

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - VALUE FOR MONEY &
CUSTOMER SERVICE - 18 NOVEMBER 2019

(To be read in conjunction with the Agenda for the Meeting)

Present

Cllr Peter Martin (Chairman)	Cllr Jerry Hyman
Cllr Joan Heagin (Vice Chairman)	Cllr Stephen Mulliner
Cllr Roger Blishen	Cllr Peter Nicholson
Cllr Jerome Davidson	Cllr Julia Potts
Cllr George Hesse	

Also Present

Councillor Simon Dear, Councillor John Gray, Councillor Mark Merryweather and
Councillor David Beaman

27. MINUTES (Agenda item 1.)

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 16 September 2019 were confirmed as a correct record and signed.

28. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTES (Agenda item 2.)

There were no apologies for absence.

29. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Agenda item 3.)

There were no declarations of interests in connection with items on the agenda.

30. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC (Agenda item 4.)

There were none.

31. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS (Agenda item 5.)

There were none.

32. PRESENTATION FROM THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR FINANCE, ASSETS
AND COMMERCIAL SERVICES (Agenda item 6.)

The Chairman reminded the Committee that at its last meeting, Members had been keen to understand the Executive's approach to property investment, and also to learn more about the progress of Brightwells Yard, as a major income area for the Council. Cllr Merryweather, the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Assets and Commercial had been invited to the meeting to give a presentation to the Committee.

Cllr Martin advised the Committee that he was a member of the Property Investment Advisory Board. While he did not anticipate any conflicts of interest in

relation to this particular agenda item, he stated that in future, should there be any conflicts, he would withdraw from the meeting.

Cllr Merryweather set out the various strands feeding into the Medium Term Financial Plan, including a projected £900k contribution to be made from property investment by 2024.

Cllr Merryweather advised the Committee that the Property Investment Strategy was being re-written in order to better align with the council's Corporate Strategy. The intention was to diversify into market residential lettings, which would be ethical as far as possible. There would also be a move towards borough-wide investments, as a large proportion of the existing property portfolio was centred around Farnham. Legal advice had confirmed that the Council had the necessary powers to invest in both commercial and residential property. Going forward, a number of different options could be explored through 'pilots' and it would be important to have sufficient resource to support these. The Committee heard that various funding options were being explored including borrowing, asset sales, income from grants, and CIL.

In relation to Brightwells Yard, Cllr Merryweather outlined the impact of this project on the General Fund, and summarised the front loaded and recurring (p.a.) costs. He also outlined a number of risks and sensitivities, including the potential loss of New Homes Bonus and the phased growth of Commercial Rents.

In response to questions from the Committee about the composition of the Property Investment Advisory Board, Cllr Merryweather explained that getting the right skillset had been seen as the most important factor, and the Board now comprised a diverse range of expertise which should prove valuable going forward.

The Committee thanked Cllr Merryweather for his presentation, and RESOLVED to note the update.

33. BUDGET STRATEGY WORKING GROUP INTERIM REPORT (Agenda item 7.)

Cllr Mulliner, Chairman of the Budget Strategy Working Group (BSWG), presented the report to the Committee. He explained that the aim was to provide a sufficiently detailed, but easy to understand model of the ledger, within the context of the Medium Term Financial Plan. Key messages included:

- Options for generating additional income were limited.
- The 2023/24 budget would be crucial as this was the year in which the last business rates retention was expected to be lost.
- The Business Transformation programme was expected save £1m, but the timings for when this would be delivered were not yet known.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Mulliner and the other members of the BSWG for the comprehensive report.

The Committee asked further questions about the leisure centres project, which had been highlighted in the report as an area for increased income, but with a concern over the timing for when this would be delivered. Cllr Mulliner explained that with reference to Godalming Leisure Centre, the BSWG had recommended that a parallel working approach be adopted, so that the building work could commence as soon as possible after consent had been received from the Secretary of State.

It was noted that at this point, the work of the BSWG had predominantly been a desk-top exercise, with input from the Heads of Service. There were a number of assumptions at this stage, and the impacts of the climate emergency declaration had also not yet been assessed.

