SOCIETY, ENVIRONMENT, AND COUNCIL DEVELOPMENT EXECUTIVE ADVISORY BOARD

8 September 2016

* Councillor Adrian Chandler (Chairman)
* Councillor Pauline Searle (Vice-Chairman)

* Councillor Christian Holliday	Councillor Tony Phillips
Councillor Liz Hooper	* Councillor David Quelch
* Councillor Jennifer Jordan	* Councillor David Reeve
Councillor Nigel Kearse	* Councillor David Wright
* Councillor Dennis Paul	* Councillor James Walsh

*Present

The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Planning and Regeneration, Councillor Paul Spooner and Councillors Michael Illman (Lead Councillor for Finance) and Tony Rooth (Lead Councillor for Housing and Social Welfare) were also in attendance.

S15 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies for absence were submitted by Councillors Liz Hooper, Nigel Kearse and Tony Phillips.

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 23(j), Councillor Colin Cross attended as a substitute for Councillor Phillips.

S16 LOCAL CODE OF CONDUCT AND DECLARATION OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interest.

S17 MINUTES

The Board confirmed the minutes of the meeting held on 14 July 2016. The Chairman signed the minutes.

S18 LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME FOR 2017-18

The Director of Resources introduced the report. The Deputy Housing Benefit Manager gave a presentation summarising the current Local Council Tax Support Scheme, changes made to the Scheme in previous years, the hardship fund and future changes to the Scheme.

The Lead Councillor for Housing and Social Welfare, Councillor Tony Rooth noted that this was a complex area with many of the changes stemming from central government and the introduction of universal credit. The hardship fund had been established and utilised, and was sufficient to satisfy the claims of the successful applicants. The Council's current Scheme was effective and provided a cushion for the most vulnerable residents.

Comments from the Board raised the following points and information:

- In 2013, there had been attempts to formulate a shared Local Council Tax Support Scheme with other local authorities in Surrey. However, as each authority had individual requirements depending on their caseload, demographic and councillor wishes, this had proven difficult.

- There had been concern that as people crossed local authority boundaries there would be confusion because of the different Local Council Tax Support Schemes, however this had not been a problem.
- The Board noted that approximately 1% of claimants made applications for support from the hardship fund. Welfare reform had resulted in changes to both Housing Benefit and the Local Council Tax Support Scheme. The Council focused on notifying those likely to be affected by any changes as early as possible. This helped to improve understanding and allowed time for changes to be made to household budgets and for assistance to be sought.
- As some vulnerable groups did not have access to the internet, much of the literature was circulated through the post. Information on the Local Council Tax Support Scheme and the hardship fund was included on every Council tax bill, in all benefits documentation sent to residents and was available on the Council's website. The Council worked with welfare rights units and the Citizens Advice Bureau to ensure that residents were aware of the hardship fund.
- It was estimated that £5,598,470 of Local Council Tax Support would be paid out in 2016-17.
- The hardship fund budget was fixed at £40,000 per year and approximately one quarter of this was spent each year. Members of the Board suggested that the budget should be reduced to take account of this. The Board was informed that the former Finance Scrutiny Group had considered the Local Council Tax hardship fund and determined that it should remain at £40,000.
- When an application for hardship failed, the applicant was provided with a breakdown of how their income and expenditure had been calculated. Each applicant had a right to review of such decisions.

The Board,

RESOLVED: To not recommend that any changes be made to the current Local Council Tax Support Scheme, subject to the feedback the Council would receive from stakeholder consultation.

S19 WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

The Web Programme Manager gave a presentation that provided an update on the website development project. This included a summary of the objectives of the project, the research undertaken, the timeline and milestones and information on the changing needs of customers.

The Lead Councillor for Planning and Regeneration noted that the extensive consultation process had resulted in a much improved website design and invited the Board to comment on the objectives of the project in particular.

Questions and comments from the Board raised the following points and information:

- The Board noted that residents were expected to do more online, therefore it was important that the website was easy to use. The Board noted that quick links through to important pages on the homepage were particularly useful.
- The next phase of the project was tree testing. A link would be sent out to participants who would test the usability of the new website by completing tasks that asked them to find specific pieces of information. Officers hoped that staff, councillors and residents would get involved with this testing.
- Focus groups had been held with members of staff where information for the website had been organised and prioritised.

- In order to ensure that information on the website was easily understandable, content was written for the average reading age of ten using plain English. The number of photos and videos on the website would be increased.
- The mobile website would be as easy to use as the desktop site.
- Although the system used to search for planning applications and Modern.Gov would look like part of the main website, the web team did not have control over their functionality. The experience of using these systems would be improved as they would be signposted on the main website. The Board agreed that as both Councillors and residents used these systems regularly, it was important that they functioned properly and were easy to use.
- There were approximately 8000 pages on the website. The most visited webpage was the homepage.
- The Board warned against advertising on the website as it would impact negatively on the residents' experience. Officers explained that the Council was looking for new ways of generating income because of budget cuts and advertising on the website may provide a useful source of income in the future.
- There were a number of transactional processes that were carried out on the website, and it was hoped that e-billing would be tested in early 2017. The Board was informed that 53 forms had been put on the website in the last 3 months.
- The Board heard that the new website content would conform to the AA Accessibility standard. Videos were streamed using YouTube, which allowed for subtitles and translation to be used. There was also a translate button on each page on the website. The focus was on making content as simple as possible to ensure that residents were able to use the accessibility features within their own technology.
- It was important that content was written to take advantage of local search technology.
- The design of the new website was flexible, however technologies changed quickly and as a result significant resources would need to be invested to ensure that the Council's website remained up to date.
- During the project a wire-framing workshop had been completed where a number of other Council websites had been examined, including Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Chichester District Council. A number of elements, such as the drop down menu, had been influenced by the design of commercial websites.

S20 COUNCILLOR INVOLVEMENT IN THE PREPARATION OF THE BUDGET

The Board considered a report that proposed to establish a joint EAB Budget Working Group, comprising of councillors of both EABs. The Board was requested to nominate four members to the working group. For reasons of political proportionality one Conservative member, one Liberal Democrat member, one Guildford Greenbelt Group member and one Labour member were required to be nominated by the Board.

Those nominated were:
Councillor Colin Cross
Councillor David Quelch

The Guildford Greenbelt Group member and the Labour member would be nominated by those groups and their names would be reported at the meeting of the Borough, Infrastructure and Economy EAB held on Monday 12 September 2016.

The Board

RESOLVED

(1) That a Joint EAB Budget Working Group be established, comprising of councillors of both EABs, with the following terms of reference:

To consider and review for submission to the EABs, Executive and Council:

(i) The draft General Fund and Housing Revenue Account revenue budgets and

(ii) The draft General Fund and Housing Revenue Account capital programmes, including growth bids to inform the evaluation process.

(2) That this EAB appoints Councillor Colin Cross and Councillor David Quelch to serve on the Budget Working Group for the 2016-17 municipal year.

S21 EAB WORK PROGRAMME

The Board considered the EAB work programmes.

Board members were encouraged to email suggestions for items to be added to the work programme to the Chairman and Vice-Chairman.

S22 PROGRESS WITH MATTERS PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED BY THE EAB

The Board considered the progress with matters previously considered by the EAB.

The meeting finished at 9.00 pm

Signed ..... Date .....

Chairman