

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE HELD ON 11 JULY 2017 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.45 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Keith Baker (Chairman), Laura Blumenthal (Vice-Chairman), Parry Batth, Ken Miall, Ian Pittock, Malcolm Richards, Bill Soane, Chris Smith and Shahid Younis

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Abdul Loyes, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey, Gary Cowan, David Lee, Charles Margetts and Oliver Whittle

Officers Present

Andy Couldrick, Chief Executive
Heather Thwaites, 21st Century Council Programme Director
John Spurling, Category Manager Growth and Delivery
Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist

14. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted by Lindsay Ferris, Kate Haines and Pauline Helliars-Symons.

Abdul Loyes and Rachelle Shepherd-Dubey attended the meeting as substitutes.

15. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 30 May 2017 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

16. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

17. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited members of the public to submit questions.

The following question was submitted by Pam Stubbs. An answer was provided by Councillor David Lee, Executive Member for Strategic Highways and Planning.

Question

Tonight, there is to be yet another Local Plan Update. Why are you bothering with this when it has become increasingly obvious that landowners and developers are ignoring the Local Plan Process and are exploiting Wokingham's inability to maintain a workable and robust five year land supply, which would protect both Towns and Parishes from being ambushed with premature planning applications? These are sites which should be reviewed within the scope of the new Local Plan.

As there are such large numbers of approved applications, which would satisfy five or even ten years of housing, why not declare all applications over three years old as "out of date" and then warn applicants of those which, in theory, should start building in the immediate future. After all, these are the developers who are holding the sites back until the housing market picks up again, whilst they are still looking for new land on which to apply. This would at least give local residents the opportunity to object on current grounds

not just on historical information. Three years would seem to be a long time in planning and many issues which could influence a decision have changed quite dramatically.

Answer

In response to the first part of the question, I would totally agree with you. Some developers are clearly holding back. We have granted planning approvals for over 10,500 houses. Developers are not delivering the housing they should and then winning appeals by arguing that the Council did not have an adequate 5 Year Land Supply.

In addressing this issue the Executive, at its meeting on 27 July, will be recommended to approve the release of reserve sites and land south of Cutbush Lane to bolster the housing land supply. In effect, this will deliver a 6 Year Land Supply and will make it more risky for developers to go to appeal. We have to challenge developers on sustainability. All our Core Strategy policies are in place and they still carry substantial weight.

We are very concerned about the current situation and I would say that it is incumbent upon all of us to challenge the Government's position which is allowing developers to ride rough-shod over Councils' established positions. I would urge all Members of the Borough, Town and Parish Councils to write to the Government on this issue.

In response to the second part of the question, I would suggest that we are strengthening our reasons to refuse as part of the Local Plan Update. We need to address the situation whereby Planning Inspectors recognise our 5 Year Land Supply but then go on to say that the National Planning Policy Framework states that there is a presumption in favour of sustainable development. The major sustainability issue we face is the impact of traffic congestion. It is possible to identify sites for new schools and leisure facilities but more challenging to build new roads within some of our existing communities. These are the issues which our Planning Officers and the Planning Committee need to focus on.

Finally, I am happy to meet with any of the Town and Parish Councils to explain the Borough Council's approach to these issues.

18. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

19. 21ST CENTURY COUNCIL

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 15 to 35, which provided an update on the 21st Century Council programme.

The report reminded Members of the projected benefits arising out of the programme, viz:

- improved availability of, and access to, Council services through digital channels;
- swifter resolution of issues and queries;
- ability for residents to track the progress of issues;
- greater focus on problem solving and customer responsiveness;
- a leaner, more efficient Council costing significantly less to run.

Appended to the report at Annex A was the most recent progress report to the Executive (May 2017) and a submission from UNISON (Annex B). Annex C contained a number of key lines of enquiry approved by the Chairman in advance of the meeting.

In addition to the written submissions the Committee received evidence from the following witnesses:

Oliver Whittle (Executive Member for Finance, 21st Century Council, Internal Services and Human Resources); Charles Margetts (Deputy Executive Member for Finance, 21st Century Council, Internal Services and Human Resources); Heather Thwaites (21st Century Council Programme Director) and Andy Couldrick (Chief Executive)

Heather Thwaites addressed the Committee and gave details of progress relating to the 21st Century Council programme to date. Heather outlined the defined outcomes of the programme which were to change the way in which the Council was organised, supported by modern IT, in order to understand customers better and meet their needs. The programme would deliver savings of £4m per annum and would ensure that vulnerable residents were supported and protected.

