

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE HELD ON 7 JULY 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.40 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Alison Swaddle (Vice-Chairman), Sam Akhtar, Rachel Burgess, Paul Fishwick, Jim Frewin, Norman Jorgensen, Sarah Kerr, Rebecca Margetts, Jackie Rance, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey, Chris Bowring and Anne Chadwick

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: John Halsall

Officers Present

Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist
Chris Hannington, Trees and Landscape Manager
Francesca Hobson, Service Manager - Community, Heritage, Green & Blue Infrastructure
Susan Parsonage, Chief Executive
Grant Thornton, Category Manager - Economic Prosperity and Place
Diana Tovar, Climate Emergency Manager

12. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Guy Grandison and Pauline Helliard-Symons.

Chris Bowring and Anne Chadwick attended the meeting as substitutes.

13. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 16 June 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the following amendments:

- Cllr Dennis was in attendance.
- CS5 KPI – “What is the basis of this KPI because 52% target is not in line with treating children in care and care leavers as our own?”
- PG22 KPI – “Current data demonstrates ¼ of original target achieved so this KPI should be Red not Green.”
- PG26 KPI – “the data should reflect the average of all the air monitors *in each AQMA* rather than a single monitor.”

14. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

15. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

16. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited Members to submit questions to the appropriate Members.

16.1 Gary Cowan asked the Chairman the following question:

The Climate Emergency highlight report is very comprehensive and one I welcome but I have some concerns with some of the listed key priorities namely:

- 1. Reduce Carbon Dioxide Emissions from Transport.
- 5. Increase the levels of carbon sequestration in the borough through greening the environment
- 4. Finally, create a Local Plan that specifies Net Zero Construction and Infrastructure.
- In any new local plan briefings which I have been involved in which will form the basis of the Council's emerging local plan and be subject to public consultation followed by an examination in public there is no real mention of net zero construction and infrastructure.
- Planning Officers seem to pay no attention to additional emissions when approving development that increases traffic on already congested roads with no thought to reducing carbon emissions. No air quality checks are asked for and trees that impinge on development are usually removed.
- With respect to greening the environment Planning Officers secretly approved the removal of about 500 mature trees including many with Tree Preservation Orders on them by Bearwood Lakes without any conditions to replace them.

My question is: will the Overview and Scrutiny use their influence to insist that Wokingham's Planning Officers apply where possible all the Council's Climate Emergency plans/policies/targets and aims to every single planning decision they take and, at the same time, add Climate Emergency to the planning status internal consultation reports also for every planning application?

As Councillor Cowan was unable to attend the meeting, the following written answer was provided.

Answer

The O&S Climate Emergency Task and Finish Group recently published its 2021 report. The report highlighted the importance of the Planning process in achieving the Council's 2030 Net Zero target and made specific recommendations, as follows:

- Introduce a Supplementary Planning Document linked to the current Local Plan to ensure that, whilst we wait for the new Local Plan Update to be completed, any new homes are built as close to carbon neutral as possible.
- Engage proactively and work together with housing developers, planning to build in the Borough, to clarify the Council's position on Climate Emergency and explain the planning and building control requirements arising out of the Climate Emergency Action Plan.
- Use the Council's housing companies to showcase the highest standards of energy efficiency in any future developments. These standards may surpass standards set in the new Local Plan.

The Task and Finish Group highlighted the importance of ensuring that key policies and plans were aligned with the Climate Emergency Action Plan. This included the emerging Local Plan Update. The Group also emphasised the importance of Council services working together with a clear understanding of the Action Plan. To support this the Group recommended that Climate Emergency training should be provided for Members, officers

and contractors, with the aim of embedding awareness into every service and every key decision.

The Task and Finish Group's recommendations will be submitted to the Executive for consideration. We trust that they will be given serious consideration in line with the points raised in your question.

