

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

12 November 2019

* Councillor Paul Spooner (Chairman)

* Councillor James Walsh (Vice-Chairman)

* Councillor Colin Cross
* Councillor Graham Eyre
* Councillor Liz Hogger
* Councillor Tom Hunt
Councillor Steven Lee

* Councillor Masuk Miah
* Councillor John Redpath
Councillor Tony Rooth
* Councillor Deborah Seabrook
* Councillor Patrick Sheard

*Present

Councillors Paul Abbey, Joss Bigmore, Lead Councillor for Finance and Assets, Customer Services, Dennis Booth, Ted Mayne, Julia McShane, Lead Councillor for Community Health, Support and Wellbeing, and James Steel, Lead Councillor for Tourism, Leisure, and Sport, were also in attendance.

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 23(j), Councillor Maddy Redpath attended as a substitute for Councillor Tony Rooth.

OS21 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

The Committee was advised of apologies for absence from Councillors Steven Lee and Tony Rooth and a substitute as detailed above.

OS22 LOCAL CODE OF CONDUCT AND DECLARATION OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS

There were no declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests.

OS23 MINUTES

In response to a question from a Committee member, the Chairman confirmed that references to 'Council' within the minutes concerned Guildford Borough Council unless specified otherwise.

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 10 September 2019 were approved.

OS24 LEAD COUNCILLOR QUESTION SESSION

The Chairman welcomed the Lead Councillor for Finance and Assets, Customer Services, and the Director of Finance.

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

- In reply to a question about the opportunities to influence and scrutinise projects, the Lead Councillor for Finance and Assets, Customer Services indicated that non-Executive Councillors were able to input into projects through working groups and obtain information on past decisions or options associated with specific projects.

- The Lead Councillor for Finance and Assets, Customer Services confirmed that the Council had not allocated any funds for social housing. He indicated that it was not viable for the Council to build social housing. The meeting was advised that the Council had earmarked £110m for affordable housing for which, unlike social housing, government grants were available.
- In reply to a question, the Lead Councillor for Finance and Assets, Customer Services indicated that although he was personally sceptical about the value of the Walnut Bridge and associated landscaping, the question of whether the costs were worthwhile would be decided by the Executive or full Council.
- The Lead Councillor for Finance and Assets, Customer Services advised the meeting that the changes in the rental property market was a widespread issue not unique to Guildford, and that it was being treated with urgency by the Council. He suggested that industrial holdings were a buoyant part of the Council's property portfolio.
- In reply to a question about the future impact of Future Guildford on customer services, the Lead Councillor for Finance and Assets, Customer Services indicated that the transformation programme was an essential change.
- The Committee was advised that the Council's substantial capital programme needed to be well-researched to ensure it did not affect service provision. The meeting was reminded that many of the services provided by the Council were discretionary.
- The Director of Finance advised that the New Homes Bonus grant paid by central government to the Council was approximately £3million. [The Director of Finance confirmed subsequently that the amount in the New Homes Bonus reserve was £4.5million, of which £2million was already committed for projects and a further £2.2million proposed for future use, with a possible uncommitted balance of approximately £300,000.]

The Chairman thanked the Lead Councillor for Finance and Assets, Customer Services, and the Director of Finance for attending.

OS25 REVIEW OF GRANTS

The Chairman welcomed the Lead Councillor for Community Health, Support and Wellbeing, the Policy and Partnerships Manager, and the Community Development Manager to the meeting.

The Lead Councillor for Community Health, Support and Wellbeing introduced the report submitted to the Committee. She advised that the report set out the recommendations arising from the former Grants Review Panel. The Lead Councillor for Community Health, Support and Wellbeing indicated that the proposals aimed to focus support and protect funding for voluntary organisations working with vulnerable residents. She informed the Committee that the recommendations included a smaller Voluntary Grants Scheme and the replacement of the Community Grants Scheme with a new Aspire Grants Scheme. The Committee was advised that the Voluntary Grants and the Community Grants Schemes would operate in the usual way for the last time in the 2020-21 financial year.

During the ensuing questions and discussion, the Committee was provided with information and members made a number of points:

