

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

19 January 2021

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

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| * Councillor Dennis Booth | * Councillor Ramsey Nagaty |
| * Councillor Colin Cross | * Councillor George Potter |
| * Councillor Graham Eyre | Councillor Tony Rooth |
| * Councillor Angela Goodwin | * Councillor Deborah Seabrook |
| * Councillor Tom Hunt | * Councillor Fiona White |

*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), and James Steel (Lead Councillor for Environment) were also in attendance.

OS46 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no apologies for absence.

[Councillor Tony Rooth indicated subsequently that due to technical difficulties he had been unable to join the meeting.]

OS47 LOCAL CODE OF CONDUCT AND DECLARATION OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS

There were no declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests.

OS48 MINUTES

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings held on 10 November 2020 and 1 December 2020 were agreed.

OS49 RESPONSE TO COVID-19 – UPDATE

The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery introduced the item, referring to the level of COVID-19 infection rate and the introduction of the vaccination programme. He indicated that G Live might have developed into a mass vaccination centre by the end of February or beginning of March. In addition, he praised police, hospital staff, Council workers, and local communities for their efforts during the pandemic. The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery advised the meeting of a Guildford Philanthropy-organised donation of 50 laptops for secondary school students.

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 475 per 100,000 – similar to the rate for the South East (475.5) and the national rate (468.8) – and the Guildford rate had decreased to 387.3 per 100,000. The Managing Director advised that in the previous week there had been 5,682 new cases in Surrey, of which 577 were in Guildford. The meeting was informed that as at 18 January there were 1,443 registered COVID-related deaths in Surrey, with 115 in Guildford.

The Managing Director advised the meeting of key COVID-19 issues: the national lockdown; continuing support and services for the most vulnerable; business support; Council services; staff sickness; financial implications; and mass vaccination. The Committee was informed that both Shawfield Day Centre and Park Barn Day Centre were being used for food parcel deliveries. The Managing Director outlined the grants and funding available to support businesses impacted by the pandemic. He confirmed the maintenance of essential Council services such as waste and recycling, revenues and benefits, and emergency housing repairs. The Committee was advised that the financial implications for the Council of the new lockdown were likely to be similar to those from the previous lockdown, with a reduction in income from fees and charges and additional spending to support residents. The Managing Director advised the meeting of vaccination sites, including G Live.

In response to questions, the meeting was advised that vaccinations at G Live had increased over the first week and the intention was to deliver approximately 1,100 appointments each day in the second week. In addition, the meeting discussed the need to communicate vaccination-related information to the public.

A member of the Committee indicated that the Guildford Lions were refurbishing and distributing laptops to schools to help children without suitable equipment for home-schooling. The meeting was advised that unneeded laptops could be donated to Guildford Lions.

The Committee members agreed that an update on the response to COVID-19 be provided to the next Committee meeting in two weeks' time.

OS50 LEAD COUNCILLOR QUESTION SESSION

The Chairman welcomed the Lead Councillor for Resources and reminded the meeting of Councillor Anderson's main areas of responsibility: finance; commercial asset management; and procurement.

The following information and responses were provided during the ensuing discussion:

- In reply to a question about the impact of the pandemic on the Council's commercial assets, the Lead Councillor for Resources indicated that in 2019-20 the Council's commercial assets were valued at £153.4m, giving rent receipts of £8.4m and a yield of 6.3 percent. He stated that units at the redevelopment of Midleton were selling rapidly. With reference to the impact of the pandemic on the Council's income, the Lead Councillor for Resources indicated that some rent deferrals and changes to payment terms had been agreed with businesses. He suggested that the pandemic had speeded up an already existing process of retail decline. The Lead Councillor for Resources advised the meeting of the financial success of the Council's investment strategy, along with the need to keep the approach up to date and ensure it considered the needs of local businesses.
- In reply to a question, the Lead Councillor for Resources indicated that adoption of the Procurement Strategy in 2020 had been a key change in the organisation and a significant step change in terms of approach to sourcing and contracting. He stated that Council services had responded well to the change and were largely on board with the strategy ensuring engagement for any expenditure over the new threshold of £1,500 (previously £10,000). The Lead Councillor for Resources informed the Committee that he was confident the new procurement measures and procedures in place would deliver the right outcomes for the Council.

