

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

12 September 2023

- \* Councillor James Walsh (Chair)
- \* Councillor Matt Furniss (Vice-Chair)

|                               |                                 |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Councillor Honor Brooker      | * Councillor Maddy Redpath      |
| Councillor Jason Fenwick      | * Councillor Katie Steel        |
| * Councillor Lizzie Griffiths | Councillor Fiona White          |
| * Councillor Gillian Harwood  | * Councillor Dominique Williams |
| Councillor Steven Lee         | Councillor Sue Wyeth-Price      |

\*Present

Councillors Catherine Houston (Lead Councillor for Commercial Development), Richard Lucas (Lead Councillor for Finance and Property), Julia McShane (Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Housing), Carla Morson (Lead Councillor for Community and Organisational Development), George Potter (Lead Councillor for Planning, Environment and Climate Change) and Howard Smith were also in attendance, with Angela Goodwin (Lead Councillor for Engagement and Customer Services) in remote attendance.

### **OS7 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

The Committee was advised that apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Honor Brooker, Jason Fenwick, Fiona White, and Sue Wyeth-Price. Councillor Bilal Akhtar was present as a substitute for Councillor Honor Brooker.

### **OS8 MINUTES**

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 11 July 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

### **OS9 LOCAL CODE OF CONDUCT AND DECLARATION OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS**

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary or non-pecuniary interests.

## **OS10 LEAD COUNCILLOR QUESTION SESSION**

The Chairperson introduced the question session with Councillor Julia McShane, the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Housing. The Committee was reminded that Councillor McShane's specific areas of responsibility included Homelessness, Housing Advice, Landlord Services, and Housing Maintenance and Repairs.

During the ensuing discussion several points were made and clarifications offered as follows:

- In response to a question regarding the Council's actions to improve access to accommodation for vulnerable people, the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Housing advised that the Borough had received funding from the Government Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) to support the delivery of services for homeless people and rough sleepers until March 2025. This funding would enable the Number 5 Hub, which provided short-term temporary accommodation with support for local rough sleepers, to undergo significant refurbishment works to bring the building in line with service needs. In addition, housing pathways had been identified to support vulnerable client groups including young people and those released from prison, experiencing domestic abuse, leaving care and rough sleeping.
- With regard to the current social housing stock repair status, the Committee was advised that, although there had been some regrettable decline in performance in this area recently, the situation was being reviewed and the Council was committed to providing a good service to its tenants who would be contacted and measures put in place to address concerns.
- The Committee was advised that of a social housing stock of slightly over 5,000 Council owned properties, there were currently 172 homes unoccupied in a void position. Forty of these were undergoing major repairs, twenty-nine of which were being structurally monitored. The number of voids also reflected a rate of turnover with tenants moving out or downsizing. The average time for turning around void properties for occupation by new tenants was 40 days.
- The Committee was advised that concerning buy-backs of former Council owned homes previously sold to tenants, due diligence was undertaken to

ascertain whether the homes in question met the profile of the type, condition and location of properties sought by the Council to meet housing needs. The only identified issue was associated with the Council's housing company, North Downs Housing, and the future treatment of its properties.

- The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Housing was asked how the Council's new administration was balancing its expressed vision and plans for Guildford with the work underway to solve the Council's financial challenges. In response, the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Housing advised that no plans had been postponed or abandoned. However, there had been temporary pauses in some areas of major projects as part of the Financial Recovery Plan to ascertain whether there may be more cost effective ways of delivering the projects. The top priority was to stabilise the Council's finances, with the assistance of the Financial Review Executive Working Group, as they were an essential foundation for future delivery of projects and services. The protection of essential public services, particularly for vulnerable and less advantaged residents, was being prioritised. Plans to deliver new Council homes would continue utilising ring-fenced monies in the Housing Revenue Account, subject to business cases being approved by the Council.
- The Chairperson enquired as to whether the cost of living crisis was having an impact on the number of homeless people living in Guildford in recent years. In response, the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Housing explained that, although the flow of people rough sleeping in the Borough remained stable in single figures amounting to approximately half of those sleeping on the streets prior to Covid, an increase in the number of homelessness applications to the Council had occurred. The Committee was advised that this was a reflection of national trends witnessing an increase in the number of evictions owing to rent increases and pressure on household budgets. Property affordability, mounting debts, and a discrepancy between market rents and low income assistance claimable from the Department of Work and Pensions to assist with housing costs, remained a barrier to some in accessing affordable housing.
- In terms of the level of Council resources available to assist homeless people, the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Housing advised that, in line with many other local authorities, the Council did not have a

