
Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission (OSMC) Task Group: Council Strategy Refresh 2018/19

Committee considering report:	Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission
Date of Committee:	9 January 2018
Task Group Chairman:	Councillor Ian Morrin
Report Author:	Stephen Chard
Forward Plan Ref:	n/a

1. Purpose of the Report

1.1 To note the Task Group's findings and recommendations.

2. Recommendation

2.1 That the report be noted.

3. Key background documentation

3.1 The minutes of the Task Group's meetings (available from Strategic Support).

Executive Summary

4. Background / the process

4.1 At its meeting on 17 October 2017, the OSMC agreed to form a Task Group to help inform the Council Strategy Refresh 2018/19. Members of the Task Group were agreed as follows:

- Councillor Ian Morrin (Chairman)
- Councillor Jason Collis
- Councillor Lee Dillon
- Councillor Richard Somner

4.2 It was agreed that a 'light touch' review would be undertaken for the refresh. The Task Group reflected on the successes achieved to date, but primarily focused upon the challenges encountered to help inform the 2018/19 refresh. It was acknowledged that the priorities could not be changed, but the Task Group sought to identify areas for added focus for 2018/19.

4.3 During the course of this scrutiny activity the Task Group also had discussions about a number of the priority areas for improvement and whether these would be appropriate for the new Council Strategy. However, the Task Group acknowledged that this line of enquiry would need to wait until the new Strategy was being formulated.

4.4 The Task Group met three times on 27 November 2017, 4 December 2017 and 14 December 2017. It was contributed to by the Chief Executive, Corporate Director (Communities) and the Head of Strategic Support. It was supported by Strategic Support Officers. The Task Group determined that it was not necessary to meet with the Corporate Director (Economy and Environment) as Members were content with the progress being made, and did not identify any particular areas on which to focus, within that Directorate.

5. Findings and Recommendations

5.1 Findings and any recommendations are outlined for each Council Strategy priority. These are for the OSMC to note as the Task Group's findings and recommendations have already been forwarded to the Performance, Research and Consultation Manager with a request that they be incorporated within the refreshed Council Strategy 2015-2019. The refreshed Strategy is scheduled for approval by Council at its meeting on 1 March 2018.

6. Improve Educational Attainment/close the Educational Attainment Gap

6.1 This area of Council activity was given the greatest degree of focus by the Task Group. The targets aligned to closing the attainment gap were acknowledged as ambitious, but Members heard, from the Corporate Director (Communities), that it should continue to be the Council's aspiration to eliminate this gap and aim to enable every child to achieve their best.

6.2 Resource remained in the School Improvement Team for Pupil Premium related activity, but the funding for school improvement work, which was discretionary, has reduced over recent years. However, the team was able to continue to facilitate

school to school support, this had proved successful and was noted as a key factor that impacted on good outcomes at times of school inspection.

- 6.3 The ability to directly influence schools had reduced, i.e. increasing number of academies and this fact would need to be considered when the new Council Strategy was being formulated.
- 6.4 The Corporate Director (Communities) felt it would have been beneficial to retain the resource level from earlier years and target it on particular cohorts. This could have then taken place via a West Berkshire Schools Trust, external to the Local Authority. It was felt that this approach would help to establish a common/shared interest for all schools to collectively make improvements. A potential consideration for the new Strategy, noting however that funding restrictions continue.
- 6.5 A wide range of support activities are being delivered to support disadvantaged pupils' attainment. In terms of Looked After Children, Pupil Premium funding for these children was higher and held centrally.
- 6.6 The Task Group considered that the Executive should consider the following points and their level of priority when refreshing the current Council Strategy and in formulating a new Council Strategy with effect from 2019/20:
- Engagement with vulnerable families at the earliest opportunity is a key success factor to focus on as is access to early years' childcare.
 - Pupil Premium sign up should be encouraged to ensure appropriate support is provided.
 - Community based options to support disadvantaged families and their children should also be prioritised by the Building Communities Together (BCT) Team.
 - Contribution of other services towards attainment levels should be coordinated e.g. housing (security/stability of housing), accessing amenities (transport links etc particularly in rural areas) and security of income (fluctuating income).
 - The Council should continue to focus on closing the educational attainment gap in 2018/19.
 - Consideration should be given on whether the new Council Strategy should include educational attainment targets and, if so, what these should be.
 - The potential to form a West Berkshire Schools Trust should be investigated by the Corporate Director (Communities) and the Head of Education Services.

7. Enable the completion of more affordable housing

- 7.1 As discussed in detail at the OSMC meeting in October 2017, the target set in this area was recognised as being very ambitious. The Task Group noted that the target would likely be reported 'red'. Moving forward into the new Council Strategy, the target would continue to be challenging – 200 affordable housing units per year were required which is the assessed need in the 2016 Strategic Housing Market Assessment.
- 7.2 The Strategy should make reference to joint working with other housing providers which will help towards delivering more affordable units and in addressing homelessness. The Racecourse development was also expected to deliver a large number of units.
- 7.3 Affordable homes were often impacted by issues of viability.

