

Overview and Scrutiny Chairman's Annual Report 2023

Introduction

Welcome to this brief annual summary 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 focussed its attention mainly upon the internal service delivery of the Council and it is believed that gains in operational efficiency and service quality will result from the recommendations made. The Committee has also gained further experience in practicing its targeted approach to Cabinet portfolio scrutiny and its action-tracking system, both of which were introduced in 2021-22. The latter mechanism has proven its worth in ensuring that agreements for action made between the Committee and scrutinised bodies do not get forgotten!

Overview and Scrutiny Committee's scrutiny, information-gathering and workshop processes operate at the committee level with all Committee members involved, the latter activity happening through its 'roundtable' discussion forums. In these, members and officers share opinions and experiences as they work closely together on the generation of ideas, the introduction of new initiatives and development of the Council's Corporate Plan.

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. Although the year has seen the operation of six panels, two of these have spanned the entire year and have busied themselves with in-depth analyses and public consultation in their pursuit of service improvements. These are the work council communications and planning enforcement.

The Committee has one panel, the Budget Panel, which is reappointed every year and oversees the processes in the financial planning year: the previous year's outturn is assessed, the budget for the forthcoming year is prepared, fees and charges for the Council's services are set and a medium-term forecast is created. This leads to the final approvals by the Cabinet and Full Council in February. Formerly, the Committee oversaw the audit process through a panel but this function is now performed by a new and separate committee.

Finally, we should not forget the important role that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee plays in environmental issues. In particular, regular updates are provided to the Committee on the Council's progress towards the objectives set in its Climate Emergency Action Plan. This includes both the work towards the reduction of the Council's own carbon footprint and that aimed at influencing the entire Test Valley in the same direction. This year has seen some significant progress in reducing fossil fuel use by our vehicles and the increase in energy-efficient practices within the Council's buildings. The Committee has also taken a special interest in the green economy of the Test Valley and is looking at ways in which this may be promoted and celebrated.

Annual Away Day

The Committee held its Away Day on Saturday 16 July at Broughton Village Hall. The day started with a welcome from the Chairman and this was followed by a networking/conversation session. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services then led a session on good governance where members worked through some eye-opening case studies which demonstrated how circumstances can conspire to create catastrophic failures within local government organisations. The focus for these was a consideration of whether warning signs were evident and whether the failings could have been prevented. Several cautionary themes were seen to emerge.

The afternoon session concentrated on the Committee's work programme and members discussed and agreed to give further consideration to the topics below. Following initial suggestions at the Away Day, members were subsequently requested to rank the ideas and to propose whether they might best be explored as: briefings, roundtable discussions or panels. The results were then incorporated into the 2022-3 work programme.

- Hampshire County Council Highways projects within local communities.
- Council's current and future IT strategy
- Green Economy
- Regeneration (Andover & Romsey)
- Tourism
- Business Parks and Industrial Estates
- Waste and Recycling
- Leisure Provision
- Cost of Living
- Medium Term Financial Strategy
- Village Sustainability
- Affordable Housing and Homelessness
- Issues Arising from the Planning of new Neighbourhoods
- Revision of the OSCOM Handbook
- Raising awareness of the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Accessibility within the Borough
- Wildlife Corridors
- New Ways of Working
- Communications between the Council and Residents

- Planning Enforcement
- Flexibility of planning call-ins

The Away Day also enabled the Committee to develop a work programme which reflects the Council's corporate priorities and strategic necessities. It also ensured that the Council's officer team were prepared to resource the work of the Committee and its associated panels.

Round Table Discussions and Briefing Notes

Corporate Plan Survey – The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has played a key role in overseeing the development of the corporate plan for the forthcoming 4-year Council. More so than ever before, this is involving consultation with the community through workshops, social media and public events. The plans and results of the team concerned were examined and endorsed several times during the year.

Flexibility of planning call-ins – to understand the legislation and constitution with regard to this subject.

Leisure Services (23 January 2023) – This was a detailed, retrospective financial examination of the options, negotiations and decisions made during the period of the pandemic when leisure services were suspended. The negotiations were continuing at the time of the roundtable, with the cost of heating energy adversely affecting the business and the insistence of the leisure provider that it is still labouring under the extended influence of the covid legislation.

Affordable Housing and Homelessness Strategy (1 March 2023) – A consideration of how the Council: defines and manages its affordable housing; how it achieves its targets; how it influences the sustainability of villages; how the pandemic has had lasting influences; and how the provision differs between the north and south of the borough. Of course, the significant impact of refugees from Afghanistan and the Ukraine has now to be considered too. Homelessness was also debated and the members present contributed some opinions to the forthcoming revision of the Council's homelessness strategy.