sufficient supply of suitable and affordable accommodation within the Borough. It was highlighted that the provision of housing was only part of the solution to tackle homelessness as affected people often required other forms of support in order to maintain their tenancies. The specialist Homelessness section at the Council had adopted a homelessness prevention approach which sought to support people at the earliest opportunity to remain in their existing accommodation or secure alternative accommodation. Discretionary Housing Payment could be applied for to assist with rental shortfalls. Local partner providers in the supported housing sector were experiencing difficulties with retaining and recruiting staff of the required calibre to assist in this area.

- Regarding the type of partnership working pursued by the Council to address the root causes of rough sleeping in Guildford, councillors were advised that people who were regular rough sleepers often had multiple needs and required personalised support featuring a holistic and flexible multi-agency approach to enable them to develop the stability and foundation from which they could rebuild their lives. The Council's strategic partners in both the statutory and voluntary spheres were also struggling to meet service demands with limited resources. This hampered people's access to timely and appropriate support which negatively impacted on the housing options on offer. The Council was an active participant in Surrey County Council's Surrey Adults Matter initiative which played a valuable role in uniting and engaging agencies to identify individual and realistic solutions. The Guildford Rough Sleeper HOST service worked in close partnership with the Council and other agencies involved in assisting individuals requiring support. The Committee was advised that Guildford remained an attractive destination for rough sleepers with no connection with the Borough possibly due to the daytime resources that were available in the town centre provided by the voluntary sector.
- The meeting was informed that in terms of room for improvement to address the root causes of rough sleeping through partnership working, there was a constant process of adaptation to meet the changing picture of people's needs as far as possible. The Council was working in partnership with DLUHC to identify trends and methods of tackling homelessness. DLUHC had recently agreed to the Council's proposal to re-purpose some funds to meet identified issues. The initiatives included targeted reconnection work, counselling and art therapy, purchase of

additional bed space outside the Borough, tailored training, and reflective practice for the specialist Housing Prevention team. The Council would also be working with Guildford HOST outreach and support service together with other grant funded services in the community to implement these projects.

- Further to a question regarding the possibility of offering support towards the maintenance of overgrown gardens and hedges within the Council's social housing stock, the Committee was advised that charities and local groups had offered assistance in this area in the past. It was felt that this issue could be due to elderly occupants being unable to maintain their gardens who may prefer to move to a smaller property either without a garden or a smaller outdoor space requiring less maintenance. This factor mirrored a wider conversation occurring within the Council regarding 'right-sizing' as there was an awareness that there were a number of older tenants under occupying properties who may wish to move to a more appropriately sized home, freeing larger homes for families. A possible solution to the garden maintenance issue would be referred to officers for further consideration.

#### **OS11 SAFER GUILDFORD PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT 2022-23**

Councillor Carla Morson, Lead Councillor for Community and Organisational Development, introduced this item explaining that the Council had a statutory duty to work alongside partners to develop and implement strategies to reduce crime and disorder in the Borough. This was achieved via the Safer Guildford Partnership (SGP) which was overseen by the SGP Executive. Responsible authorities also carried a statutory duty to report to a scrutiny committee for crime and disorder which in Guildford Borough was fulfilled by presenting the Partnership's Annual Report to this Committee.

The report outlined some of the key achievements during 2022/23, including the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Pledge, domestic abuse training and public webinars, implementation of the town centre Public Spaces Protection Order, launch of the Safer Communities Programme, the SGP training programme, and funding in respect of Partnership projects.

The SGP 3 Year Plan 2021-2024 set out the framework for Partnership priorities which had been agreed in 2021. These sought to raise awareness of domestic abuse and the related support available; reduce and prevent community harm; protect people from serious harm such as terrorism,

organised crime and youth violence; and raise awareness of community support available to those facing community safety issues.