7.4 The Task Group considered that the Executive should consider the following points and their level of priority when refreshing the current Council Strategy and in formulating a new Council Strategy with effect from 2019/20:

- Reference should be made in the Strategy to joint working with other housing providers.
- The Council should increase lobbying of Government to reduce the impact being caused by viability issues.

8. Deliver or enable Key Infrastructure Improvements (Superfast Broadband)

8.1 The Task Group felt that the Council should endeavour to do more to ensure that superfast broadband is in place for all new developments as a way of ensuring access into future years. The Chief Executive agreed to progress this with Planning and the Developers Industry Forum, but it was noted that the Council currently had no direct levers with which to compel developers to put this in place.

8.2 There was strong confidence that 2018/19 targets would be achieved for superfast broadband. In terms of targets for 2019/20 onwards, the Task Group agreed that this would be a point of focus to help inform the new Council Strategy. This would link with the aspirations of the West Berkshire Vision.

8.3 The Task Group considered that the Executive should consider the following points and their level of priority when refreshing the current Council Strategy and in formulating a new Council Strategy with effect from 2019/20:

- The Head of Development and Planning should explore the potential to do more to ensure that superfast broadband is in place for all new developments with the Developers Industry Forum.
- There is a need to focus, for the new Strategy, on appropriate superfast broadband targets.

9. Good at Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults

9.1 The Task Group acknowledged that safeguarding within Children and Family Services had been rated by Ofsted as “Good”. However, maintaining the improvements achieved in this area depended on the continued stability of the workforce.

9.2 The Corporate Director (Communities) felt that there should be a focus on progressing the family safeguarding model which has been introduced to reduce the number of children in the Council’s care.

9.3 As the adult safeguarding activities became statutory more recently than those for children’s services, more is being done to ensure validation processes are working appropriately.

9.4 Delayed Transfers of Care (DToC) remain an issue and therefore an area of focus - peer review is scrutinising this area for the Berkshire West authorities. It is important for Health and Social Care to work together to improve practices and manage financial pressures jointly. A detailed DToC review had already been undertaken by a Scrutiny Task Group and the response to this review would be reported to the

Executive in due course. The need to adhere to Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) is also a challenge in terms of increasing demand pressures.

- 9.5 In addition to the education attainment gap, health inequalities, particularly for disadvantaged families needed to be focused on. Benchmarking of similar local authorities would assist the work of identifying how to close gaps moving forward.
- 9.6 The Task Group considered that the Executive should consider the following points and their level of priority when refreshing the current Council Strategy and in formulating a new Council Strategy with effect from 2019/20:
- Focus on progressing the family safeguarding model to help reduce the number of children taken into the Council's care.
 - Need to conduct benchmarking activity in order to be able to use this data to be able to help to understand how to close gaps in education and health & wellbeing for disadvantaged families.

10. Support communities to do more to help themselves

- 10.1 The Task Group acknowledged that the work of this relatively new team was evolving. There was a need for this team to be more focused and be responsible for a set of clearly defined outcomes, potentially in liaison with other service areas. This will be particularly important in formulating the new Council Strategy.
- 10.2 The roll out of the devolution prospectus will be another key aspect of supporting communities to do more to help themselves.
- 10.3 The Task Group considered that the Executive should consider the following points and their level of priority when refreshing the current Council Strategy and in formulating a new Council Strategy with effect from 2019/20:
- The need to gain an improved understanding of what areas of activity communities want to take on themselves and how they can assist the Council, needs to be developed in liaison with all service areas and relevant external partners.

11. Become an even more effective Council

- 11.1 The Task Group acknowledged that this priority area for improvement lacked overall focus and appeared to have a number of random actions attached to it. Whilst it was noted that the Council, compared to its statistical neighbours, was efficient in terms of its overall costs there was a requirement to ensure that further work was undertaken to identify those services which could need improving.
- 11.2 The importance of valuing and recognising the workforce is a key factor in developing a modern and flexible workforce. The targets attached to this area of activity needed greater focus.
- 11.3 Effective budget management was highlighted as a success during a time of significant financial pressure and challenge.
- 11.4 The Task Group considered that the Executive should consider the following points and their level of priority when refreshing the current Council Strategy and in formulating a new Council Strategy with effect from 2019/20:

- To investigate and highlight which areas of Council activity are not as efficient as possible in comparison to other similar areas with a view to identifying areas for improvement.
- To heighten the focus on developing a modern and flexible workforce via recognising the value of enabling the workforce.

12. General Points for the new Council Strategy:

- 12.1 It is envisaged that the new Council Strategy will be approved by Full Council in June/July 2019 in order to take account of the results of the District Council election results. The Task Group will therefore need to reconvene at an appropriate time in order to contribute to this work.
- 12.2 A wide range of benchmarking information needs to be taken into account when producing the new Council Strategy and setting its priorities/targets.
- 12.3 The way in which progress will be measured against priorities and targets needs to be more transparent moving forward, i.e. in making a RAG judgement.
- 12.4 In the delivery of all the Council's priorities an approach needs to be identified to reflect that all priorities are the responsibility of the entire Council (e.g. not only individual Directorates). The way in which different service areas are working together for the benefit of West Berkshire's residents should be better evidenced.
- 12.5 The Council should continue to strive to achieve aspirational targets. Mention of this aim should be made within the foreword to the new Strategy.