Business Parks and Industrial Estates (14 December 2022) – An overview of the current position of the many business parks in Test Valley and the impact that they have on the economy of the borough, addressing such issues as: Do we have the right mix of industries? Does this match future industrial trends? Do we have a diverse range of employment opportunities? How can we attract more high-tech scientific industry? How has our relationship with Kier operated, and what will influence the forthcoming renewal of this agreement? What is likely to be the future of Plot 90?

Hampshire County Council Highways projects within local communities (19 April 2023) – Developing an understanding of how HCC Highways prioritises projects and funding for schemes within local communities and how this could link to the wider context of TVBCs place-based approach.

OSCOM-sponsored Workshops

OSCOM-sponsored Workshop on New Neighbourhoods (23 May 2022 at Longstock Village Hall) - An opportunity for members to contribute thoughts and opinions to the report which is compiling and analysing the lessons learnt from the planning and establishment of Test Valley's new housing estates.

OSCOM-sponsored Workshops on the Joint Municipal Waste Strategy (28 April 2023)– An interactive discussion at which the Environment Act requirements for waste collection were examined, together with the interpretation of the Act to be adopted in Test Valley and the likely timescales involved.

OSCOM-sponsored Briefing on Deliberative Events (3 November 2022) The briefing was to inform members of the purpose of the four Deliberative Engagement workshops which has been arranged for the weekends in November. Three geographically positioned workshops (King's Somborne, Romsey, Andover), with 35 invited participants discussed questions, led by the Involve Foundation and supported by trained facilitators; A final workshop was held in the last weekend of November, involving up to 15 participants from the earlier workshops to create statements which formed the recommendations to Council on 5 April 2023. The outcomes of the workshop helped to develop the Council's strategic objectives to create a new Corporate Plan to cover 2023 to 2027.

OSCOM-sponsored Workshop on the Performance of the Revised Planning Committee Structures and the Preliminary Summary Conclusions of the New Neighbourhoods Report (4 October at Kings Somborne Village Hall)

OSCOM-sponsored meeting on Corporate Plan (2 March 2023) – A presentation by the Head of Strategy of Innovation to brief members on the outcomes of the deliberative engagement work and the emerging draft priorities of the new Corporate Plan. The session provided members an opportunity to discuss and provide feedback on the draft plan ahead of it being considered for approval by Full Council in April 2023.

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

Items and Meetings

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had a busy workload with responsibilities across the Council and beyond. Committee meetings have continued to be held on a six weekly cycle but this reduction in frequency does mean that agendas are very full with a wide range of topics. The move to a six-weekly cycle has better facilitated the Council's business and aligned it with the financial deadlines.

Council at its meeting on 6 April 2022 resolved to introduce a stand alone Audit Committee to monitor and make decisions in respect of work relating to the audit. Some of the responsibilities were therefore transferred to the Audit Committee such as agreeing the Annual Audit Report and Risk Management.

There have been 7 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:

- Corporate Action Plan Annual Review
- Progress of the development of the Corporate Plan 2023 to 2027
- Draft Fees and Charges
- Cost of Living
- Work of the Test Valley Community Safety Group
- Update on Climate Emergency Action Plan (2020)
- Referral of Planning Applications to Committee
- Authority's Monitoring Report 2021-2022
- New Ways of Working
- Review of Area Planning Committees
- Regeneration of Andover and Romsey town centres
- Green Economy update

Presentations

Regeneration – The Regeneration Manager gave a presentation on regeneration in both Andover and Romsey. The presentation covered the progress headlines including;

- Details of place brand in Andover
- 6 public realm design schemes in Andover
- Feasibility work (Bus Station in Romsey)
- Crosfield Hall options appraisal (Romsey)
- Engagement with partners such as Romsey Future, landowners, Aldi, Crosfield Hall users and sport/leisure providers in Romsey
- Phasing in Andover and Romsey

Funding will be sought via CIL/S106/NHB, TVBC site disposals together with discussions with partners such as Hampshire County Council, EM3 LEP, Homes England, One Public Estate and Arts Council England.

New Ways of Working – The Head of Strategy and Innovation gave an update to the Committee on the New Ways of Working project. This aims to deliver a programme which will modernise working practice across the organisation, focusing on satisfying the demands of residents, communities and members. It aims to introduce flexibility while retaining performance targets and meeting strategic priorities.

Climate Emergency and Countryside Portfolio Holder Presentation - Presentation on village sustainability. Councillor Johnston presented details of the demographics of rural areas as well as information on the rural economy, housing needs and support available to communities in rural areas from the Council.

Portfolio Reviews

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has continued to review Portfolio Holders and their portfolios. The approach adopted in 2021 has increased efficiency by focussing on specific aspects of each portfolio and targeting questions 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 sought 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. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has informally appointed Portfolio Coordinators who advise the Committee on the most appropriate area for scrutiny within each portfolio, and propose the general form of questioning which will be used on the day.

Finance and Resources Portfolio – Focussing on Investment Properties – the presentation provided members with an overview of the council’s approach to managing its investment property portfolio and the implications that the rental income from the portfolio has on the Council’s overall budget.

