

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

8 June 2021

- * Councillor Paul Spooner (Chairman)
- * Councillor James Walsh (Vice-Chairman)

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| * Councillor Chris Blow | * Councillor George Potter |
| * Councillor Colin Cross | Councillor Tony Rooth |
| * Councillor Guida Esteves | * Councillor Will Salmon |
| * Councillor Graham Eyre | * Councillor Deborah Seabrook |
| * Councillor Angela Goodwin | * Councillor Fiona White |

*Present

Councillors Tim Anderson (Lead Councillor for Resources), Joss Bigmore (Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery), Julia McShane (Lead Councillor for Community), John Redpath (Lead Councillor for Economy), Maddy Redpath, John Rigg (Lead Councillor for Regeneration), and James Steel (Lead Councillor for Environment) were also in attendance.

OS1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

An apology was submitted on behalf of Councillor Tony Rooth.

OS2 LOCAL CODE OF CONDUCT AND DECLARATION OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS

There were no declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests.

With reference to item 6, Report of an investigation by VWV LLP appointed by the Monitoring Officer for Guildford Borough Council relating to the Garden Village at the former Wisley Airfield, the Chairman indicated that he would participate in discussion but that due to his past association with the project while Leader of the Council the item would be chaired by the Vice-Chairman.

OS3 MINUTES

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 2 March 2021 were approved.

OS4 RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery introduced the item. He referred to the possible ending of restrictions on 21 June and advised the meeting that the vaccination centre at G Live would close at the end of July. The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery indicated that sites for a new vaccination centre in Guildford were being explored and he would keep councillors updated.

The Managing Director gave a presentation on the current COVID-19 situation and the Council's response, beginning with an update on local cases. The Committee was advised that the COVID-19 infection rate in Surrey was 32.6 per 100,000, lower than the national rate of 36.6 per 100,000 but higher than the South East rate of 25.3 per 100,000, while Guildford's rate had risen in the last week to 14.8 per 100,000. The Managing Director advised that in the previous week there had been 390 new cases in Surrey, of which 22 were in Guildford. The meeting was informed that as at 8 June there were 2,913 registered COVID-related deaths in Surrey, with 246 in Guildford.

The Managing Director advised the meeting of key COVID-19 issues: the Government road map to the removal of COVID restrictions; support and services for the most vulnerable; business support and grants; Council services; staffing matters; and vaccination and testing. The meeting was advised that the services at the Hive and the community fridge had re-started. The Managing Director confirmed that the intention was to re-open the reception area of the Council offices at the end of June if Government guidance permitted. In addition, the Committee was advised that the model for lateral flow testing across Surrey had changed from fixed sites to mobile ones that could be deployed as necessary.

In response to a question about hesitancy towards the coronavirus vaccine, the Senior Specialist Public Health indicated that the reasons among Council staff varied.

The Chairman thanked the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery and the Managing Director and other officers for attending.

OS5 LEAD COUNCILLOR QUESTION SESSION

The Chairman welcomed the Lead Councillor for Community and Housing and reminded the meeting of Councillor McShane's main areas of responsibility: Health; Wellbeing; Access and Disability; Safety; Grants and voluntary services; Careline; Handyperson; Care and Repair; Housing; Homelessness; and Housing standards (including Houses in Multiple Occupation and the private rented sector).

In reply to a question about the provision of GP services in the Guildford urban area, the Lead Councillor for Community and Housing referred to the issues discussed at the Committee's December 2020 meeting with Guildford and Waverley Integrated Care Partnership [minute OS45 details]. The Lead Councillor for Community and Housing indicated that prior to the pandemic the NHS were working to create new surgeries in the north of Guildford. She suggested that discussions with the NHS about progressing the pre-pandemic plans for GP provision might resume later this year. The Lead Councillor for Community and Housing offered to return at a later date to update the Committee on the progress of discussions with the NHS.

In response to a question about the provision of GP services for Ash and Ash Vale, the Lead Councillor for Community and Housing informed the meeting that she had been advised by the NHS that existing practices would be used to absorb patients from the new housing developments in Ash and Ash Vale. The Lead Councillor for Community and Housing offered to return to the Committee to provide an update on the situation.