17. DISCUSSION WITH LEADER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE

John Halsall (Council Leader) and Susan Parsonage (Chief Executive) attended the meeting to set out the Council's key priorities over the year ahead. The aim was to identify any policies or plans being considered over the year which would benefit from pre-decision scrutiny in line with the Council's Constitution. As similar exercise was being carried out by the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees in order to maximise the benefit that Overview and Scrutiny could add to the decision-making process.

John Halsall addressed the Committee and highlighted the following points:

Over the past year, the Council had responded well to the challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic. This had been possible due to the hard work, commitment and flexibility of Council staff. Staff returning to office settings would be considered in the context of balancing business needs with welfare needs.

The Council had a clear Community Vision and Corporate Delivery Plan which had been developed following consultation with the Borough's residents. The priorities in the Vision and Delivery Plan fed through into the three year Medium Term Financial Plan.

The Council's approach was innovative and tackled residents' priorities. These included the regeneration of Wokingham town centre, plans for affordable housing, tackling traffic congestion, the Climate Emergency Action Plan and bringing forward the updated Local Plan.

Other priorities included bringing the Public Protection Partnership (PPP) back in house, tackling anti-social behaviour, domestic violence and fly tipping. A new Waste Strategy would be developed along with proposals to transform adult social care services and home to school transport.

The Council would seek to build on the improved partnership with the community and voluntary sector which had developed during the pandemic. This would include a focus on health inequalities and tackling poverty across the Borough.

Susan Parsonage highlighted the following points:

The Council would seek to build on recent positive inspections (Ofsted and ILAC) relating to Children's Services. This include significant progress relating to the SEN Statement of Action.

Work would continue with partners in the Community Safety Partnership (police, health, probation and fire and rescue) to deliver the approved strategy. The reintegration of the PPP would result in an intelligence-led model which delivered value for money for the Borough's residents.

The Council would deliver on the new Arts and Culture Strategy and would seek to develop a positive relationship with the business community, for example in relation to the Climate Emergency Action Plan.

The updated Local Plan would be delivered using a robust timetable while the new Waste Strategy would focus on waste minimisation and an updated re3 partnership.

The Council would also focus on improving the customer interface using improved data from the GovMetric system which would facilitate improved, more responsive services. The past year had demonstrated the innovation and flexibility of staff in delivering new services and improving existing services.

Challenges following the pandemic included mental health and wellbeing, complex cases (adult social care and special educational needs) and the post-Covid response to business as usual.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points:

What were the most important factors relating to the successful response to the pandemic? John Halsall highlighted the Council's command structure, partnership working, speedy response to emerging challenges such as PPE and communication with key stakeholders, e.g. MPs, GPs, community sector partners and political groups on the Council.

What was the current situation relating to the reintegration of PPP? John stated that a team was in place to move the project forwards. The aim was to commence discussions with staff within the next few weeks. In the meantime, discussions were continuing with West Berkshire. The desired outcome was an improved, more responsive service for the Borough's residents.

What progress was there in relation to the Council's 2030 carbon neutral target? John stated that the Council had committed to do all it could to achieve the 2030 target. This recognised the fact that the Council could only do so much. Other actors, especially the Government, would also need to take positive steps and facilitate access to the necessary funding for Councils.

Was there a risk that a focus on the Council's achievements could lead to complacency about the challenges facing the Borough, such as the rich-poor divide, health inequalities and the lack of affordable housing? John stated that the priorities and actions highlighted above demonstrated a focus on the key challenges.

What were the next steps in developing the anti-poverty strategy and when would it be made public? John stated that a report had been considered by the Executive in January 2021 with proposals to develop the strategy. This had set out a number of blocks of work which would focus on residents in the greatest need. As an example, the redevelopment of the Gorse Ride estate had seen the replacement of poor housing with new, high quality, energy efficient homes.