The 2023/24 Action Plan had been drafted in response to the above priorities and identified actions to achieve the priorities through Partnership joint working. Consultation in respect of the draft Action Plan was taking place. The South West Surrey Domestic Abuse Outreach Service had expressed a wish for Partnership Support and the local adoption of the Surrey Gold Standard Coercive and Controlling Behaviour Framework to be included as part of a priority. The Action Plan also included the continuity of a number of the 2022/23 actions in addition to extending the subject areas covered by the Partnership's annual training programme and consultation in respect of preparation for the next 3 year Action Plan 2024-2027. Any feedback in respect of the Partnership's activities and achievements during 2022/23 as detailed in the Annual Report were welcomed.

The following points arose from ensuing questions, comments, and discussion:

- Although there had been an unprecedented increase in domestic abuse referrals to the Outreach Service during Covid lockdowns, the number had now stabilised. It was thought that the rise was a result of wider awareness of the Service following publicity campaigns as opposed to more incidents of domestic abuse.
- Information relating to the gender breakdown of victims of domestic abuse would be sought. It was advised that the Outreach Service offered specialised support to all sectors of the community through various projects.
- The availability of future funding to support the SGP was subject to review.
- The SGP had a communications pledge which was supported by all partners who shared their social media promotional campaigns. It was agreed that it would be beneficial to extend the circulation of such material to councillors to enable them to share it more widely with residents.
- The Action Plan proposed for 2024 onwards was similar to that of previous years as it was aligned to the priorities contained in the existing

three year Plan covering 2021 to 2024 which were operating successfully. As 2024 was the last year of the current Plan, its priorities would be subject to review and consultation in the near future. The Plan for 2024 included a number of additions to reflect emerging legislation including the Protect Duty and the Serious Violence Duty.

- Issues regarding drug use and rural crime were raised and the Committee was advised that these factors could be considered as part of the consultation in respect of the next set of priorities. The Joint Action Group (JAG) was a forum for raising such issues of concern as they emerged. In the event that an area was referred to the JAG, relevant ward councillors were welcome to attend the specific meeting for consideration of that particular item if they wished. Also, councillors were able to make a referral to the JAG via an accessible on-line form and would be invited to a meeting to discuss the matter if it was pursued for consideration.
- Although some focused partnership work to tackle issues such as anti-social behaviour in Ash and Kingston Meadows, East Horsley, had been undertaken, at present Guildford town centre was the main area of attention owing to related concerns and was the subject of a specific project. The Public Space Protection Order covered the issue of drug use in the town centre.
- In response to a concern raised in respect of County Lines, the Committee was advised that there had been a reduction in this form of drug distribution in Guildford. The reasons were felt to be an increased awareness of the issue and improved police intelligence operations to target offenders and identify victims. County Lines was a focus of the Serious Organised Crime JAG where related issues and referral routes were highlighted with partners in the interests of preventing and addressing the issue. Also, there was increased support and safeguarding measures in place to assist the young and vulnerable people involved. Whilst resources to tackle County Lines were limited, the matter remained a priority for the police and a National County Lines Intensification Week with additional targeted activities across the Borough and the County was planned for early October 2023.
- The work of the SGP was currently delivered within available resources which included the involvement of partners.

Gratitude to the SGP was expressed in recognition of its work.

**OS12 SPEND ON CONSULTANTS AND AGENCY WORKERS FOR THE 2022-23 FINANCIAL YEAR**

The Committee was advised that this was the fourth iteration of the above report providing an update in respect of the historical spend position in relation to consultants and agency workers, refreshed to include the financial year end 2022/23. The report was first presented in October 2020, with update reports subsequently circulated in 2021 and 2022 assessing the impact of the recommendations implemented from the first report. Financial data reporting had improved in the meantime. Over the last financial year (2022/23), the Council reported spend of a combined total of £12.2 million in respect of consultants and agency workers across revenue and capital budgets compared to £13 million in 2021/22.

The report, which focused on departmental spend rather than project costs and examined the reasons for engaging agency workers and consultants, explained that the Council operated a compliant procedure through a company named Comensura in order to recruit such staff which was necessary on occasions, particularly when recruitment attempts had been unsuccessful for a number of reasons. Compliance via the Comensura route was currently 56%, however, not all employment and recruitment agencies wished to work with Comensura owing to the associated low profit margins. This was the first version of the report to divide spend into the categories of revenue and capital costs and it indicated decreasing spend in relation to revenue expenditure whilst capital spend was linked to capital projects monitored by the Finance team.