The Lead Councillor for Community and Housing was asked to comment on the latest performance indicators in her area of responsibility, including the lack of data for some indicators. In response, the Lead Councillor for Community and Housing confirmed that operational pressures had led to non-reporting in some frontline areas, but the data had been recorded and was available. She explained that indicators relating to the number of jobs completed by Care and Repair and the Handyperson services would in future be the responsibility of Community Services; performance indicators relating to adaptations in public sector home, empty homes, and statutory nuisance investigations would be reported by Environmental and Regulatory Services. The Director of Service Delivery confirmed the importance of performance data for decision-making and service delivery.

The Lead Councillor for Community and Housing indicated that the services in her area of responsibility continued during the pandemic, including investigating complaints of potentially illegal evictions and HMO (houses in multiple occupation) and housing inspections. In

addition, the meeting was advised that during the pandemic there had been increased demand for care services and community wellbeing support services.

In reply to a question about her current priorities, the Lead Councillor for Community and Housing spoke of community services, improving tenant services and the existing housing stock, and bringing forward new housing developments.

With reference to press coverage of the topic, a member of the Committee asked for an update on the number of empty Council properties and plans to make them available to rent. The Lead Councillor for Community and Housing indicated that in the previous year there had been 95 Council properties vacant but unavailable to rent. She indicated that some Council properties had remained empty for longer than usual due to the COVID restrictions delaying moves and building works. The Director of Service Delivery indicated that, regardless of the impact of COVID, the Council's housing maintenance could be improved.

In reply to a question about the carbon footprint of the Council's housing stock, the Lead Councillor for Community and Housing stated that the Council reported annually to the government on the energy efficiency of its housing stock. She outlined planned expenditure to improve the Council's housing stock and indicated that details were provided within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) business plan.

A member of the Committee questioned a proposed reduction in the Council's grant funding of Ash Citizens Advice (CA) and remarked on the value of the services provided by CA to vulnerable residents, the increased demand for CA services during the pandemic, and the increased costs of providing CA services during the pandemic. The Lead Councillor for Community and Housing indicated that discussions about funding for Ash CA had begun in 2020 when the changed financial situation for the Council had become apparent. She indicated that the decision on funding of Ash CA, above £75,000 already confirmed as to be paid, was subject to approval by the Executive. The Lead Councillor for Community and Housing noted that CA Ash and CA Guildford were looking at ways to work more closely together.

The Chairman thanked the Lead Councillor for Community and Housing for attending and answering questions.

OS6 REPORT OF AN INVESTIGATION BY VWV LLP APPOINTED BY THE MONITORING OFFICER FOR GUILDFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL RELATING TO THE GARDEN VILLAGE AT THE FORMER WISLEY AIRFIELD

The Vice-Chairman, Councillor James Walsh, took the Chair for the item.

The Vice-Chairman explained the background to the item and asked members of the Committee to focus on the issues relevant to the investigation, rather than wider issues relating to the Local Plan and the merits of specific sites.

After brief remarks from the Council's Monitoring Officer and Mr Heath [a consultant with the law firm VWV and author of the report submitted to the Committee], the Vice-Chairman invited the Lead Councillor for Economy to address the meeting.

The Lead Councillor for Economy suggested that the investigation and report into issues relating to the development of the former Wisley airfield, including the bid to Government submitted jointly by the Council and private sector partners, had taken nineteen months to reach the Committee. He suggested that the investigation and its report would not allay concerns about the Council held by residents of Ockham and

Wisley. The Lead Councillor for Economy suggested that, in contrast to the conclusion of the report, further action was required by the Council in relation to the issues raised.

The Lead Councillor for Economy suggested that the Council had overstated its own role in the production of the Wisley Garden Village Bid document and sought to downplay the part played by the site owners in the bid. He indicated that the document was biased and contained statements unlikely to have been authored by any council. He advocated that in future the Council should be open, transparent, and precise about who prepares its documents. In addition, he suggested that the then Leader of the Council had misled Council in December 2018 about the primary authorship of the bid document. In conclusion, the Lead Councillor for Economy voiced concerns about the public's perception of bias or influence if members of the Executive met developers and were also members of the Planning Committee.

