

Overview and Scrutiny Chairman's Annual Report 2022

Introduction

Welcome to this annual glimpse of the many strategic activities which have been undertaken by Overview and Scrutiny Committee in its dual role as a scrutiniser of Council operations and practices, and as a developer of policies and initiatives which seek to enhance the lives of those who live in the Test Valley.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee is unique among Council committees in that the majority of its work is not performed reactively in response to external requirements. Instead, members manage its own independent work plan in which they focus cross-party collaborative effort upon the investigation, refinement and improvement of a wide range of processes and practices. These enhancements are targeted both within the Council and within its sphere of influence throughout the Borough. Recently, such work has resulted in important areas of policy development coming to fruition.

This year the Committee has also focused upon the efficiency of its own working by questioning the fundamental requirements of 'scrutiny' and by ensuring that its own practices maintain high standards while achieving an economy of committee time. Examples are the revision of the process for appointment of the Overview and Scrutiny Chairman and the new procedure by which the Committee scrutinises Cabinet Portfolios.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee's scrutiny, information-gathering and workshop processes operate at the committee level, the latter activity happening through its 'roundtable' discussion forums. In these forums, members and officers share opinions and experiences as they work closely together on the generation of ideas, the introduction of new initiatives and the creation of corporate plans. Examples this year include: contributions on the implementation of the new Environment Act; Council communications; the annual Corporate Action Plan; development of the new Corporate Plan; and exploration of the potential of the green economy.

Most of the Committee's policy and reform work, however, is carried out within its 'panels' by committed groups of members. Each panel is established to achieve a specific task through a defined programme of work, which typically lasts several months. Throughout most of this year the Committee has been simultaneously operating eight panels. Two of these, the Budget Panel and Audit Panel are re-born on an annual basis and scrutinise their respective Council functions at precision level. Others, which are all discussed below, are examining significant issues such as: the processes involved in S106/CIL negotiation and allocation; and the improvement of the transparency and effectiveness of planning enforcement.

Special mention should be made of the considerable effort performed by members and officers on several initiatives devoted to the study and potential mitigation of the effects of climate change. Two panels have explored climate and environmental issues, one of which created the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan. This is a revisable document which examines the means by which the Council will achieve carbon neutrality and how it can use its influence to reduce the generation of greenhouse gases across the entire Borough.

Away Day

The Committee held its Away Day on Saturday 10 July at Broughton Village Hall. The day started with a welcome from the Chairman and this was followed with a networking/conversation session. A training session was then delivered by Ian Parry from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to develop members' skills and approach to scrutiny. This also helped members to develop an analytical and structured approach to scrutiny and strengthen their ability to work as an effective team.

Several issues raised by Ian Parry's session have since been incorporated into the scrutiny practices of Overview and Scrutiny Committee, such as the benefits of scrutinising future intent and strategic planning, rather than concentrating on the past.

The Committee also reviewed its work programme and discussed future topics. Following evaluation the Committee agreed to add the following to the work programme for 2021/22.

- Community Resilience
- The Green Economy
- Communications
- Funding infrastructure within communities
- Regeneration of town centres
- The impact of the Environment Bill and waste collection in Test Valley
- New ways of working
- Corporate Plan and Corporate Action Plan

The away day has enabled the Committee to have in place a clear work programme which reflects the work the Council is undertaking in relation to its corporate priorities. This enables the Committee to be able to focus on key strategic issues and the Council's officer team to be able to resource the work of the committee and its associated panels.

Round Table discussions and Briefing Notes

Five Round Table discussions have been held during the year including;

Communications – a focus on how the Council communicates with residents through its various channels such as print media and the website. The roundtable provided an overview of the work of the strategic communications team and provided the basis for the committee to develop and refine a proposed scope for the communications panel review that commenced during the year.

Corporate Action Plan year 4 – as part of the annual process for updating the Council's corporate action plan, this was an opportunity for the committee to review the proposed changes to the action plan ahead of it being considered by Cabinet.

Developing a new Corporate Plan – In 2023 the Council will adopt a new corporate plan. A roundtable was held to enable members to consider the process for developing the next plan with a particular focus on the public engagement work that commence in summer 2022.

The Green Economy - The OSCOM Green Economy roundtable will focus on where and how TVBC can support business resilience as the UK heads to Net Zero, fostering and supporting low carbon innovation, future land use and places together with the skills that will underpin this transition.

Environment Bill – The roundtable briefed the committee on proposed changes in legislation and also focused on the Hampshire Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy that was subsequently approved by Cabinet two weeks later.

The Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy is part of the building blocks or stepping stones that will help take the Council, and other Hampshire partners, on the waste collection system change journey brought about by the Environment Act, specifically weekly food waste collections and the introduction of a twin stream collection system for recyclable material.

Briefing notes on wider subjects of interest to the committee continue to be circulated as and when required.