With regard to the next steps, Cllr Mulliner explained that the Group would produce a further report in January which would include the latest budget position. The Committee also looked forward to hearing about the results of the participatory budgeting exercise in due course.

The Committee RESOLVED to endorse the following recommendations to the Executive:

1. Providing the SCC application to the Secretary of State in relation to the expansion of Godalming Leisure Centre car park is not, on enquiry, expected to encounter difficulties in securing approval, that the design work preparatory to a planning application should be commissioned without delay, subject to Leisure Programme Board approval.
2. The MTFP is modelled in at least the level of detail contained in the BSWG spreadsheet with updated estimates for new cost and income items accompanied by prudent timing estimates.
3. Transformation costs should be carefully estimated with regard to both quantum and timing and included in the MTFP model.
4. The MTFP should be extended to 2023/24 to reflect the fact that it is the first year in which retained Business Rates are forecast to make no contribution.

34. SCOPING OF COST IMPLICATIONS OF PLANNING APPEALS (Agenda item 8.)

Beth Howland-Smith, Development Manager, reminded the Committee that at its last meeting, Members had been concerned about the cost implications of defending a relatively high number of planning appeals. The Committee had asked for more information, and Beth advised that this would be brought to the next meeting in January; she sought to understand Members' aspirations for what should be included in the report.

The Committee was keen to learn about the scale of costs awards, and how frequently these occurred. Members also felt that it would be useful to be able to identify any patterns in relation to appeals. It was agreed that the report should also include information on enforcement statistics and Judicial Reviews.

More generally, the Committee felt that it would be helpful if they were informed when an application went to appeal. Beth explained that in the past, this had been reported on a quarterly basis and this could be re-instated.

Subject to the comments above, the Committee RESOLVED to endorse the proposed structure and content of the report.

35. CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORT Q2 2019-20 (JULY - SEPTEMBER 2019) (Agenda item 9.)

The Committee received the report, which provided an analysis of the Council's performance for the second quarter of 2019-20. The Chairman invited each Head of Service to present a summary of their Service's performance.

Business Transformation

David Allum, Head of Business Transformation, informed the Committee that Q2 had seen the recruitment of the Business Transformation team, as well as the continuation of the customer service project. The Master Data Management (MDM) system had been installed and the procurement exercise for a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system continued.

Cllr Heagin noted from the Committee's work programme that there was an outstanding action to develop a customer service baseline and asked whether the implementation of the CRM would help with this. David responded that it would, and he hoped to be able to present this in the next year.

The Committee also discussed the implementation of the new IT system for Planning. David clarified that this action related to the internal system, not the website front-end, and the system was expected to go live in Q1 of 2020/21.

Finance and Property

Peter Vickers, Head of Finance and Property, advised the Committee that it had been a busy quarter in Finance. The Exchequer team had faced a number of challenges due to staff turnover, however this had provided an opportunity to look into increased use of IT automation and the benefits of this new way of working should be seen in the next quarter through an improvement to the performance indicator on payment of invoices.

The Committee noted that there had been a drop in performance in relation to complaints, however this had been due to one complicated complaint taking slightly longer to resolve.

Policy and Governance

Robin Taylor, Head of Policy and Governance, highlighted key achievements over the last quarter, including the establishment of a Governance Review Working Group; the adoption of a new Corporate Strategy; and a series of project management workshops had been delivered to staff.

In relation to the performance indicators, Robin highlighted that sickness absence was improving, but still needed further work. Indicator PG2a in relation to complaints was still underperforming, Robin explained that this was a very ambitious target, which had never been met, and there were further challenges as a result of the complaints process being managed locally within individual service areas.

The Committee asked if a table could be provided showing the complaints performance for each service area, which would help to pinpoint areas of concern. Robin agreed to include this in the next report.

Cllr Hyman noted that a new Communications and Engagement was due to be approved in Q3 and asked if the previous version could be circulated to help Members to identify the changes. Robin agreed to circulate this after the meeting.