Phase 1 of the programme had been completed, going live on 3 July 2017. The go live process had been successful with few problems reported. Phase 1 involved 244 staff, 100 of whom had been placed “at risk”, with 80 eventually being redeployed. Of the 80 redeployed staff, 31 had been promoted and 41 remained on the same grade.

Heather stated that there had been a high level of understanding amongst staff about the proposed changes and the reasons behind them. Staff morale was felt to be as good as could be expected in an organisation undergoing such major changes. The implementation of Phase 1 was on budget and would deliver savings of £2.1m. All significant risks had been identified and mitigated.

Phase 2 of the programme would focus on the Council’s outward-facing services and would involve greater emphasis on the role of Members and communications between Officers, Members and residents.

Hilary Rothery and Joe Donnelly, UNISON

Hilary Rothery addressed the Committee and set out a number of concerns identified by UNISON relating to the development and implementation of the 21st Century Council programme. These related to the Council’s strategic approach, the way it complied with its statutory duties and policies and the treatment of staff.

UNISON’s concerns were based on feedback from other Councils which had adopted the consultant’s (Ignite) operating model. UNISON noted that the Council was the first unitary authority to adopt this operating model and, as such faced higher level risks.

Hilary highlighted a number of questions in its paper in the Agenda, including:

- Why had the Council embarked on this major savings initiative before updating its priorities?
- Why did the Council make commitments relating to consultation and equalities only to ignore them in delivering major projects?
- Why had no other unitary Council adopted the Ignite operating model?
- Were Members confident that all key risks relating to the project were being managed effectively?

UNISON recognised the financial challenges facing the Council with the likely impact on jobs. However, the Union reserved the right to raise concerns in a constructive manner.

Gary Cowan, Member for Arborfield

Gary Cowan addressed the Committee and referred to the discussion at its previous meeting about potential measures to improve communication between Members, Officers and residents. Gary noted the potential opportunities from the 21st Century Council programme for better quality information and improved methods of communication which would assist elected Members in their roles.

The Committee put questions to the witnesses using the framework provided by the key lines of enquiry set out on Page 31 of the Agenda:

Key Line of Enquiry 1 – Update on Concept

Members noted that the witnesses' introductory remarks had provided an update on the implementation of 21st Century Council to date;

Key Line of Enquiry 2 – Staff Morale

Members raised the following points:

- What evidence was there relating to the current levels of morale in the organisation? Heather Thwaites stated that in any change programme there would be peaks and troughs relating to morale. Feedback from staff, change agents and managers indicated that staff were positive about their new roles.
- Hilary Rothery commented that feedback from UNISON members and other staff indicated that morale was generally poor. Hilary felt that staff had found it easier to talk openly to UNISON during Phase 1 of the programme and many of them had highlighted concerns about the paucity of information, for example, in relation to new job roles.
- How could Members develop an accurate picture relating to staff morale? Heather Thwaites reported that a new Change Readiness Survey was being carried out and staff were able to feed back to the change agents who were supporting the programme.
- What was the role of Ignite in implementing the programme? Andy Couldrick commented that 21st Century Council was a Council programme with support from Ignite. The Council could have worked with one of the larger consultancies, but working with Ignite gave the Council much greater scope to shape the process. Ignite had been retained following a procurement framework process.
- Members recognised that both sides of the argument could be correct in that major reorganisations such as 21st Century Council would always produce winners and losers. Joe Donnelly commented that UNISON felt that the HR process in Phase 1 of the programme had caused increased uncertainty and anxiety rather than visa-versa.
- Were lessons learnt from Phase 1 of the programme being collated and used to improve the delivery of Phase 2? Heather Thwaites confirmed that this process was

ongoing and that information from the latest Change Readiness Survey would be fed into the process. Both management and UNISON agreed that a key outcome of the programme was a successful Council with highly motivated staff.

