

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – SERVICES

30 September 2024

* Councillor James Walsh (Chair)
Councillor Bilal Akhtar (Vice-Chair)

The Mayor, Councillor Sallie Barker MBE	* Councillor Maddy Redpath
Councillor Geoff Davis	* Councillor Joanne Shaw
* Councillor James Jones	Councillor Katie Steel
Councillor Steven Lee	* Councillor Jane Tyson
* Councillor Sandy Lowry	* Councillor Catherine Young

*Present

Councillors Catherine Houston (Lead Councillor for Commercial Services), Richard Lucas (Lead Councillor for Finance and Property), and George Potter (Lead Councillor for Environment and Climate Change) were also in attendance, with Councillors Carla Morson, (Lead Councillor for Community and Organisational Development), and Fiona White (Lead Councillor for Planning) in remote attendance.

OSS15 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

The Committee was advised of apologies from Councillors Bilal Akhtar, Sallie Barker, Geoff Davis, Steven Lee, and Katie Steel. Councillors Philip Brooker and Vanessa King attended as substitutes for Councillors Sallie Barker and Steven Lee respectively.

OSS16 LOCAL CODE OF CONDUCT AND DECLARATION OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interest.

OSS17 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 July 2024 were approved.

OSS18 LEAD COUNCILLOR QUESTION SESSION

The Chair introduced the Lead Councillor for Commercial Services, Councillor Catherine Houston.

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

- With reference to the energy use and ageing appearance of the Spectrum leisure centre, a member of the Committee asked about the options under consideration for the centre and suggested the value in scheduling the matter for review by an overview and scrutiny committee. In response, the Lead Councillor for Commercial Services advised that the Spectrum had been built in the 1990s and received continued investment and upgrades throughout its life. She indicated that the current contract ended in October 2025 and the appointment of a new operator was the first step in deciding the future of the facility. The Lead Councillor for Commercial Services advised the meeting of possible grant opportunities to reduce energy usage at the leisure centre and the introduction of carbon-reduction measures. She indicated that making the Spectrum more carbon neutral would be a key aspect of the new contract.
- The Lead Councillor indicated the value in increasing the membership of the overview and scrutiny Leisure Partnership Agreement working group to help ensure a cross-party input into the procurement process. In response to a question about the commitment involved in membership of the working group, the meeting was advised that it was expected the group might meet three or four times a year. The Assistant Director, Commercial Services, indicated that the remit and expansion of the overview and scrutiny working group was to be considered later in the meeting. He advised the Committee of the outline timetable for the procurement of an operator for the Council's leisure facilities and indicated that the first meeting would take place the next day.
- In reply to a question, the Lead Councillor for Commercial Services and the Assistant Director, Commercial Services, advised the meeting of current efforts to reduce energy usage at the Spectrum, including the installation of pool blankets and shower aerators. The Assistant Director, Commercial Services, indicated that the life expectancy of the Spectrum building exceeded the period of the new 10-15 year contract.

- In reply to a question about pavement parking, the Lead Councillor for Commercial Services confirmed that the issue was the responsibility of Surrey County Council and suggested that residents affected raise the issue with their county councillor. The Lead Councillor for Commercial Services suggested the value of the former Guildford Joint Committee in dealing with such issues.
- In response to a question about a petition for year-round-swimming at the Lido and the financial viability of such a proposal, the Lead Councillor for Commercial Services advised that the Lido ran at a loss of £140k per year and keeping the facility open for winter swimming would be challenging. She advised the Committee of current works fitting new boilers at the Lido, in addition to the installation of pool blankets and winter maintenance. The Lead Councillor for Commercial Services indicated that she hoped out of season activity at the Lido might be offered as part of the new contract arrangements. The Assistant Director, Commercial Services, informed the Committee of the difficulties of making the Lido financially viable during the winter.
- A member of the Committee asked about the accountability of the operator for unplanned closures of the Spectrum leisure centre. The Lead Councillor for Commercial Services referred to the need for planned closures of facilities as part of a cycle of maintenance and suggested the contractor was liable for unplanned closure penalties. The Assistant Director, Commercial Services, indicated that there were numerous penalty charges specified within the current contract, including those relating to unplanned closures, lack of cleanliness, and speed of repairs. He stated that councillors would be kept informed of the planned three-week closure of the Spectrum during November.
- A member of the Committee suggested that the information on leisure events that was provided to councillors be added to the Council's website. The Assistant Director, Commercial Services, thanked the member and noted that while leisure information was available through Visit Guildford the Council's website links could be improved.
- In reply to questions about the increased charges for car parking, especially in the town centre, a member of the Committee requested information on the income and usage of the Council's car parks. The

