

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

29 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 Paul Abbey, Julia McShane (Lead Councillor for Community and Housing), and Redpath (Lead Councillor for Economy) were also in attendance.

### **OS9 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

There were no apologies for absence.

### **OS10 LOCAL CODE OF CONDUCT AND DECLARATION OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS**

There were no declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests.

### **OS11 MINUTES**

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 8 June 2021 were approved.

### **OS12 RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

The Director of Service Delivery 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 67 per 100,000, lower than the national rate of 116.9 per 100,000 and the same as the South East rate (of 67.3 per 100,000), while Guildford's rate in the last week had fallen to 50.3 per 100,000. The Director of Service Delivery advised that in the previous week there had been 801 new cases in Surrey, of which 75 were in Guildford. The meeting was informed that as at 27 June there were 2,918 registered COVID-related deaths in Surrey, with 247 in Guildford.

The Director of Service Delivery advised the meeting of two key COVID-19 issues: vaccination and testing; and business support and grants. The meeting was advised that in Surrey the case numbers of the Delta variant were highest in Reigate and Banstead, where targeted testing was taking place. The Director of Service Delivery indicated that there were plans in place for surge testing in Guildford if required. The Committee was informed that vaccination rates in the Borough were comparable with the national and regional figures. With reference to the lower than average vaccination rate in Guildford town centre, the Director of Service Delivery advised the meeting that the Council were working with Surrey County Council and health partners on a targeted communications campaign.

The Director of Service Delivery updated the meeting on the discretionary and mandatory grants paid, including Restart Grants. He indicated that the Council was helping the business community to adjust to the delay in the government's roadmap. With reference to the launch of the Guildford Fringe and an upcoming brocante market, the Director of Service Delivery advised the Committee that events were starting to return to Guildford.

In response to questions, the Senior Specialist Public Health indicated that while a replacement vaccination centre for G Live had not been finalised, it would likely be the park and ride site at Artington. In addition, the Senior Specialist Public Health undertook to look into the issue of providing further information to residents on the Delta variant.

### **OS13 LEAD COUNCILLOR QUESTION SESSION**

The Chairman welcomed the Lead Councillor for Economy and reminded the meeting of Councillor Redpath's areas of responsibility: Economic Development; Social Enterprise; Rural Economy; and Heritage and Community Assets.

In response to questions about the boundaries of his portfolio and that of the Lead Councillor for Resources, the Lead Councillor for Economy indicated the importance of community assets and the overlap with the portfolio of the Lead Councillor for Resources. In addition, the Director of Service Delivery acknowledged that overlaps in portfolio existed and referred to the responsibility of Executive members and officers to communicate when dealing with subjects that impacted across portfolios.

A member of the Committee asked about the Council's plans and activities to help the Borough's secondary shopping centres and parades recover after the pandemic. The Lead Councillor for Economy indicated the importance of using the Council's Welcome Back fund for sites and events throughout the Borough. He suggested that shops and some other businesses in rural areas had benefitted from a daytime economy during the pandemic revived by residents working and shopping from home. In reply to questions, the Lead Councillor for Economy confirmed that details of the Welcome Back fund would be sent to all councillors. In addition, he indicated that to establish and quantify the impact of COVID the value of undertaking a survey of secondary shopping areas and local hubs in the Borough would be explored.

The Lead Councillor for Economy confirmed that preparations were underway for the Heritage Open Days events in September 2021, with a brochure expected to be published in July. The Director of Service Delivery indicated that ensuring the success of Heritage Open Days in Guildford would be one of the main objectives for the new heritage lead officer. The Lead Councillor for Economy stated that all venues involved in previous Heritage Open Days should have been contacted about their participation in this year's event.

In response to a question, the Lead Councillor for Economy indicated that following the distribution of grants to businesses during the pandemic, the Council's database of businesses in the Borough was up to date. He noted the progress achieved updating the database, while advising that there was no method in place for maintaining the database to ensure it was kept updated as changes occurred.

The Chair thanked the Lead Councillor for Economy for attending and answering questions.

### **OS14 UPDATE ON FOOD POVERTY AND INSECURITY**

The Lead Councillor for Community and Housing introduced the item, praised the Community Services staff and outlined the report submitted to the Committee meeting. This summary included the Lead Councillor for Community and Housing advising the Committee of the prioritised work streams for 2021 around food poverty and insecurity.

Members of the Committee questioned how community spaces were identified for the community fridges funded by Guildford Philanthropy. The Head of Community Services indicated that community groups able to look after a community fridge and organise donations would be supported by the Council and Guildford Philanthropy but the Council could not run the scheme. In reply, a member of the Committee noted that the Council did

organise the community fridge at The Hive and suggested other areas of the Borough with equal need were being overlooked. The Head of Community Services advised the meeting that the Community Services team was unable to resource the running of community fridges across the Borough but could help support voluntary groups wanting to become involved in such a scheme. The Head of Community Services undertook to provide councillors with details of the commitment and other criteria involved in establishing a community fridge site.

With reference to both the amount of food parcels distributed in Guildford town centre and the number of food-related businesses, a member of the Committee suggested the suitability of a town centre community fridge. In response, the Head of Community Services advised the meeting of action to support vulnerable residents in the town centre during the pandemic.