- Councillor Charles Margetts reported on the work of the Member Working Group overseeing 21st Century Council. A major aim of the working group was to retain key members of staff.
- How would the 21st Century Council programme team work with UNISON as the programme moved into Phase 2? Heather Thwaites reported that regular meetings had been held during Phase 1 and these would continue as the programme progressed.

Key Line of Enquiry 3 – IT

Heather Thwaites confirmed that Phase 1 of the programme was now live and that the new supporting IT had worked successfully with very few problems.

Key Line of Enquiry 4 – Finances

Members noted that Phase 1 of the programme had been delivered on budget and would achieve a saving of £2.1m.

Key Line of Enquiry 5 – Councillor Interactions

Gary Cowan referred to the opportunities afforded by 21st Century Council to develop Member roles and improve lines of communication. Members felt that there was still a lack of clarity about the changing roles of Members as a result of the programme. Oliver Whittle confirmed that contact with Members was now stepping up in order to address this issue. Andy Couldrick confirmed that Phase 2 would include more discussions with Town and Parish Councils about the delivery of locality services. This may be a useful subject for further scrutiny by the Committee.

Key Line of Enquiry 6 – Risk Mitigation

Members sought clarification on the management of key risks following developments such as the imminent departure of the Chief Executive and changes to the Council's Executive. Andy Couldrick confirmed that the programme would continue to run smoothly following his departures as the change programme had been co-owned and co-created by a team of people.

New processes and systems would be rigorously tested before going live. It was essential to develop suitable feedback mechanisms to ensure that residents could feed back on what worked and what didn't. All parties agreed that major changes such as 21st Century Council would encounter teething problems, but that these would be overcome.

In relation to the number of interim and agency staff being used, Heather Thwaites reported that these staff filled a number of roles. For example, when services were under review it was sensible to retain interim staff rather than incur redundancy costs as a result of service changes. Exit strategies were developed to ensure that the costs relating to interim staff were minimised.

The Chairman confirmed that final decisions had not yet been taken on an interim replacement for the Chief Executive.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the witnesses be thanked for attending the meeting and answering Member questions on the 21st Century Council programme;
- 2) copies of the additional witness submissions and follow-up information be circulated to Members;
- 3) a summary of the lessons learnt from Phase 1 of the programme be circulated to Members;
- 4) the development of locality services and improved methods of communication between Members, Officers and residents be the subject of a further scrutiny session;
- 5) an update on the development of “21st Century Councillor” roles be circulated to Members.

20. LOCAL PLAN UPDATE

The Committee considered a report, Agenda pages 33 to 35, and a presentation which provided details of progress on the Local Plan Update. Appended to the report were the key lines of enquiry approved by the Chairman in advance of the meeting.

John Spurling, Growth and Delivery Manager, introduced the presentation which highlighted improvements in strategic development following the introduction of the Core Strategy in 2006. This had delivered the master planning of new developments (SDLs) and a significant increase in developer contributions per property from £5k to £28k. To date the Council had received £350m in S106 developer contributions and Community Infrastructure Levy.

John highlighted the community benefits arising from the Council’s approach such as new schools, neighbourhood centres and public open spaces. However, it was also apparent that developers had not built houses quickly enough and were now challenging the Council’s 5 Year Land Supply position at appeals. This pressure would continue to build until the updated Local Plan was in place. In order to address this issue the Council’s Executive would be considering a report at its meeting on 27 July 2017. The report would recommend the release of reserve sites to increase the current land supply position.

Councillor David Lee circulated a paper which set out progress relating to the Local Plan Update, viz:

- Issues and Options Consultation – completed;
- Call for sites to be included in the plan – completed but Wokingham BC sites can still be added;
- Desk top review of all submitted sites – ongoing;
- Master Planning on sites and review of housing numbers – September to October 2017;
- Preferred site options and draft policies consultation – Summer 2018;
- Submit updated Local Plan for Inspection - aiming for early 2019;
- Following Examination in Public and follow-up changes – plan goes live.

