

GLRA and Wescott Ward Councillor meeting 10th January 2019

Members of the GLRA Committee (GLRAC) met with Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) Member for Wescott Ward & Council Leader, Councillor Julian McGhee Sumner (JMS). Councillor Oliver Whittle (OW) sent apologies.

Councillor Accountability and Transparency

JMS summarised his key policies as outlined in his address to the Council on his election as leader on 14th December 2018.

JMS emphasised the duty of the council to focus on serving the interests of residents and to be seen to be managing priorities appropriately. He outlined his intent to set each Executive Member five objective targets. GLRAC members suggested that he should consider reporting periodically the performance against targets. JMS said that he would consider this.

JMS also proposed to set objective targets for the top level of Officer – the five Directors. Performance against these targets would control the payment of bonuses.

He will reduce the number of separate payments that Executive Councillors receive. If they fill multiple roles as Executives, chairs of Committees and Directors of WBC owned companies, they will be entitled to a single payment only, in addition to the annual allowance that every WBC councillor receives.

Responding to a suggestion that WBC needed to publicise its achievements, JMS said he would institute a new Communications Strategy, so that residents have a clearer view of WBC policies and delivery performance.

Major Projects

Major projects like the Wokingham Town Centre Regeneration elements are to be subject to reviews of cost against budget and delivery on time. These would take place on completion and annually. GLRAC members again suggested that these should be published. JMS would consider this, bearing in mind any legitimate commercial confidentiality issues.

Peach Place premises had attracted strong interest from potential occupants. The current outlook was that occupancy would be high. Announcements would be made as lease agreements were completed.

Local Development Planning & Plan Integrity

JMS expressed a strong WBC preference for large scale housing development to be concentrated on the establishment of new settlements, like Grazeley, other than a continuation of boundary development of existing developments. The South Wokingham SDL would likely be the last of the major boundary schemes.

WBC had strengthened its legal representation. It had become more successful in winning appeals against applications on land outside the current Local Plan designations – 6/6 recently. WBC had defended successfully its position that it had an adequate land supply; well in excess of the 5 year minimum. However, it was still subject to the decisions of individual government Inspectors when they reviewed appeals.

Finance

Until recently, WBC had been faced with a strong possibility that not only 100% of its business rates would be remitted to central government but that it would have to make a further financial contribution - a negative Revenue Support Grant. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is currently more sympathetic to removing this financial threat to local authorities and there will be no negative RSG in FY 2019/20. Graham Ebers continues as Director of Finance.

Public Art in Wokingham

GLRAC had expressed concerns that public art should play a more prominent role in the marketing of Wokingham as an attractive destination. JMS suggested that we continue to work with Chris Bowring, Deputy Executive Member for Regeneration on proposals.

Other Matters

Vandalism: CCTV infrastructure is in place to support cameras when appropriate.

Heathrow Flight Path proposals: WBC has responded to the consultation.