

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE HELD ON 9 JANUARY 2018 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.20 PM

Committee Members Present

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

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Philip Mirfin and Stuart Munro

Officers Present

Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist

55. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted by Kate Haines and Pauline Helliard-Symons.

56. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 22 November 2017 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

57. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

58. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

59. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

60. DISCUSSION WITH EXECUTIVE MEMBER

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 13 to 24, which continued the process of holding discussions with Executive Members. The aim of the discussions was to increase awareness of key policy and service issues over the year ahead and to identify areas where Overview and Scrutiny could provide effective challenge and support. Members supported the principle that Overview and Scrutiny could add more value if it was a proactive rather than a reactive process.

Stuart Munro (Executive Member for Business, Economic Development and Regeneration) and Philip Mirfin (Deputy Executive Member) attended the meeting to give an outline of key challenges and to answer Member questions developed around a set of key lines of enquiry. Councillors Munro and Mirfin focussed on three key issues: economic development, asset review and the Council's Property Portfolio Investment Strategy.

Appended to the report was the Council's Economic Development Strategy, 2016/21, which had been approved by the Executive in June 2016. Members also considered the Economic Development Strategy Action Plan which gave details of specific actions undertaken to deliver the key objectives in the Strategy. These were:

- Create a place where businesses thrive by offering good quality housing and infrastructure;

- Facilitate business growth through business support and inward investment;
- Ensure that people have the skills that businesses need and are able to support themselves into employment;
- Encourage innovation and technology to build a competitive business environment.

Stuart Munro and Philip Mirfin addressed the meeting and highlighted the following points:

- Good progress was being made on house completions at the four SDL sites which was providing a positive economic benefit for the Borough;
- Key worker housing units were being delivered – 18 at Montague Park and 22 at Peach Place;
- Business engagement was progressing with a “world café event” to be held at the Reading University Science Park. This event would be hosted jointly by the Council and the university;
- Plans for a Wokingham town centre “Business Improvement District” (BID) had been paused as the Council was unable to gain support from businesses in the town centre;
- The Borough was receiving positive benefit from the work of the Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership;
- The Asset Review Programme Board met monthly to consider issues including potential asset transfers to Town and Parish Councils and local community groups;
- The Council’s land assets were being considered as part of the Local Plan Update process;
- The £100m Property Portfolio Investment Fund had been agreed by Council in November 2017 and a team of Members and Officers were now considering options.

In the ensuing discussion Members raised the following points and questions:

Could the Council promote Business Improvement Districts in other areas such as Woodley or Twyford? It was suggested that a briefing note be prepared for the Committee on the pros and cons of a BID and examples of successful BIDs in other parts of the country.

Could the Committee receive a copy of the Local Enterprise Partnership Update report? It was confirmed that a copy of the update report would be circulated to the Committee.

Bearing in mind the LEP’s support of Heathrow expansion was it possible for the Council to influence the decision making process to reflect views from different parts of the Borough?

Could the Committee receive an update on the work of the Asset Review Programme Board in order to understand progress and future plans?

Could the Committee receive an update on progress relating to the Council’s new Property Portfolio Investment Fund? It was confirmed that an update report would be submitted to Members later in the year.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Councillors Munro and Mirfin be thanked for attending the meeting and answering Member questions;
- 2) Officers be asked to provide a briefing for the Committee on the pros and cons of setting up a Business Improvement District (BID), with examples of good practice;
- 3) in conjunction with the BID briefing the Committee receive an updated copy of the Economic Development Strategy Action Plan;
- 4) the Local Enterprise Partnership Update Report be circulated to Members;
- 5) an update on the Assets Review Programme be included in the Committee's Work Programme for 2018/19;
- 6) an update on progress relating to the Council's new Property Portfolio Investment Fund be included in the Committee's Work Programme for 2018/19.

61. SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT INTO OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Committee considered a report, set out on Agenda pages 25 to 87, which gave details of the House of Commons Select Committee for Communities and Local Government's inquiry into the effectiveness of Overview and Scrutiny in local government. A copy of the Select Committee's report, published on 15 December 2017, was appended to the report.

The Select Committee's report highlighted a number of key issues relating to the operation of Overview and Scrutiny, including:

- the importance of organisational culture in determining the effectiveness of Overview and Scrutiny;
- potential measures to promote a more positive culture could include a change in the line of accountability with Overview and Scrutiny reporting to full Council rather than the Executive;
- the importance of the role of Overview and Scrutiny Chairmen in demonstrating the independence of the Scrutiny function;
- effective Scrutiny depended on access to information about Council (and partner) services and policies;
- there should be a greater parity of esteem between the Executive and Overview and Scrutiny with effective Officer support for the Scrutiny function;
- Scrutiny powers should be strengthened in relation to the delivery of outsourced services and monitoring of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs).