- In response to a query about the government's proposed changes to procurement for local authorities, the Lead Councillor for Resources advised the meeting that the consultation on the green paper for procurement reform closed on 10 March 2021 and the timeframe for enacting any changes was unknown. He indicated that there was new guidance in effect currently for below Find a Tender levels which allowed the Council to specify that only suppliers located in a geographical area could bid. He indicated the guidance permitted the Council to reserve some procurements for small and medium enterprises or for voluntary, community and social enterprises.
- The Lead Councillor for Resources indicated his priorities within his portfolio, confirming that his financial priority was the budget. He informed the meeting that balancing the budget for 2021/22 was assisted substantially by the Local Government Finance Settlement in December with government being more generous than we had expected and providing an additional £1.4 million. In addition, he confirmed that four capital projects had been removed from the 2021/22 budget [the museum, public realm, bike share, and the town centre gateway]. The Lead Councillor for Resources stated that budgets up until March 2026 still showed a cumulated deficit of nearly £6 million.
- The Lead Councillor for Resources indicated that within the commercial assets area of his portfolio his priority was to maintain the performance achieved. He advised the Committee that his priority for procurement was to ensure the new procurement protocol was embedded fully and savings achieved.
- The Lead Councillor for Resources advised the Committee that progress towards a new Corporate Plan had been made in 2019 and in 2020 prior to the pandemic. He stated that the top corporate priority was the budget.
- The Lead Councillor for Resources indicated that as part of the budgeting process a survey of the views of Guildford's population across the borough had been undertaken to help both the budgeting process going forward and the next Corporate Plan. He advised the meeting of the priorities identified from this survey of residents: services to elderly and vulnerable; environmental services; public health and safety; economic development, business, jobs, and employment. The Committee heard that the process to develop and adopt the new plan would involve working through group leaders to involve all councillors and the Council's executive advisory boards.
- In reply to a question about the representativeness of the survey of residents, the Director for Resources advised the meeting that the survey was representative of the population of the Borough. The Strategy and Communications Manager suggested that it might be possible to provide further detail and breakdowns of the survey data for Councillors.
- The Lead Councillor for Resources confirmed that the survey was intended to identify residents' priorities and inform decision-making within the Council.
- The Lead Councillor for Resources was asked about his confidence in the Council's level of borrowing to fund development. He stated that the Council needed to borrow £400 million to fund an ambitious investment programme, although interest rates were predicted to remain low for some time and the Council would begin to receive income once its developments completed. He indicated that the risks of borrowing were under control at the Council.

- In response to a question about his vision for the Borough, the Lead Councillor for Resources indicated the key importance of the town centre masterplan and other regeneration projects, together with the need for the Council to plan and deliver more social and affordable housing for the whole Borough. He stated that the waiting list for Council housing in the Borough was far too long.

The Chairman thanked the Lead Councillor for Resources for attending and answering questions.

OS51 REVIEW OF THE ANNUAL REPORT AND MONITORING ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE OPERATION OF THE G LIVE CONTRACT 2019-20

The Lead Councillor for Environment introduced the item and provided a brief overview of the ninth contract year. The Committee was advised that due to the pandemic the G Live venue was operational for less than six months of the contract year. The Lead Councillor for Environment indicated that 2019-20 produced a surplus that resulted in almost £60k being returned to the Council. He thanked the members of the overview and scrutiny G Live working group for their work and praised the role of G Live as a vaccination centre.

A member of the overview and scrutiny G Live working group, present at the meeting as a member of the Committee, confirmed that the venue appeared to be on for a record year until the pandemic hit.

A member of the Committee asked about the advisability of re-tendering the contract for running G Live during the pandemic and the other options available with the current contract with HQ Theatres Guildford Limited (HQT) expiring in 2021. In reply, the Lead Councillor for Environment indicated that the existing contract could be extended by up to five years.

In reply to a question, the Leisure Services Manager assured the meeting of the financial viability of HQT and indicated he had no current concerns for their cash flow or stability.

The Contracts Officer outlined the climate change implications of the report to the meeting. She informed the Committee of past and future plastic-free initiatives at G Live and advised of the introduction of LED lighting. With reference to a new contract for the operation of the venue, the meeting heard a suggestion that the Council be able to measure and monitor the environmental impact of the operator. A member of the Committee suggested that once the coronavirus restrictions were lifted it would be worthwhile using the foyer and other areas of the venue to promote environmental impacts.

With reference to a new contract, the Lead Councillor for Environment suggested a prioritisation activity for events at G Live could be undertaken at an executive advisory board meeting.

A member of the Committee questioned the time it had taken HQT to develop G Live as a successful business. In response, the Contracts Officer advised that establishing a new venue in the marketplace had been expected to take a number of years. The Leisure Services Manager indicated that HQT had improved performance year on year and suggested the operator had exceeded expectations held at the outset of the contract period.

With reference to events at G Live that had been postponed due to the pandemic, the Committee heard that a high percentage of customers had either retained tickets or exchanged them for gift vouchers.

The Leisure Services Manager confirmed that the use of the venue as a vaccination site had been funded by COVID-19 recovery grants from Surrey County Council; there had been no cost to the venue or the NHS.

In response to questions, the meeting heard from the Leisure Services Manager that a defect had been discovered with how fireproofing had been fixed under cladding on the building and that this was being progressed with the builder. He advised that Surrey Fire and Rescue Service was aware of the matter and any actual evacuation of the venue should not be materially affected.

The Chairman thanked the Lead Councillor for Environment and officers for attending and answering questions.

OS52 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Senior Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) advised the meeting that a request had been received from officers to reschedule the Impact of Brexit item from March to a later meeting. In addition, the meeting heard that nominations had been invited from Group Leaders for membership of the Committee's two task and finish groups.

The meeting was informed that the one matter outstanding from previous meetings should be addressed by the report on traveller encampments / traveller strategy and policy scheduled for the March 2021 Committee meeting.

With reference to the Future Guildford item to be considered at the Committee's meeting on 2 February 2021, members requested that information be provided on staff welfare and an analysis provided of the reasons for staff leaving (excluding retirement and redundancy).

The Committee agreed the rescheduling of the Impact of Brexit item from March to a later meeting, and that the report on the Submission of a Garden Village bid for Wisley Airfield be considered at its April 2021 meeting.

The meeting finished at 8.43 pm

Signed

Date

Chairman