The Committee RESOLVED to note the Q2 performance for the service areas falling within its remit.

36. STAFF SURVEY RESULTS (Agenda item 10.)

Robin Taylor, Head of Policy and Governance, delivered a presentation on the results of the 2019 staff survey. This had been requested by the Committee at the last meeting following discussions about staff sickness and concerns of low morale.

Robin advised that there had been a very good response to the survey, which was up from the 2016 figure. The survey had used a classic five-point scale, but also included a free text option to enable members of staff to provide further feedback.

With regard to the questions linked to morale, there was a generally positive response, with 74% of staff stating that they had a good work life balance and 59% thinking that Waverley takes the necessary steps to maintain good health and wellbeing of staff. Nevertheless, there were some areas that needed to be worked on, for example, 26% thought that employees are not treated consistently across services.

Nine key actions had been identified, including review of pay and reward, review of Fit for Work policy and increased Senior Management Team (SMT) visibility and internal communications.

Cllr Martin recalled that the Committee had been particularly concerned about staff morale, and a potential link to sickness absences. He was pleased to note that morale was generally good, but there were some areas of concern. Although the performance indicator relating to sickness had shown some improvement this quarter, Members remained concerned, and were also interested in learning about any variation between service areas. Robin reminded the Committee that a report on the Workforce Profile was on its work programme for the March meeting, and agreed to include information on staff sickness in this report.

The Committee RESOLVED to note the update and looked forward to receiving a further report in March.

37. REVIEW OF COMPLAINTS CLOSED IN 2018/19 (Agenda item 11.)

Sue Petzold, Corporate Complaints Officer, presented the report to the Committee. She advised that 75% of all complaints had been closed at Level 1 which was very positive. 60% had not been upheld, 22% had been partly upheld, and 18% had been upheld. Unfortunately there was no comparative data available as this was the first year since changing to the new, two-stage, process.

The Committee noted that the service with the most complaints was Housing, and hoped that the Housing O&S Committee was also aware of this. Officers confirmed that Housing O&S received the complaints data on a quarterly basis and had also been made aware of this year-end report.

Members felt that some of the complaints in relation to Housing could be due to the use of contractors, as there had been a slight dip in performance following the change of housing maintenance contractors. Cllr Mulliner suggested that it would be useful to have a comparator or benchmark in order to provide context, particularly in relation to other councils with their own housing stock.

The Committee RESOLVED to note the information set out in the report. Additionally, the Committee noted that the Housing O&S Committee had been made aware of this report and, in view of Housing receiving the highest volume of complaints, urged that Housing O&S continue to monitor the situation as part of the Corporate Performance Report.

38. COMPLAINTS TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL CARE OMBUDSMAN AND HOUSING OMBUDSMAN ABOUT WAVERLEY'S SERVICES IN 2018/19 (Agenda item 12.)

Sue Petzold, Corporate Complaints Officer, presented this report to the Committee. She highlighted that there had only been one finding of 'fault' throughout the whole year, which was very positive. The Committee was also pleased to note that the number of complaints to the Ombudsman was declining year on year.

The Committee RESOLVED to note the information contained in the report, and thanked officers for the high level of performance.

39. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda item 13.)

Having reviewed its work programme, the Committee noted that key items for its January meeting would be the budget and service plans.

40. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC (Agenda item 14.)

At 9.18pm, it was RESOLVED that pursuant to Procedure Rule 20 and in accordance with Section 100A(4) of the Local government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following items on the grounds that it is likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, that if members of the public were present during the items, there would be disclosure to them of exempt information (as defined by Section 100I of the Act) of the description specified in paragraph 3 of the revised Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act.

41. PROPERTY INVESTMENT QUARTERLY PROGRESS REPORT (Agenda item 15.)

The Committee received an update on the latest position with properties purchased under the Property Investments Strategy and asked a number of questions as set out in the (exempt) annexe to these minutes. Peter Vickers, Head of Property and Finance, agreed to provide some additional narrative in future reports.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm and concluded at 9.29 pm

Chairman