- In reply to a question about the overall decrease in funding for the Citizens Advice (CA) in the Borough, the Lead Councillor for Community Health, Support and Wellbeing indicated that the Council would be working with the CA to explore different ways of working. The Policy and Partnerships Manager confirmed that the Voluntary Grants Scheme was an annual, discretionary scheme and organisations such as CA could not assume they would receive funding from the scheme.
- A member of the Committee questioned whether the proposed changes would act against rural areas, with urban areas more likely to apply for funding from the Council. The Policy and Partnerships Manager suggested that the grants schemes and the proposed crowdfunding platform were well-suited to rural areas. He advised that the use of the proposed crowdfunding platform would demonstrate if there was local support for a project and, in addition to Council funding, perhaps help attract corporate sponsors.
- A Councillor suggested that the Committee request a report detailing the amount and use of the New Homes Bonus.
- With reference to the funding priorities within the report and the responsibility of the NHS, the role of the Council in funding voluntary organisations working with mental health services was questioned. In response, the Committee was advised that the NHS was unable to fund such provision and that the Council's funding priorities were based on Corporate Plan commitments.
- The Policy and Partnerships Manager confirmed that the priority groups identified in the report submitted to the Committee might be re-aligned following the upcoming refresh in Corporate Plan priorities.
- The meeting was advised that the proposals included ending the current Voluntary Grants Scheme and incorporating the expenditure within existing service budgets, with funding agreements for specified services then arranged with voluntary organisations.
- With reference to the under-subscription of the Community Grants Scheme in recent years, members questioned its promotion. The Community Development Manager indicated that the scheme could have been promoted more widely. The Policy and Partnerships Manager advised that the Community Grants Scheme had been slightly soft-pedalled to enable virement of funds from the Community Grants Scheme to the Voluntary Grants Scheme. The Lead Councillor for Community Health, Support and Wellbeing suggested that Councillors could be more active in their communities in promoting available grants.
- The Committee was advised that the estimated annual cost to the Council of the proposed crowdfunding platform was £80,000. The Policy and Partnerships Manager indicated that the fee charged on Council and private contributions to crowdfunding projects was likely to vary according to the operating and funding model of the provider, particularly the extent of community engagement activity.
- The Community Development Manager indicated that historically many of the unsuccessful applications to the Community Grant Scheme had requested funding to create posts and consequently had been judged unsustainable. The meeting was advised that the criteria for different grants schemes are published on the Council's website.

- The Community Development Manager advised the meeting that the Council's Wellbeing team offered advice on other funds available and that there was no longer a separate forum or briefing provided.
- The Policy and Partnerships Manager advised that the Committee's comments on the draft proposals would be considered by the Executive.

The Chairman thanked the Lead Councillor for Community Health, Support and Wellbeing, the Policy and Partnerships Manager, and the Community Development Manager for attending the meeting.

OS26 OPERATION OF LEISURE MANAGEMENT CONTRACT 2018-19

The Chairman welcomed the Lead Councillor for Tourism, Leisure, and Sport, the Leisure Services Manager, and the Contracts Officer, Leisure Services.

The Lead Councillor for Tourism, Leisure, and Sport, summarised the report submitted to the Committee.

In response to questions from the Committee, a number of points were made and clarifications offered:

- The Committee was advised that the installation of a Combined Heat and Power (CHP) unit at Guildford Spectrum had contributed financial savings. In response to further questions, the Leisure Services Manager advised that gas had been judged the best option to power the CHP unit, preferable to alternative fuels such as a biomass CHP system. In addition, the Leisure Services Manager provided an outline of other energy saving initiatives at the leisure facilities, including solar panelling, LED lighting, and variable speed drives.
- Committee members suggested that the reduction in leisure membership numbers could be linked to staff reductions. The Leisure Services Manager indicated that membership numbers had probably been affected by the decisions not to staff the reception in the Spectrum gym and to introduce a turnstile, and by the cost of the gym.
- Members of the Committee questioned how the objectives for service provision set out in the Leisure Partnership Agreement (LPA) were measured. In reply, the Leisure Services Manager informed the meeting that the objectives of the LPA were not quantifiable easily and were broad aims and perceptions.
- Members raised issues about the maintenance of Guildford Lido, including pool algae. The Leisure Services Manager advised Committee members that stopping the use of cyanuric acid would help address the issue of algae growth.
- Members also questioned the closure of the paddling pool in the summer. In response, the Committee was informed that the paddling pool had been shut as a precaution because of the main filtration system struggling to keep pace with the demand at times in the small area of water due to the higher volume of potential contaminants. The meeting was advised that options were under consideration, but the cost of installing a separate filtration system for the paddling pool would be significantly over £100,000 if that were to go ahead.

- The Contracts Officer, Leisure Services, confirmed that issues raised by members about disposable cups and unnecessary heating at the Spectrum would be followed up.
- A member of the Committee indicated that, in addition to the summaries within the provider's annual report, a further breakdown of the Customer Satisfaction Surveys would be desirable.
- The Chairman summarised the discussion, indicating the Committee's support for investment in Guildford Lido.

The Chairman thanked the Lead Councillor for Tourism, Leisure, and Sport, the Leisure Services Manager, and the Contracts Officer, Leisure Services for attending the meeting.

OS27 MATTERS OUTSTANDING FROM PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Committee considered information on matters outstanding from previous meetings; namely, the cost of installing water fountain / bottle-filling facilities; the age at which care leavers' housing applications are reviewed and considered in the same way as other housing applicants; and details of the oversight the Council has over the farmers on Council-owned land.

RESOLVED: That the updates on matters outstanding from previous meetings be noted.

OS28 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered a report setting out the Overview and Scrutiny work programme for 2019-20.

The Committee was advised that three extra items could be added to the work plan as a result of a work programme meeting the previous day: the Crematorium Project; North Downs Housing Ltd: business plan update; and the Council's Property Investment Strategy. In addition, members of the Committee agreed to add a report on the amount and use of the New Homes Bonus to their work programme.

RESOLVED: That, subject to the addition of the four items above, the Overview and Scrutiny work programme at Appendix 1 of the report submitted to the Committee be agreed.

The meeting finished at 8.50 pm

Signed

Date

Chairman