How was the Council addressing the negative impacts of new housing development such as the flooding of gardens with sewage after major storms which had an impact on the mental health of residents? John stated that flooding in Shinfield and Three Mile Cross was primarily a matter for Thames Water to address, but the Council could support

residents by applying pressure. The Council would look at issues such as these on a “case by case” basis. The Council was aware of the increase in mental health conditions over the past year and was responding proactively.

What was the timeframe for developing the new Waste Strategy? Susan stated that early work was under way and was focussing on waste minimisation, cost and environmental impacts. This involved a deep dive into the re3 partnership with Reading and Bracknell. The aim was to produce the new waste Strategy by the autumn of 2021.

How would the proposed intelligent transport system help to reduce congestion across the Borough? John stated that there were several aspects to the proposed system – increased traffic flow, communications, intelligent traffic signals and improved driver information. At the same time the Council would be seeking to adopt initiatives such as car sharing and new technologies. It would also be supporting the transition to electric vehicles through improved charging infrastructure. Investment was also ongoing into active travel through improved cycling and walking facilities.

In relation to improving customer interactions relating to front-line services (e.g. grass cutting, waste and roads) when would a report be submitted to the Committee to enable detailed scrutiny? Susan confirmed that the Council was beginning to collect improved data and to identify gaps in existing systems. A report would be submitted to the Committee once the improved data could be organised into a suitable form.

Could the Committee receive information on the implementation of the Community Safety Partnership’s strategy relating to domestic abuse and anti-social behaviour? Susan stated that she would confirm the timeframe for a report back to the Committee.

In relation to reducing the number of vehicles on the Borough’s roads in line with the Climate Emergency Action Plan, what progress was being made on the development of car clubs? Susan stated that she would seek clarification on this point from the Highways team.

Over the next three years the Council had committed £17m on tackling traffic congestion, compared to £5.8m on active travel. What modelling was used to determine expenditure on measures aimed at achieving modal shift from cars to active travel and public transport? Could this modelling data be shared with the Committee? John referred to his earlier comments on the intelligent transport system. Further information could be shared with the Committee once new policies were announced.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) John Halsall and Susan Parsonage be thanked for attending the meeting to discuss future priorities and answer Member questions;
- 2) that additional information be circulated in response to Members’ specific questions;
- 3) that the issues discussed at the meeting be used to inform the Committee’s work programme for 2021/22.

18. COMMUNITY DELIBERATIVE PROCESSES

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 19 to 56, which gave details of potential community deliberative processes aimed at improving resident engagement

and input into the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan. The aim was to submit the recommended deliberative processes to the Executive in July 2021 with a follow-up report to the October 2021 Executive, setting out the financial implications, timeline and expected outcomes.

Diana Tovar and Grant Thornton (from the Climate Emergency team) attended the meeting to introduce the report and answer Member questions.

The report stated that research had been carried out into a number of potential deliberative processes and that an evaluation matrix had been developed in order to rank the different options (Appendix A to the report). Case studies had also been reviewed where processes were used by local authorities. The processes under consideration included citizens' assemblies, user panels, focus groups, town meetings, area forums, conversation cafes, crowd sourcing and e panels.

The report concluded that, based on the results of the evaluation, the recommended deliberative processes were focus groups and e panels. These methods engaged a wide variety of stakeholders, were low cost, had a relatively quick turnaround and delivered a large amount of useful data.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points:

Whilst the public engagement was welcomed, there was a lack of clarity on the desired outcome, i.e. which process would help to deliver the most significant level of carbon reduction. The report indicated that greater weighting had been allocated to cost rather than issues such as range of participants and breadth of discussion. The weighting given to different criteria was also subjective. For example, focus groups received 5 for discussion potential whilst citizens' assembly received 1 for communication of results. However, there were examples of Councils using citizens' assemblies that had produced reports with recommendations which were widely circulated and used to inform Climate Emergency action plans.

Diana Tovar commented that the option appraisal and methodology had been used to establish a value for the different deliberative processes. The aim was to establish the most cost-effective option in terms of the balance between cost, time, support required and the quality of the outputs which could then be used to inform the Climate Emergency discussions.