Mr Heath advised the Committee that his investigation had noted the Council could have been more transparent in making available the information it held, the need for involvement of ward councillors, and the need for the Council's Forward Plan to work effectively.

A member of the Committee suggested that the investigation had not addressed key concerns; namely, why the lack of transparency about the role of the developer in preparing both the bid document and a supporting letter, and why the bid was so late that the overview and scrutiny call-in process was not feasible. In response, Mr Heath referred to an issue raised within his report about the failure of the Forward Plan to give warning that the decision on the Garden Village bid would be made and his recommendation concerning the Committee ensuring better use of the Forward Plan. In addition, Mr Heath indicated that Council officers had maintained that they had controlled the final content of the bid document.

A member of the Committee referred to the damage to the Council's reputation from the episode. She suggested that Executive members should have known who was responsible for producing the bid document and that officers involved would have known the timescale to facilitate scrutiny or a possible call-in. The member of the Committee indicated the need to minute meetings between the Council and private sector partners.

Another member of the Committee suggested the actions of the Council in relation to the garden village bid appeared corrupted by the interests of the owner of the former Wisley airfield site. He questioned the lack of investigation of the supporting letter submitted by the LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership) and whether or not the Council had paid partners for their involvement in the bid preparation. In response, Mr Heath confirmed that the issue of payments for the bid preparation was reviewed by a previous investigation and was outside the terms of reference of his report.

The Vice-Chairman invited the Chairman of the Committee to respond to the discussion. The Chairman welcomed the investigation and report, and suggested its findings aligned with those of a previous report into the garden village bid. He indicated that the preparation of a garden village bid for the former Wisley airfield site was rushed at its deadline due to a failure to manage the project. He suggested ward members should have been more involved in the bid, indicated the importance of using the Forward Plan, and upheld the principle of seeking information from other stakeholders and the value in Lead Councillors speaking to developers alongside officers.

The meeting was advised that the Council's Corporate Governance task group was looking at transparency issues and would be an appropriate forum to review issues identified by the Committee.

RESOLVED: That the Council's Corporate Governance task group be requested to review the following matters:

- (I) the Council's Constitution regarding the definition and processes for 'Key Decisions' so that any bids, tenders or other activities that may lead to key decisions in future are included in the Forward Plan or communicated to relevant Ward Councillors in a sufficiently timely manner for transparency;
- (II) how we can ensure that any meetings involving lead members, officers and the private sector are minuted and available in the public domain; and
- (III) how we can ensure that any failings in transparency or procedure are communicated to the public by the Council as soon as identified.

OS7 ANNUAL REPORT: MODERN SLAVERY MOTION

The Chairman took the Chair for the remainder of the meeting.

The Senior Specialist Procurement introduced the item and updated the Committee on progress implementing measures against modern slavery as laid out in the report submitted to the Committee. The Committee was advised that further measures would be taken, such as producing an ethical procurement statement, a supplier code of conduct, and an annual modern slavery statement.

The Lead Councillor for Resources praised the measures enacted at the Council against modern slavery and suggested it was very unlikely the Council could buy goods or services from companies involved in modern slavery.

In reply to a question from a member of the Committee, the Senior Specialist Procurement undertook to provide information on measures the Council could take against companies that leased Council properties and were involved in modern slavery.

RESOLVED: That the annual update on Modern Slavery submitted to the Committee, including the further measures which can be undertaken in order to strengthen the Council's response to Modern Slavery, be noted.

OS8 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman advised the meeting of a request from a member of the Committee that a date be obtained to enable the Outcome of investigations into Guildford Crematorium stack height item to be scheduled.

RESOLVED: That, subject to the scheduling of the Outcome of investigations into Guildford Crematorium stack height item, the work plan as presented in the report submitted to the Committee be approved.

The meeting finished at 9.05 pm

Signed

Date

Chairman

