has been a healthy amount of activity through the Asset of Community Value process since its introduction over three years ago. So far the Council has received 19 nominations from a range of local community organisations, and has approved seven of these nominations as assets of community value.

The Localism Act (2011) provides local voluntary and community organisations along with parish councils the power to nominate a building or land that they believe to be of importance to their community's social well-being to be included on a list of 'assets of community value'. The list can include private as well as public assets, including local authority, NHS or Police assets.

The Council's policy on Assets of Community Value states that nominated buildings or land should play a significant role in local life and that the activity it supports could not reasonably continue if the building was lost to community use. This would normally mean that there are no similar or alternative facilities in the local area that could support the activity.

If the nomination is approved, and in the future the owner of the asset wants to sell it, a moratorium period of up to six months can be triggered during which the asset cannot be sold. This period gives interested parties time to develop a proposal and raise the required capital to bid for the property when it comes onto the open market at the end of the moratorium period.

These regulations do not place any restriction on what an owner can do with their property, restrict who an owner of a listed asset can sell his property to (or at what price), or confer a right of first refusal to local voluntary and community organisations.

So far, two approved Assets of Community Value have been sold: The White House School in my Evendons Ward has become a shining example of a community led free school and goes from strength to strength. The Royal British Legion in Shinfield will provide the site for the new community facility within the South of the M4 Strategic Development Location, which is being delivered jointly by Wokingham Borough Council and Shinfield Parish Council.

Public Questions

1. Guy Grandison asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question

Could the Executive Member tell me what the Council is doing to ensure that schools in Earley can keep pace with the growing population at both primary and secondary levels?

Answer

The Council has recognised Earley as an area where additional primary school capacity is required. In response, we agreed to expand Loddon Primary School by 210 places and are developing a proposal to expand Aldryngton Primary School by a further 105 places.

We will continue to keep a close eye on the balance between need and available places. Need is driven by the number of births to residents, the balance of families leaving and arriving and families living elsewhere who prefer Earley schools. We know the number of births has been stable, but falls significantly in the age groups that will be admitted to school in 2018 and 2019. This will at least partly offset any increase due to families moving into the area. There are no major residential schemes planned in the area so residential growth will not play a significant part in future needs. Our view is that growth is driven by the changeover of housing from older households to younger families and this will be the subject of continuing scrutiny. If applicant numbers drop next spring then we will need to review our expansion plans (above the places being created at Loddon Primary School) to ensure we are only providing capacity we need.

On the question of secondary school places, we do not see evidence of any immediate need to create capacity. Families in the Earley area have a number of secondary schools within walking distance of their homes. Maiden Erlegh School of course serves Earley and continues to be oversubscribed locally. Families also have at least one of Oakbank, Forest, Bulmershe and Waingels schools within walking distance and all these schools have some surplus capacity.

We will however continue to watch the number of available places closely so if new capacity is required it can be planned in a timely manner.