Items and Meetings

Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings were previously held on a four-weekly cycle. At its meeting on 26 February 2021, Council approved pilot arrangements for the frequency of Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny (OSCOM) meetings to move to a six-weekly cycle on a pilot basis.

The move to a six-weekly cycle aimed to better facilitate the Council's business, in particular to better align with the financial deadlines of the Council. It was anticipated that greater time between meetings would allow for the business of the Council to be progressed in a more meaningful and effective way allowing Members and officers to develop work and report back to future meetings in a timely manner taking into account the legal requirements for agenda publication.

The committee had a busy workload with responsibilities across the Council and beyond. During the pilot period Overview and Scrutiny Committee has been able to create and manage its work plan with more time to actively engage in key areas of work. The pilot was reviewed at Council on 26 February where it was agreed to move the frequency of Overview and Scrutiny Committee (and Cabinet) to a six-weekly cycle.

There have been 8(9) meetings since the last Chairman's Annual Report. The Committee recommended the budget update to Cabinet and endorsed the work undertaken to deliver a budget for 2022/23. In addition the committee also considered the following reports:

- Annual Audit Report
- Budget Panel draft budget and draft fees and charges
- Equality and Inclusion
- Use of Council's power under Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000
- Feedback from Armed Forces Covenant Panel
- Annual report on complaints
- Report on the work of the Test Valley Community Safety Group
- Authority's Monitoring Report 2020-2021

The Committee had received regular updates on the Climate Emergency Action Plan and Covid-19 Recovery

Presentations

Regeneration – The Regeneration Manager gave a presentation on regeneration in Andover and Romsey including the regeneration plan for Andover Town Centre and South of Romsey Town Centre.

Presentation on Local Policing – Acting Chief Inspector Taylor and Sergeant Boughey gave an overview of work and crime figures locally and set out the 8 national priority areas and the three district priorities. They took a variety of questions from members.

New Ways of Working – The Innovation and Business Change Manager gave a presentation on the Council's new ways of working, the first phase of which will focus on providing outstanding services, meeting corporate priorities and achieving best outcomes for our residents. The second phase of the project will look at innovation, insight and service delivery, culture and people and business infrastructure and technology. Members then asked a variety of questions. Further strategic updates relating to this programme of work will be provided in the future, and as a direct result of this presentation, members are now due to receive support on how they can use Council facilities to take part in hybrid meetings.

Portfolio Reviews

Leader's annual review of the Corporate Plan – The Leader gave his annual update on the Council's Corporate Action Plan (CAP) 2019-2023 'Growing Our Potential'. The presentation also updated the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the Covid-19 Recovery Plan which looks at the ongoing work to ensure the safety of the population and workforce, review future working, providing a sustainable mechanism of recovery through place-based and community focused approach, identifying opportunities to do things differently and adapting to the changing situation.

Housing and Environmental Health Portfolio – Councillor Bundy gave a presentation of key areas of activity during the pandemic and, looking ahead to the future, he also reflected on the role of the Environmental Health Service to ensure that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had an understanding of the role they have played in supporting our communities. Overview and Scrutiny members were supportive of the work of the service and there was a good discussion about pressures and service planning associated with the scope Councillor Bundy covered in the presentation.

Community, Leisure and Tourism Portfolio Holder – The Community, Leisure and Tourism Portfolio Holder gave a presentation on leisure facilities including and how leisure and sports facilities are progressing financially post pandemic recovery. He highlighted that the Council received a detailed report covering period from March 2020 to July 21 and that whilst restrictions have all been lifted, activity levels continue to recover.

At the time of reporting, Ganger Farm remained in the ownership of the developer however the Council is pushing for completion in preparation for opening later in 2022.

The portfolio Holder was delighted to report the Lights had reopened in September, it had also been awarded the Society of London Theatres See it Safely kitemark in recognition of measures taken to keep the public safe.

Panels

Budget Panel – The Budget Panel, led by Councillor Matthews, met three times during the course of the year.

The panel reviewed the previous year's Financial Out-turn, Medium Term Financial Projection and proposed Fees and Charges for the coming financial year.

The outcomes of these Panel meetings were recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that enabled the Committee to make its own recommendations to Cabinet, helping to deliver a robust and balanced budget for the Council in the 2022/23 financial year.

Audit Panel – The panel, led by Councillor Borg Neal met three times during the past year, setting the Internal Audit work programme for 2021/22 and subsequently reviewing progress reports and summaries of recommendations being made. The panel also endorsed the external audit annual audit report, treasury management mid-year review and the process for the appointment of a new external auditor

Review of Outside Bodies - The panel, led by Councillor C Dowden, reviewed the role and expectations of members who serve as representatives on outside bodies. The panel examined the guidance for representatives and undertook work to further define the role and the level of feedback required. The review sought to understand the added value that having members as representatives on these bodies brings to ensure that these organisations and the Council gain mutual benefit from this.