During the ensuing discussion a number of questions were asked and clarifications offered as follows:

- In addition to consultants providing specialist services, agency workers were required to fill recruitment gaps and further information detailing these gaps would be gathered as part of the Financial Recovery Plan work and provided later in the year. In this connection, attention was drawn to Table 2 in the report which provided some commentary and explanation in respect of the Housing Revenue Account service delivery model including some detail surrounding recruitment gaps. Also, Comensura provided the Council with management data giving reasons for



onboarding agency staff which could possibly be circulated. Councillors were assured that they were at liberty to pose detailed questions to officers and Lead Councillors.

- It was emphasised that there was a need for consultants offering particular expertise which the Council did not have a long term need to retain in house. This need also applied to obtaining agency workers to staff services such as waste collections in accordance with the associated business model to avoid over staffing to cover absences.
- The importance of improving the capability and maturity of financial aspects of the Council to facilitate the Finance section's business partnering with each of the other services to improve financial controls relating to staffing was highlighted.
- In terms of capitalising the cost of spend in relation to consultants supporting capital projects, the Committee was advised that there was a requirement for the Council to comply with CIPFA's Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities. This Code prevented the capitalising of spend in situations where consultants were working across a range of projects. A judgment in this regard would be made at the year end and be audited.
- There was an internal process where any off-contract spend in respect of an agency worker that was not paid via Comensura would be submitted to the Corporate Procurement Board for approval as an exception requiring evidence that the service area had consulted Comensura without success. As recruitment agencies tended to specialise in niches of the market, Comensura was not able to onboard every agency and occasionally separate contracts with other agencies were negotiated to secure placements.

RESOLVED: (I) That the spend position for 2022/23 be noted;

(II) That an update in respect of this report, including the breakdown between revenue and capital spend, be received in six months' time; and

(III) That further detailed analysis and reporting, providing details of reasons for engaging consultants on a service and project level alongside the Financial Recovery Plan, will follow.

### **OS13 PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT 2023-24 (QUARTER 1)**

This report was introduced by the Lead Councillor for Community and Organisational Development and presented by the Joint Executive Head of Organisational Development. The report formed part of the Council's performance monitoring framework and gave an overview of its performance against the corporate key performance indicators (KPIs) during quarter 1 2023/24 and where possible, the annual KPIs for 2022/23, alongside the detailed quarterly Performance Monitoring Report attached at Appendix 1 to the report.

From this quarter onwards reporting would be against 35 quarterly KPIs and 5 annual KPIs. The report provided a summary of the Red, Amber or Green (RAG) ratings in the relevant quarter together with a comparison of quarterly RAG ratings between 2022/23 and 2023/24. Exceptions in data available for reporting were summarised in section 9 of the report.

Performance for the quarter equated to 40% of KPIs rated Green, 5.7% graded Amber and 25.7% rated Red. A further 20% of indicators were data only measures without RAG ratings whilst data in respect of the remaining 8.6% was awaited. Performance in relation to KPIs COU9 and COU10, the speed of determining planning applications for minor and other development, respectively, had shown significant improvement.

During the related discussion, a number of points were raised and the following responses provided:

- Further to a query regarding a reduction in the number of KPIs reported against in the paper, the Committee was advised that this matter had been raised at the previous meeting and the intention had been that an e-mail communication listing the changes to indicators reported on, giving the reason, would be circulated to members. The list would be re-circulated. It was confirmed that a number of indicators were monitored at service level and were not fed into the corporate reporting system, however, the Committee's views in this regard would be taken into account.
- Additional information in respect of the reason for a reduction in performance in relation to KPI ENV2 (household waste recycled and composted) would be obtained and provided. In this connection, the Committee was advised that performance relating to some of the

Environment waste indicators was felt to reflect a regular cyclical reduction in performance owing to increased residual waste and reduced recycling levels associated with the Christmas season. It was anticipated that future performance figures would indicate some waste contamination issues which were thought to be of a county-wide nature mainly associated with waste processing and not collection.