Leader’s annual review of the Corporate Action Plan - The Leader gave his annual update on the council’s Corporate Action Plan (CAP) 2019-23 ‘Growing Our Potential’. During the last year, the Council had made significant progress towards its strategic aims, through the delivery of the projects set out in the year-three Corporate Action Plan. The new Corporate Action Plan was out for consultation and the responses analysed and worked into the new Corporate Plan for 2023-2027.

Democracy and Governance Portfolio – Focussing on the Council's IT strategy, this included:

- Background of the IT shared service including governance arrangements
- Desktop equipment and officer access to systems
- Description of systems and applications and how they are delivered
- General data protection regulations compliance and data retention
- Hardware and server estate details including backup arrangements and data replication.
- Cyber security and resilience
- Insight as to what might be expect within a future IT strategy

Panels

Budget Panel – The Budget Panel, led by Cllr Mathews and more recently by Cllr Neal, met 3 times during the last municipal year. The Panel looked at the revenue outturn position for 2021/22 and reviewed the Council’s reserves position at 31 March 2022 and considered the biggest factors affecting the budget-setting process for 2023/24. The panel also considered the revenue budget position for the first four months of the 2022/23 financial year together with the main assumptions that will drive the Medium Term Financial Strategy and set out some potential options for closing the budget gap that have already been identified.

Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill Panel – The panel led by Cllr Lodge emerged in response to a Council motion. It had met four times during 2021/22 with the final considerations and conclusions being presented to the Committee in May 2022. At the time of the final meeting of the panel the CEE Bill was due its second reading in the House of Commons, however this was delayed and eventually disappeared from parliamentary business. Despite this, the Panel had investigated, as best it could: the connections between the Bill and other existing legislation; how the Bill might influence our Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP) and other Test Valley issues; what its implications might be for deliberative democracy; and whether the panel could recommend that the Council supports the Bill. As the Bill was no longer progressing it was recommended that the work of the Panel be concluded and the Bill not supported. The Panel did however highlight elements of the Bill which it could support and which might add value to the existing CEAP, notably its commitment to biodiversity.

Enforcement Panel - A review, led by Cllr Burley, has been undertaken to review how the Council delivers its planning enforcement service. The key points of focus were to understand the legislative and policy framework in which the service operates, including when it is expedient to take enforcement action and how the public interest test is considered in each case. The panel also looked at how the Council's service compares to other local authorities in terms of measuring performance, resourcing and costs, as well as going on to consider the effectiveness of the service in relation to communications with members, parish councils and other stakeholders. Training opportunities and support for parties interested in planning enforcement were also considered. The panel will report to Overview and Scrutiny at its meeting in April 2023 outlining key recommendations for consideration.

Communications Panel - This panel, led by Councillor Brooks, reviewed communications to and from the Council and between members and staff. Members explored a range of different communications methods and approaches. The scope of the panel included a review of corporate communications, including social media, the website and press, member communications, and communications direct from services, including letters to residents. The panel concluded a number of proposals that should be considered as the council develops its onward approach to communications.

S106/Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Panel – The panel led by Cllr Hamilton, reviewed how S106 (S106) and Community Infrastructure Level funds have been utilised between 2016 and 2022. The panel concluded that there were robust systems in place to ensure that funding is secured, allocated and spent, additional information in the form of a briefing note would help to ensure that all members have a full understanding of the processes involved in securing CIL and S106 and that training should be provided to all members following the elections. This would ensure that members better understand how to access funding within their area and help deliver infrastructure for their communities.

Revision of the OSCOM Handbook - A small panel has taken on the task of revising the Handbook in order to reflect the additional processes involved in: appointing the chairman and vice chairman, the responsibilities introduced for those representing the Council on outside bodies, and the process for scrutinising portfolios, including the role of the Portfolio Coordinator.

Conclusion

This report has described the variety of strategic activities undertaken by the members of Overview and Scrutiny Committee during the present Council year.

These activities have included: the annual away day, roundtable workshops, briefings, 6-weekly Committee meetings (which include work plan reviews), cabinet portfolio reviews, information-gathering presentations, and panels. In addition, the Committee has 'sponsored' several workshops throughout the year, to which all council members have been invited (some of these have been held on-line).

All these events have been well-supported by the Committee's indefatigable, committed and enthusiastic members, who have not only given up many of their afternoons and evenings to carry out this substantial work, but have also provided the ideas and initiatives which have determined our many successes. To all of them, I record my grateful thanks.

I would also like to express my thanks to my Vice Chairman Cllr Jim Neal and to officers Caroline Lovelock and James Moody who have constantly supported all our activities and provided valuable advice and guidance behind the scenes. Thank you too to the numerous officers of the Council who have provided their expertise to our specialist panels and who have addressed the Committee in the course of its work.

Cllr Nicolas Lodge
Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Committee