

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

13 July 2021

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

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

*Present

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

OS17 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

An apology was submitted on behalf of Councillor Will Salmon.

[Councillor Colin Cross resigned membership of the Committee on 6 July 2021.]

OS18 LOCAL CODE OF CONDUCT AND DECLARATION OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS

There were no declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests.

OS19 MINUTES

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 29 June 2021 were approved.

OS20 RESPONSE TO COVID-19 – UPDATE

The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery introduced the item. He referred to the relaxation of COVID restrictions after 19 July and the responsibility of individuals to protect themselves and others. He stated that the link between hospitalisations and deaths remained and that hospitalisations were increasing.

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 188 per 100,000, lower than the national rate of 267.1 per 100,000 and the South East rate of 199.9 per 100,000, while Guildford's rate was 158.4 per 100,000. The Managing Director advised that in the previous week there had been 2,250 new cases in Surrey, of which 236 were in Guildford. The meeting was informed that as at 11 July there were 2,921 registered COVID-related deaths in Surrey, with 247 in Guildford.

The Managing Director advised the meeting of three key COVID-19 issues: the Government Roadmap; vaccination; and Council offices. The meeting was advised that most legal restrictions to control Covid 19 will be lifted when England enters Step 4 of the roadmap on 19 July. The Managing Director indicated that although there would be a greater emphasis on personal responsibility, cautious guidance would remain. He indicated

that in September the Government would undertake a review into whether to continue or strengthen public and business guidance, including on face coverings, and would review remaining regulations. The Managing Director advised that the Council would continue to work with the Surrey Multi-Information Group to coordinate and share public health messages after 19 July, including government advice and guidance.

The Committee was informed that the reasons for an area of lower vaccine take-up in Guildford town centre were unclear. The meeting was advised that Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) were leading on communications for low take-up of vaccinations. In addition, the Managing Director informed the Committee that to ensure no interruption in the vaccination programme, between the closure of the G Live hub and the opening of the Artington Park and Ride site, George Abbot school might be used.

The Managing Director stated that the Council offices would be opening back up from 19 July. He indicated that all residents should access services online where possible and register for the MyGuildford area of the Council's website

In reply to a suggestion that those involved in the pandemic response locally be thanked at an appropriate time, the Leader of the Council referred to the Mayor's Awards for COVID heroes and the difficulty of timing such events before the pandemic had ended.

In response to a question from a member of the Committee, the Managing Director indicated that residents would not be turned away if they went to the reception at the Council offices at Millmead after 19 July.

RESOLVED: That an update on the response to COVID-19 be submitted to the Committee's next meeting.

OS21 QUESTION SESSION WITH LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

The Chair reminded the meeting of the areas of responsibility of the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery, including Customer Service; Future Guildford; Governance including corporate Health and Safety; Human Resources; Partnerships; Web Services; Corporate Strategy; and Communications.

Members asked questions relating to poor customer service experienced by residents contacting the Council, including long delays in answering phone calls and emails. In addition, the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery stated that the recent level of customer service and performance from the Council's call centre was below expected standards. He suggested that the situation had been caused by a combination of the amount of planning applications, issues with bin collections, hardware issues, and difficulties recruiting to the customer service centre and delays in training staff. The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery advised the meeting that use of Salesforce and MyGuildford would improve efficiency as more queries would then be dealt with online rather than through phone calls. The meeting was advised that matters relating to the Council's customer services were advertised through methods including press release, social media, and email. The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery indicated that the desired level of customer service would not be achieved before early autumn. He stated that customer services issues were common to other local authorities at the current time. The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery indicated that temporary agency staff had been hired to help address the backlog of planning applications.

The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery welcomed a suggestion for the Council's website to be used to highlight that customer service phone lines are busier than usual and advise residents of the actions being taken to address the situation.

With reference to the Council's customer service call centre, a member of the Committee asked for details of call abandon rates and average wait times and advocated the establishment of a baseline to measure progress. In response, the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery indicated that suitable performance indicators for customer services were in the process of being finalised. He suggested that using current levels as a baseline would not be useful.

A member of the Committee suggested the value in a mailshot to all residents to advise of MyGuildford and the Council's move to online services. The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery indicated that the take-up of MyGuildford would be monitored and a mailshot then considered if necessary.

In reply to questions, the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery indicated the difficulties of identifying the indirect impact of the pandemic on customer service at the Council. He advised that consolidating customer service in one team was always likely to encounter staff training issues.

Members asked about the reduction in the opening hours of the Council's customer service call centre to 10am till 4pm. In response, the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery informed the meeting that the reduced hours were to facilitate training of call centre staff.

In reply to a question, the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery advised the Committee that while the Council's collaboration with Waverley Borough Council would improve the future resilience of both organisations, both councils were currently experiencing similar issues.

A member of the Committee questioned the user-friendliness for residents of the transfer of existing queries into the new MyGuildford system. The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery indicated that he would discuss the matter with the Head of Customer, Case and Parking.

The Head of Customer, Case and Parking introduced himself to the Committee and advised of progress with the Council's customer service.

In response to a question on the Council's Future Guildford transformation programme, the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery praised the programme. He indicated that embedding the change in working culture envisaged as part of Future Guildford had been delayed by the pandemic. The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery indicated that the success of Future Guildford would be more apparent at the end of the year. He advised the Committee that staff and councillors needed to embrace the new culture and ways of working of Future Guildford and that staff returning to spend half their time in the office was important to help change the culture of the organisation.