There appeared to be some issues relating to the supporting tables in the report. These related to the weightings given to different options and the actual calculations within the tables. For example, Focus Groups scored 5 for discussion potential whilst Citizens Assembly only scored 4. Similarly, Citizens Assembly scored 1 for Communication of Results, defined as "Very slow results and difficult to relate the results into useful communication". This seemed wrong as a number of Citizens Assemblies (e.g. Camden) had produced reports with recommendations which were then incorporated in climate emergency action plans. Diana stated that the issue with Citizens Assemblies was more around the cost, level of support required and length of the process rather than the quality of information provided. Focus Groups were informed by expert opinions and were able to provide outputs more quickly. Diana confirmed that the tables in the report would be reviewed in relation to the specific issues highlighted by Members.

As part of the option evaluation, what was the definition of deliberative process? It appeared that a number of the options were not true deliberative processes – they were more like opinion gathering tools. Deliberative processes and community engagement were not the same. The report appeared to confuse the two issues and downgraded the importance of discussion. Diana stated that the options had reflected what other local authorities had done in relation to Climate Emergency. Officers had tried to use specific case studies to inform the report.

Some local authorities had been successful in finding external funding to support Climate Assemblies. Did WBC officers seek external funding – if funding could be found, this would change the weighting significantly. Diana commented that officers had tried to identify external funding opportunities but had been unsuccessful.

The report did not include any case studies for the two preferred options – focus groups and e panels. Diana confirmed that case studies had been sought but none had been identified in relation to Climate Emergency.

The report stated that the use of focus groups would allow the targeting of relevant stakeholders who may specialise on or be interested in specific issues under consideration. Was this consistent with the aim of engaging with a more balanced, representative cross-section of the community. Grant Thornton stated that the process would not exclude discussions with a cross-section of the community. The report was, in effect, a balanced scorecard which aimed to guide decision making on the most effective options. The criteria “participant variation” took into account the breadth of engagement to be delivered. Specific financial issues, such as reimbursement for participants, would be considered in due course.

It was proposed by Sarah Kerr and seconded by Paul Fishwick that:

“The Committee has significant reservations relating to this report and does not recommend its approval by the Executive”.

On being put to the vote, the proposal was not approved.

RESOLVED: That the review of potential Climate Emergency Community Deliberative Processes (Appendix A to the report) be noted.

19. ESTABLISHING THE TREE AND BIODIVERSITY PROTECTION TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Following discussion at the March and June 2021 meetings, the Committee considered the composition of the proposed Tree and Biodiversity Protection Task and Finish Group.

The Chairman stated that, in line with the Council’s political balance arrangements, the Task and Finish Group should be set up with three Conservative Members, one Lib Dem Member and one Labour/Independent Member.

Rachel Burgess stated that she was content for an Independent Member to sit on the Group.

The Chairman stated that the Task and Finish Group would establish its terms of reference at the first meeting.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the Tree and Biodiversity Protection Task and Finish Group be established with three Conservative Members, one Lib Dem Member and one Independent Member;
- 2) membership of the Task and Finish Group be open to all non-Executive/Audit Committee Members;
- 3) the Task and Finish Group consider and confirm its terms of reference at its first meeting.

20. 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 57 to 64.

It was confirmed that the Procurement Strategy, to be submitted to the July Executive, was a new strategy based on best practice and guidance from CIPFA.

RESOLVED: That the Executive and Individual Executive Member Decision Forward Programmes be noted.

21. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMMES

The Committee considered its forward work programme and that of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees as set out on Agenda pages 65 to 76.

RESOLVED: That the Overview and Scrutiny work programmes be noted.

22. ACTION TRACKER REPORT

The Committee considered the Action Tracker report, set out at Agenda pages 77 to 78.

RESOLVED: That the Action Tracker report be noted.