

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 6th October 2015 at Pippbrook, Dorking from 7.00pm to 8.20pm

Present: Councillors Chris Townsend (Chairman), David Draper (Vice-Chairman), Tim Ashton, Stephen Cooksey, Rosemary Dickson (substitute for Claire Curran), Paula Hancock, Duncan Irvine, Malcolm Ladell, Paul Potter, and Michelle Watson (substitute for Mary Huggins).

Also present: Councillors Chris Hunt, Vivienne Michael, Phillippa Shimmin and Charles Yarwood

33. Minutes

The minutes of the Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 15th September 2015 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

34. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Claire Curran and Mary Huggins.

35. Asset Management Plan

The Committee received an Executive report setting out a new Asset Management Plan for Mole Valley District Council, replacing the previous one dated 2008. Members were asked for their observations or recommendations which would be reported to the Executive during its consideration of the item on 20th October 2015

During the discussion of this report the Committee suggested a number of possible amendments or additions to the Asset Management Plan and it was agreed that these would be suggested as amendments to the Executive. These suggestions included:

- The addition of an appendix listing Council owned assets.
- An expanded explanation of the One Public Estate program, which was a scheme set up by the Government to encourage public bodies to work together to make best use of their assets.
- In section 5.2 – Review and Performance Management it was suggested that the Council's target should also be shown compared to what it was currently achieving.
- In Appendix A of the Asset Management Plan, it was highlighted that the pie chart used to display the different asset types was difficult to interpret in its current format and as such alternative charts/tables should be considered.
- In section 6.4 – Leatherhead Bypass – Potential Development Site, the number of properties that could be provided from the development needed amending as it currently indicated that 500 new home and 200 affordable homes could be provided, when it should be including 200 affordable homes.

It was noted that the Council's Open Spaces Policy would link into the Asset Management Plan and as a result it was questioned how the implementation of this plan had progressed, particularly in regard to allowing residents to decide what events would be suitable for their local open spaces. As this information was not available, it was agreed that it would be fed back to Members outside of the meeting. It was also advised that information on the number of Community Rights to Bid received by the Council would also be provided to Members separately.

In relation to the One Public Estate program it was noted that the Surrey County Council's Local Committee had an Assets Working Group to look at opportunities for joint working on either District or County Council assets. It was suggested that Members should speak to the Chairman of the Local Committee regarding a meeting of this working group.

Apart from the previously mentioned suggestions, on the whole the Committee was happy with the content of the Asset Management Plan and it was suggested that by having a plan in place, even though it was not a statutory requirement reflected well upon the Council.

Resolved: That the comments of the Scrutiny Committee be relayed to the Executive during its consideration of the report on 20th October 2015.

36. Dorking Halls Business Plan

The Committee received an Executive report setting out the Dorking Halls Business Plan. Members were asked for their observations or recommendations which would be reported to the Executive during its consideration of the item on 20th October 2015

It was noted that there had been changes to the catering provision at Dorking Halls with it now being managed in-house. Members were hopeful that this would lead to an improved service, but understood that as this was a recent change it would take time for staff to understand how best to provide the service. As part of the discussion on the catering provision at the Halls, Members noted that the upstairs bar was underutilised at present and felt that there was potential for greater usage of this space during events at the Halls.

It was also noted that the website for Dorking Halls was being redesigned and the new site would be launched in January 2016. It was highlighted that the current online booking facility did not allow people who were part of the Friends of Dorking Halls scheme to purchase discounted tickets. In response, it was advised that officers were aware of this issue and it would be resolved shortly after the new website was launched.

As it was noted that many of the actions contained within the Plan ended in December 2016, it was questioned why this was the case given that the Plan was due to run until 2018. It was advised that many of the actions, such as the possibility of extending the balcony seating in the Grand Hall or extending towards the rear of the building required further work to establish whether they would be feasible to achieve. If a business case could be made, then the actions required to complete these projects would expand beyond December 2016.