Following an initial report of the findings, the panel worked with the Council's Member and Community Development Group, which is a cross-party working group, to develop the final proposals.

As a result of the panel, it has been recommended that new arrangements be developed for how members can provide feedback to the council on the work of the outside body they are part of. These arrangements shall use mechanisms such as the Members' Information Bulletin. The Committee has also agreed that an annual presentation from the Community Manager on the Council's wider support for the voluntary and community sector should form part of the OSCOM annual work programme.

Informal process for the selection of Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Committee - The panel led by Councillor C Dowden considered an informal process for selecting the candidate for Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee following the piloting of a new approach in 2021. The review focused on how the informal process can enable members to learn more about prospective candidates and how they will meet the qualities of the role description and what they will bring to the role of Chair if selected. The rationale for this is in recognition of the important role that the Overview and Scrutiny Chairman fulfils in enabling the Committee to meet its overview and scrutiny responsibilities. The Committee, at its meeting on 15 December 2021, endorsed the final conclusions of the panel and the informal process piloted in 2021 is adopted for use in future years.

Climate Emergency Action Plan - The panel led by Councillor Gwynne reviewed the status of the Council's response to the declared Climate Emergency; and to collate proposed additions to the Climate Emergency Action Plan for consideration by Council members and the Climate Emergency Board.

Enforcement Panel – ongoing - A review, led by Councillor Burley, is currently being undertaken based on the areas of focus set out in the scoping document and will result in a report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee outlining any key recommendations for consideration. The review will give assurance to residents, planning professionals and councillors that this important service is fit for purpose.

Communications Panel – ongoing - This panel, led by Councillor Brooks, reviewed communications to and from the Council and between Members and staff. The panel looked at an overview of the Council's corporate communications strategy, including plans for the future and looked at how the Council can encourage and maximise opportunities for two-way communication. The panel also focused on the role of members as community councillors and how they currently communicate with their residents and communities. The panel will also hold a focus group with residents and service users to understand how they would prefer to receive communications and identify any gaps or barriers and how these can be overcome. The review will provide valuable insight to the Council as it continues to develop key areas of its communications and the channels it uses to engage and communicate with residents.

Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill – ongoing - At the meeting of Council on 1 September 2021, a motion was proposed by Councillor Gwynne and seconded by Councillor C Dowden, which requested Council support for the Climate and Ecology Emergency Bill, which was awaiting a reading by Parliament. This was referred to Overview and Scrutiny Committee for further consideration and response.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a cross-party panel to carry out this task, led by Councillor Lodge. The panel debated the possible high-level implications of each clause within the Bill and noted where these same objectives were also covered by other, more advanced legislation, such as the Environment Act. The panel also examined the potential impact that each clause might have at borough level and where these had already been anticipated within our own Climate Emergency Action Plan.

Panel members have met four times and have had much fruitful and informed debate on the variety of environmental issues raised, even though progress of the Bill itself has been repeatedly stalled in Parliament. The panel is currently compiling its final considerations and conclusions for presentation in May.

S106/Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Panel - The purpose of the panel, led by Councillor Hamilton is to understand the processes of negotiation and allocation of CIL/S106 money and how the associated decision-making processes operate. The panel aims to make recommendations where it considers that there are areas for improvement. Work was delayed from 2021 due to COVID restrictions and the majority of it will be undertaken during 2022.

Approach to Portfolio Reviews

Throughout most of 2021 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has been trialling a new approach to the review of Portfolio Holders and their portfolios. This has aimed to increase efficiency by focussing on specific aspects of each portfolio and by targeting questioning towards future strategic issues, for example: strategic priorities, actions to mitigate future risks, future performance targets (including with regard to climate and ecological issues), future resources, and actions being taken to resolve any on-going problems. The approach also seeks to place a greater emphasis on the examination of strategic issues and encourages a forward looking analysis to ensure that future risks and opportunities are being properly anticipated.

On 22 January 2022 Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed an informal process for Portfolio coordinators which set out the role of the coordinator, how they will coordinate with the Portfolio Holder for their presentation and leading the questioning at Committee.

Conclusion

This report has described the variety of strategic activities undertaken by the members of Overview and Scrutiny Committee during the present Council year. Fortunately, it was possible for members to meet in person throughout the year, following the lifting of government COVID-19 restrictions.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee's activities have included: the annual Away Day, Roundtable workshops, Briefings (several on-line), 6-weekly Committee Meetings (which include work plan reviews), Cabinet Portfolio Reviews, information-gathering Presentations, and Panels. These have all been well-supported by members who have made significant contributions to their success.

I would like to express my thanks to my Vice Chairman Cllr Nick Matthews and to officers Caroline Lovelock and James Moody who have all provided valuable advice and guidance. Thank you too to the very many more officers who have provided expertise in the support of our specialist panels and who have addressed the Committee in the course of its work.

Cllr Nicolas Lodge
Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Committee