In light of the comments from the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery, the Chair advised that the scheduling of an update on the implementation of Future Guildford, currently set for consideration by the Committee in September 2021, would be re-visited.

In reply to a question, the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery indicated that community governance reviews for unparished areas had not been considered as part of the discussions around increased collaboration with Waverley Borough Council. He indicated he had no view at this stage on the creation of a town council for Guildford.

The Chair requested that an update on the collaboration between the Council and Waverley Borough Council be provided to each meeting of the Committee.

The Chair thanked the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery for attending and answering questions.

OS22 LEAD COUNCILLOR QUESTION SESSION

The Chair welcomed the Lead Councillor for Regeneration and reminded the meeting of Councillor Rigg's areas of responsibility: Town Centre MasterPlan; Infrastructure; Major Projects; and Strategic Asset Management.

In reply to a question about the Council's policy relating to 5G masts and balancing the needs of connectivity and amenity, the Lead Councillor for Regeneration advised the Committee of the relevant policy (Guildford Borough Local Plan: Strategy and Sites (LPSS) D1) and the likely future classification of 5G masts by the government as permitted development. He informed the meeting that question fell within the portfolio of the Deputy Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Climate Change.

In response to a question about the delay to the planning application for Weyside Urban Village, the Lead Councillor for Regeneration indicated that the Council was waiting replies from statutory consultees.

In response to a question from a Committee member, the Lead Councillor for Regeneration advised the meeting on future steps for the Guildford Economic Regeneration (GER) Programme.

In reply to another request, the Lead Councillor for Regeneration updated the meeting on the progress of the North Street development. He indicated that Councillors would soon receive an informal presentation on the scheme and that the developer hoped to submit a planning application later this year. Another member of the Committee questioned the amount of affordable housing on the site and the value of public consultation by developers. The Lead Councillor for Regeneration noted that the developer of the St Mary's Wharf site was under no obligation to provide extra information to Councillors or to undertake extra stages of public consultation.

The Lead Councillor for Regeneration advised the meeting that the Walnut Bridge project had been delayed. He undertook to provide a completion date and informed the meeting he believed the project was on budget.

The Chair thanked the Lead Councillor for Regeneration for attending.

OS23 UPDATE REPORT: SPEND ON CONSULTANTS AND AGENCY WORKERS

The Lead Councillor for Resources introduced the report submitted to the Committee. He drew attention to the off contract spend on agency staff, the reduction in expenditure on consultants (excluding consultancy spend on corporate projects), and the definition of consultancy expenditure used within the Council and the report.

The Director of Resources indicated that the report submitted to the Committee provided an update on matters considered by the Committee in October 2020. She confirmed the

implementation of more robust governance arrangements for projects and programmes and tighter procurement rules. The Committee was advised of difficulties recruiting staff and a reliance on agency staff to fill posts.

The Director of Resources advised that the reported increased figures on expenditure for consultants were due to a number of capital projects entering the implementation stage and miscoding of construction costs and professional fees. She suggested improvements to future reports to the Committee could include a tighter definition of consultancy costs and separate reporting of major project costs.

In reply to a question about the public's likely perception of the Council's spending on capital projects and its reduced spending on Council services, the Lead Councillor for Resources referred to the need to balance the revenue budget and the Council's ability to fund capital projects by borrowing or through grants.

A member of the Committee asked about the increase in revenue spending on agency staff and the Director of Resources advised of difficulties recruiting permanent staff.

A member queried the Council's shortage of planning services staff. In response, the Director of Service Delivery advised that additional agency staff had been recruited to improve the situation. He confirmed that such issues were common in local authorities due to an increase in planning applications.

In reply to a question about the value for money of the Corporate Temporary Staffing contract with Comensura, the Director for Resources advised that Comensura had been commissioned following a procurement process that included a benchmarking of agency fees.

A member of the Committee proposed that future reporting of the Council's spend on consultants should include the outcomes expected and those actually delivered. The Director of Resources suggested that the purpose of the report to the Committee might be to identify the use of consultancy and agency staff for roles where permanent Council staff should be used.

Members discussed a leaflet produced by a political party and distributed within the Borough which highlighted the increased total spend on consultants by the Council. Members of the Committee and the Lead Councillor for Resources discussed the merit in the Committee noting any misrepresentations in such a publication. At the request of the Chair, to avoid a perceived conflict of interest the Vice-Chair chaired the conclusion of the Committee's discussion about the claims within the leaflet concerning Council spending. During this discussion, the Director of Resources drew attention to section 3.2 of the report submitted to the Committee and the headline increases in agency workers spend and consultants spend compared to the previous year. With reference to the total spend on consultants, members of the Committee noted that the amalgamation of revenue and capital spending, such as occurred within section 3.2 of the report submitted to the Committee, was misleading and could lead to misinterpretations.

RESOLVED: (I) That the Senior Specialist Procurement and her team be commended for the improvements achieved.

(II) That the 2020/21 spend position and the update on the recommendations which have been implemented since be noted.

(III) That the next report to the Committee on progress with agency workers spend and consultant spend be scheduled for the next financial year.

At the conclusion of the item, the Chair resumed chairing the meeting.

OS24 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT, 2020-21

The Chair introduced the item. Councillors had no comments on the report.

RESOLVED: (I) That the report submitted to the Committee be commended to Full Council as the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report, 2020-21.

(II) That the current rules relating to call in or urgency provisions remain unchanged.

The meeting finished at 10.00 pm

Signed

Date

Chairman