Some Members noted concern that they had received feedback from groups receiving concessionary rates for hiring the Halls that they were struggling to afford the fees following a 5% increase for 2015/2016. It was advised Members should encourage groups receiving concessionary rates to contact the management team at Dorking Halls to discuss any issues they had with the hire charge.

Overall Members were very complimentary about the progress that had been made at Dorking Halls over the past few years and agreed that their comments would be conveyed to the Executive during its consideration of the report.

Resolved: That the comments of the Scrutiny Committee be relayed to the Executive during its consideration of the report on 20th October 2015.

37. Housing Allocations Policy

The Committee received an Executive report setting out the Housing Allocations Policy. Members were asked for their comments which would be taken away by the officers and incorporated in a revised version of the report that would be considered by Council on 24 November and Executive on 19 January 2016.

It was noted by Members that although the rural local connection criterion had been well received, the report was suggesting the criteria be amended from villages and settlements to parish areas. The reason for this was to prevent any difficulties that may arise for applicants when available properties fell just outside village boundaries. As an alternative proposal, it was suggested that ward boundaries could be used rather than parishes, as there was often close links between the rural villages that formed wards.

In response to a question about a reference to 'half bedrooms' in the report it was advised that this was used when the bedroom was of a size that would only be suitable for young children. A half bedroom would still be counted as one bedroom when listed as available.

Apart from the suggestion about the rural local connection, the Committee were happy with the report.

Resolved: That the comments of the Committee be noted and used to produce a revised version of the documents, which will be considered by Council on 24 November and Executive on 19 January 2016

38. Wellbeing Strategy

The Committee received an Executive report setting out the Wellbeing Strategy. Members were asked for their observations or recommendations which would be reported to the Executive during its consideration of the item on 20th October 2015.

Members noted that additional maps had been added to the Wellbeing Strategy following comments made by the Scrutiny Committee on 15th September 2016. It was agreed that these enhanced what was already a well written report.

From the discussion, it was agreed that further information would be provided to Members outside of the meeting on road accidents in Mole Valley. It was also agreed that confirmation would be sought from the Walk for Health Coordinator that their work tied into other walking schemes in the district, such as ones organised at Polesden Lacey.

Apart from the aforementioned comments, the Committee were happy with the report.

Resolved: That the comments of the Scrutiny Committee be relayed to the Executive during its consideration of the report on 20th October 2015.

39. Final Report from the Affordable Housing Panel

The Committee received a final report from the Affordable Housing Panel who had been tasked with looking at what the Council could do to support the provision of affordable housing in Mole Valley. The report set out the following four recommendations for the Scrutiny Committee to consider:-

1. That Ward Members continue to be informed of new major planning applications in their area once submitted via the weekly list of planning applications.
2. The Panel recommends that the Local Plan Working Group looks proactively at increasing the proportion of affordable housing provided within a development and also the number of bedrooms in the properties provided.
3. That the Executive undertake further work to assess the viability of the Council building, managing and maintaining affordable housing, particularly in light of the Transform Leatherhead regeneration project, which may provide development opportunities.
4. That sites within the built up area continue to be carefully reviewed as part of the Local Plan making process and sites that come forward for consideration from developers in the meantime are assessed in terms of opportunities for affordable housing be pursued where appropriate.

The Committee were asked to consider these recommendations and decided which they wished to refer to the Executive.

It was noted that the Panel had met on a number of occasions to examine a wide range of information, including meeting with local housing associations and considering reports which set out options used by other local authorities to develop their own affordable housing either by themselves or in partnership. It was highlighted that the Government were due to announce a Housing Bill in autumn 2015 which may have a significant impact on the provision of affordable housing and was something that the Council would have to take when considering how best to support the provision of affordable housing within Mole Valley.

The Committee thanked the Panel for its work and agreed that all the recommendations would be submitted to the Executive for consideration on 20th October when the Scrutiny Committee Chairman presented his update.

Resolved: That the recommendations of the Affordable Housing Panel be submitted to the Executive for consideration.

40. Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2015/2016

The Committee received a copy of its work programme and the Executive Forward Plan for it information.

Resolved: That the Scrutiny Committee work programme and the Executive forward plan are noted.