- With regard to Council Tax collection figures, there was an expected accumulative profile that would see these rising quarterly as the financial year progressed.
- Further information concerning anticipated performance improvement in relation to indicator COU3 (Council suppliers paid within 30 days) would be provided. In addition, data was sought in relation to COU5 (Time taken to assess new Housing Benefit claims) to ascertain the number of staff currently being trained to qualify as Housing Benefit claims assessors and the length of time required for them to manage casework unassisted.

#### **OS14 BOROUGH'S RESPONSE TO REFUGEES**

A requested update to the report submitted to the Committee on 8 November 2022 explaining the Borough's response to refugees was before councillors for consideration.

In her introduction to the report, the Lead Councillor for Community and Organisational Development set out some relevant background information and thanked officers for their hard work to ensure that refugees living in Guildford received the support they required.

The Joint Executive Head of Community Services advised that the purpose of the report was to inform the Committee of the support given to refugees and to invite comments in respect of the services delivered.

The Council remained involved in supporting refugees through the following core schemes financially supported by the Government:

- Syrian Vulnerable People Resettlement Scheme (VPRS)
- Afghanistan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP)
- Homes For Ukraine Scheme

- Asylum Seeking Bridging Hotel (where people had claimed asylum and were awaiting a decision as to whether they would be allowed to remain in the UK as a refugee)
- Community Sponsorship

Each of the above was a different scheme led by the Government to support the refugee situation within the UK. The Council's duty and involvement varied depending on the scheme.

Whilst the Homes for Ukraine Scheme was continuing and funded until 2025, the schemes to support refugees from Syria and Afghanistan were closing and had been successful in integrating the affected people into local communities with the assistance of the Family Support Team.

People occupying the Asylum Seeking Bridging Hotel managed by the Home Office had a different status from other refugees. The Council had expressed concern in response to the Home Office's confirmation of plans to increase the amount of accommodation available at the Hotel, to cater for up to 196 refugees, by introducing some room sharing. This could create difficulties and increase demand for local services, particularly health and education, and ultimately place pressure on the housing market.

The following points arose from ensuing questions, comments, and discussion:

- People were accommodated at the Hotel whilst their applications for asylum status were determined. In the event that their applications were accepted, the occupants were evicted within 28 days and would probably present to the Council as homeless unless their allocated Home Office support worker could assist in this area. Those whose applications were unsuccessful were also likely to be moved with a view to deportation.
- The local community was supportive of the concept of the Hotel and its guests and wished to assist them where possible. In addition, the Council was working jointly with local partners including the health, voluntary and education sectors to offer support as many of the asylum seekers had suffered trauma and were experiencing both physical and mental health issues. Those assisting refugees could also be affected and were offered support where available.

- School age children residing at the Hotel were placed in the nearest schools on arrival, subject to school capacity, and appeared eager to attend. However, school transport and the associated funding could be an issue.
- The extension of the Homes For Ukraine Scheme had presented some challenges, particularly for hosts.

RESOLVED that an update Borough Response to Refugees report be brought to the Committee in September 2024, or sooner in the event of significant change.

### **OS15 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT, 2022-23**

The Committee considered the above report which outlined the work undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) function during the past municipal year and its future work programme as thus far developed.

The six decisions taken during the past municipal year under the 'urgency' provisions were listed within the report and detailed at Appendix 2. In 2022/23, the O&S Committee's Chairperson agreed to requests to waive call-in on three occasions. No decisions were called-in for consideration by the Committee during the past municipal year.

The Chairperson drew attention to the recommendations contained within the report. There were no comments regarding the issues and topics examined by O&S during 2022-23 nor any suggestions for changes to the future work programme for O&S as developed thus far. The Leader of the Council expressed a wish for further consideration to be given to the recommendation to review the operation of provisions relating to call-in and urgency and consider proposals for improvement.

RESOLVED: (I) That the issues and topics examined by O&S during 2022-23 be noted;

(II) That the future work programme for O&S as developed thus far be approved; and

(III) That the operation of provisions relating to call-in and urgency be reviewed and proposals for improvement be considered.

RECOMMENDED to Council that:

(I) the report submitted to the Committee be commended as the O&S Annual Report 2022/23; and

(II) the current rules relating to the Council's call-in or urgency provisions remain unchanged for the time being, pending review.

The meeting finished at 8.36 pm

Signed .....

Date .....

Chairperson