Members considered the findings of the Select Committee in the context of the operation of Overview and Scrutiny at Wokingham Borough Council. In the ensuing discussion Members commented on the report's conclusions and recommendations as follows:

The Role of Scrutiny

Members supported the proposal for the sharing of innovation and best practice across the Scrutiny sector.

Party Politics and Organisational Culture

Members noted the proposal that Overview and Scrutiny recommendations should be reported to full Council rather than to the Executive. Members felt that more evidence about the pros and cons of this recommendation should be provided before a view was taken.

Members supported the recommendation that Executive Members should only attend Scrutiny meetings when invited to do so and to answer Member questions. This would help to promote political impartiality and preserve the distinction between Scrutiny and the Executive.

Members supported the principle of election of Scrutiny Chairmen and agreed to put the Council forward for inclusion in the proposed pilot scheme aimed at monitoring the impact of elected Chairmen on Scrutiny's effectiveness.

Members also noted that the Council's Constitution Review Working Group were considering options for the election of Chairmen and selection of Scrutiny Members following the Motion agreed by Council at its meeting on 23 March 2017. The decisions reached by the Constitution Review Working Group would be reported back to the Management Committee in due course.

Accessing Information

Members felt that existing arrangements were effective with Overview and Scrutiny Committees receiving relevant information, with confidential information considered in Part 2 session as and when necessary.

Members supported the principle of greater involvement in Scrutiny by residents, service users and community groups. It was noted that the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee was seeking to develop this approach to Scrutiny. Progress would be monitored and reported back to the Management Committee.

Resources

Members supported the principle of greater parity of esteem between Scrutiny and the Executive and agreed that the Overview and Scrutiny Committees should be supported by Officers who operate with independence and provide impartial advice to Members.

Members supported the principle of greater profile and seniority for the role of Statutory Scrutiny Officer at the Council.

Member Training and Skills

Members noted the Council's annual Scrutiny training event and requested more information on the training programmes provided by the Local Government Association.

The Role of the Public

Members supported the principle of greater public involvement in the Scrutiny process and considered possible initiatives including:

- Greater engagement/briefing with Town and Parish Councils;
- Briefings for local newspapers and other media outlets;
- Increased use of digital engagement and social media;
- Increased presence of Scrutiny on the Council's website;
- Scrutiny articles in the Wokingham Borough News;
- Closer working with the Council's Communications team.

Scrutinising Public Services Provided by External Bodies

Members supported the principle of Scrutiny being able to "follow the Council pound" and look at both public and commercial service providers.

In line with the earlier discussion, Members supported the proposal for public oversight of Local Enterprise Partnerships.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the issues raised by the House of Commons Select Committee report in relation to the operation of Overview and Scrutiny be noted;
- 2) the Committee's views on the report's Conclusions and Recommendations be communicated to the Select Committee and the Department for Communities and Local Government;
- 3) the Committee receive further information on the specific issues highlighted above;
- 4) the Constitution Review Working Group's findings on the selection of Scrutiny Members and election of Scrutiny Chairmen be submitted to the Committee for consideration;
- 5) a progress review on recommendations made during the year and proposed benefits realised be included in the Committee's 2018/19 Work programme;
- 6) the Committee receive further information on Scrutiny training programmes run by the Local Government Association.

62. CONSIDERATION OF THE CURRENT EXECUTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL EXECUTIVE MEMBER DECISION 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 89 to 98.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The Executive and Individual Executive Member Decision Forward Programmes be noted;

- 2) Members notify Democratic Services of any issues they wish to include in the Committee's future work programme.

63. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMMES

The Committee considered its forward work programme and that of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees as set out on Agenda pages 99 to 109.

Members noted the introduction of new legislation relating to data protection – the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), to be launched in May 2018 and asked for a briefing on the implications of the proposals for the Council and for individual Members.

Members also considered issues relating to planning conditions which were changed following the granting of planning permission and the notification to local Ward Members about the granting of Tree Preservation Orders.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the forward Work Programmes be noted;
- 2) Members receive a briefing on the new General Data Protection Regulations;
- 3) items on changes to planning conditions and the granting of Tree Preservation Orders be included in the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programmes for 2018/19.

64. 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.