Members put questions to David Lee using key lines of enquiry set out in the report. These related to the implementation of the major steps in updating the Local Plan, the consultation process and the timescales involved. The following points were raised:

- What lessons have we learned from the development of the SDLs? David Lee commented that, with hindsight, it may have been better to ensure that big sites were allocated to a number of developers rather than just one. The Council was delivering significant improvements to local infrastructure but, as highlighted in the response to the public question earlier, it was not possible to build new roads in parts of the Borough. This meant that traffic congestion was becoming a major issue for local communities. One idea worth considering was the provision of circular buses which could take residents from new estates to town centres and transport hubs, thereby reducing the number of cars on our roads.
- Why were agreed planning conditions relaxed following decisions by the Planning Committee? David Lee stated that if conditions were agreed by the Committee they should be enforced. David suggested that Members notify him of any examples relating to the relaxation of conditions.

David Lee confirmed that he would be speaking to his counterparts in the other Berkshire unitaries in order to develop a joint approach to the Government about the actions of developers in relation to the 5 Year Land Supply.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) David Lee and John Spurling be thanked for attending the meeting and answering Member questions;
- 2) progress relating to the Local Plan Update be noted;
- 3) Members contact David Lee with examples relating to the relaxation of Planning conditions.

21. EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATES

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 37 to 39, which reminded Members of the earlier decision to hold discussions with Executive Members early in the municipal year. The aim of the discussions was to increase awareness of the key policy and service issues over the year ahead and to identify areas where Overview and Scrutiny could provide effective challenge and support. Members had agreed the principle that Overview and Scrutiny would add more value if it was proactive rather than reactive.

Two Executive Members were in attendance to give an outline of the challenges in the year ahead and to answer Member questions developed around the following key lines of enquiry:

- Development of new policies and amendments to existing policies;
- Structures to be used to support policy development, e.g. working parties;
- Planned consultations over the year ahead;
- Timescales for the completion of new policies and major service changes.

David Lee, Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Strategic Highways and Planning, addressed the Committee and provided an update based on the key lines of enquiry set out in the report. David referred to the discussion on the previous Agenda item which had covered a number of important areas of work for the year ahead.

David also updated Members on plans to review the Borough Design Guide. This would address issues such as road widths and the number of parking spaces required for new developments. The aim was to have an updated Design Guide in place by the end of the year. The process would be overseen by a small working group of Members.

Oliver Whittle, Executive Member for Finance, 21st Century Council, Internal Services and Human Resources addressed the Committee. Oliver stated that his portfolio was wide, including 21st Century Council, which was discussed earlier in the meeting. In relation to other areas Oliver was working to improving budget monitoring across the organisation. He was also reviewing the annual public budget engagement exercise with a move to an electronic consultation under consideration.

In relation to the Council's funding settlement, Oliver had already written to the Chancellor about the projected move to a negative revenue support grant. Linked to this, discussions were ongoing with the other Berkshire unitaries about the possibility of a pilot scheme relating to the retention of business rates.

Oliver was reviewing the Council's procurement process in order to strengthen Member oversight. He also had a watching brief in relation to Optalis, the Joint Waste Board and the Schools Forum.

In relation to budget monitoring, Members raised the issue of Capital projects. Some schemes were funded from the Capital budget whilst others were partly funded by income generation, such as leisure facilities. Oliver confirmed that he was looking at the development of better business cases and simplified financial information which would assist Executive Members and the Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Councillors Lee and Whittle be thanked for attending the meeting and answering Member questions;
- 2) progress on the key issues identified during the discussions be reported at a future meeting of the Committee.

22. CONSIDERATION OF THE CURRENT EXECUTIVE AND IEMD FORWARD PROGRAMMES

The Committee considered a copy of the Executive Forward Programme and the Individual Executive Member Decision Forward Programme as set out on Agenda pages 43 to 49.

RESOLVED: That the Forward Programmes be noted.

23. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMMES

The Committee considered its forward Work Programme and that of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees as set out on Agenda pages 51 to 61. Members also considered the

volume of work to be undertaken during the year and agreed that additional meetings should be included in the Council's meetings schedule.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the forward Work Programmes be noted;
- 2) the number of Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee meetings during the year be increased from six to nine.

24. UPDATE REPORTS FROM CHAIRMEN OR NOMINATED MEMBER OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

The Committee considered updates from the Chairmen of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

RESOLVED: That the updates be noted.

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