The Head of Community Services agreed that the Council would be better prepared for any future lockdowns. She indicated that data and referrals about families entitled to free school meals were issues to be resolved. In reply to a question, the Head of Community Services confirmed that she hoped mobile Thrive at the Hive hubs would be created by the end of 2021.

In answer to questions from a Committee member, the Head of Community Services confirmed that local supermarkets, shops, and food wholesalers supported food poverty and insecurity initiatives in the Borough. In addition, the meeting was advised of government Covid recovery funding and grants received locally and the likelihood of central government funding to address food poverty and insecurity in future.

A member of the Committee questioned why the Council had not become an accredited Real Living Wage employer, particularly its the decision not to pay Real Living Wage rates to some play development staff. In addition, the meeting was reminded that contractors Freedom Leisure and HQT at G-Live did not pay the Real Living Wage. In response, the Head of Community Services indicated that the implications of introducing the Real Living Wage for casual play development staff would be explored as part of review of service provision. The Head of Community Services advised the meeting that a decision about Real Living Wage accreditation would be informed by the impacts on both contractors and Council services.

In reply to a question about identifying vulnerable people in need of aid during the pandemic, the Head of Community Services indicated that the Council had attempted to help all those who had requested aid and had monitored referrals.

In response to a question, the Head of Community Services confirmed that food parcel distribution figures within the report submitted to the Committee referred to the Council's response and that additional food parcels had been provided to residents by community groups.

A councillor proposed the value and timeliness of revisiting the previous recommendation for a community space in Guildford like the Lighthouse centre in Woking. In addition, the merits of a (mental and physical) health and wellbeing centre, perhaps including the Citizens Advice within such an umbrella project, was suggested, together with the use of space at the Council's offices at Millmead. In reply, the Head of Community Services undertook to discuss the suggestions and noted that residents' general health and wellbeing was a corporate priority. The Lead Councillor for Community and Housing agreed the value of progressing the suggestions put forward.

**RESOLVED:** That the continuing progress made to address the issues of food poverty and insecurity in the Borough be noted.

## **OS15 LICENSING OF HOUSES IN MULTIPLE OCCUPATION (HMO) UPDATE**

The Lead Councillor for Community and Housing introduced the item, and summarised the report submitted to the Committee. The meeting was advised of the progress achieved with licensing houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) in the Borough and implementing the recommendations of the 2014 overview and scrutiny review of HMOs.

During the ensuing discussion a number of points and clarifications were made:

- In response to a member of the Committee asking about the percentage of HMOs in the Borough that were licensed, the Private Sector Housing and Pollution Lead indicated that the number of HMOs was constantly changing.
- With reference to the number of renewal HMO applications due in 2023 and the time needed to process applications and conduct inspections, members questioned whether additional resources were required now or in 2023. The Private Sector Housing and Pollution Lead indicated that the intention at this stage was to highlight the 2023 increase. He indicated that rather than inspecting the entire HMO population annually, revisiting a sample of HMOs to conduct inspections was adequate. The Private Sector Housing and Pollution Lead advised that a risk-based approach of sample re-inspections would meet the legal duty of the Council.
- A member of the Committee suggested the establishment of a working group to investigate the policy options available to control HMOs, including an Article 4 direction. In reply, the Private Sector Housing and Pollution Lead informed the meeting that a paper had been prepared for discussion of the issues at an Executive Advisory Board (EAB). The Chairman advised the meeting that an EAB Chair had requested the issue of HMO controls be added to the EAB work programme.
- In reply to questions about the effects of HMOs and rogue landlords, the Lead Councillor for Community and Housing indicated that the Council received more reports of poor housing standards in the private rented sector than complaints relating to licensed HMOs. The Private Sector Housing and Pollution Lead confirmed that HMOs (licensed and unlicensed) produced fewer complaints to the Council than the general private rented sector.
- The Private Sector Housing and Pollution Lead indicated that measures to identify potential HMO-related planning applications would be explored.
- In reply to a member of the Committee asking for the total number of purpose-built student accommodation in the Borough, compared with the identified need for student accommodation, the Private Sector Housing and Pollution Lead indicated that he could obtain relevant the information from the University of Surrey.
- The Private Sector Housing and Pollution Lead agreed with a suggestion from a Committee member that it might be useful to re-establish the HMO stakeholder group, particularly given the increase in licensed HMOs in the Borough.
- A member of the Committee suggested that the impacts of high densities of HMOs should be taken into account when considering Article 4 directions. The Private Sector Housing and Pollution Lead indicated that the paper prepared for the EAB would consider such issues and the Lead Councillor for Community and Housing indicated that the issues would be discussed fully by the EAB.

- The Private Sector Housing and Pollution Lead welcomed suggestions to promote good landlords and to provide further information for landlords on the Council's website.
- A member of the Committee, also an EAB Chair, requested that the paper on HMO controls to be considered by her EAB include details on the additional HMO licensing scheme. She suggested that, in addition to an EAB meeting, an EAB task group to look at HMO related issues might be needed.

The meeting was advised by the Chairman that if necessary the Committee could revisit the issue of HMOs following its consideration by an EAB.

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

RESOLVED: That the progress made implementing the changes to mandatory HMO licensing since 2018 and the recommendations of Overview and Scrutiny from 2014 be noted.

**OS16 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chairman introduced the item. Committee members did not have any comments or questions.

RESOLVED: That the work plan as presented in the report submitted to the Committee be approved.

The meeting finished at 9.30 pm

Signed .....

Date .....

Chairman