Lead Councillor for Commercial Services advised the Committee of the April 2024 increases in car parking charges and the measures to encourage usage of long-term shopper car parks. She noted the importance of reducing car movements and improving air quality and spoke of the need to balance this with support for Guildford town centre, local businesses, and the local economy. The Committee was told that for Quarter One, 2024-25, car parking income was up twenty percent and the number of tickets sold was six percent higher. The Lead Councillor for Commercial Services advised that despite Sunday car parking charges rising to be put into line with the rest of the week, transactions on Sundays had increased by 11.5 percent. She indicated that dwell time had increased in shopper car parks due to the introduction of the buy two hours get one free offer. The meeting was informed that even with fewer car parking spaces and increased charges, the increased income and usage showed the Council's car parks were popular.

- In reply to a query, the Assistant Director, Commercial Services, advised that key performance indicators for the Council's car parking service would be reported through the quarterly performance monitoring reports to the Committee.
- A member of the Committee described the difficulties town centre businesses had in recruiting staff, especially for low income jobs, when car parking charges were set at £2 per hour. The Lead Councillor for Commercial Services suggested that employers might provide car parking for staff if they wanted to attract workers. She indicated that following a request from Experience Guildford a scheme for low-paid workers in the nighttime economy was under development. The Assistant Director, Commercial Services, advised that details of the scheme, such as which car parks would be included, were to be finalised with Experience Guildford.
- In reply to a question about re-establishing the park and ride service at the Spectrum, the Assistant Director, Commercial Services, indicated that Guildford's park and ride services were run by Surrey County Council and the bus companies.

- The Lead Councillor for Finance and Property noted the importance to the Council of income from commercial services and its reliance on car parking revenue.
- The Lead Councillor for Environment and Climate Change noted the importance of co-operation with Surrey County Council to ensure a co-ordinated approach that incentivised use of the park and ride scheme and reduced town centre car parking.
- In response to a request for an update on Bright Hill car park, the meeting was advised of the development of the adjacent Robin Hood pub site and associated remedial work to the car park site. The Assistant Director, Commercial Services, advised that the instability of the Bright Hill site meant it was not economically viable to build housing on it, and one solution would be to sell a portion of the Bright Hill car park to fund stabilising of the remainder of the site and re-opening parking spaces.
- The meeting was informed that Guildford's Christmas lights went on every year after Remembrance Sunday. A member of the Committee advised that a Guildford Festive Family Day was planned for Sunday 24 November.
- The Lead Councillor for Commercial Services was asked how the Council could better use and promote the heritage of the Borough. In response, the Lead Councillor for Commercial Services spoke of the work of the Council's Heritage Service, the recent heritage weekend, and efforts to engage children with their local heritage, including facilitated or unfacilitated visits to sites. She indicated the prominence of learning within the Heritage Service offer, the potential value of volunteer groups interested in the history of the Borough, and the likely importance of the work of the overview and scrutiny task group reviewing the Heritage Service.
- With reference to the overview and scrutiny task group on Heritage Service and Tourist Information Centre, the Assistant Director, Commercial Services, advised the meeting of some rationalisation within the Heritage Service, a desire to restructure the service, and a focus on increasing volunteer involvement.

The Chair thanked the Lead Councillor for Commercial Services and the Assistant Director, Commercial Services, for attending and answering questions.

OSS19 BOROUGH RESPONSE TO REFUGEES

The Lead Councillor for Community and Organisational Development apologised for attending remotely. The Assistant Director, Community Services, introduced the report submitted to the Committee. She advised that the Council participated in supporting refugees through three central government led schemes: ARAP (Afghanistan Relocation and Assistance Policy), Community Sponsorship, and the Homes for Ukraine Scheme. The Assistant Director, Community Services, explained the role of the Council's refugee and resettlement team. With reference to the closure of an asylum bridging hotel in the east of the Borough, the Committee was informed that the next central government asylum dispersal scheme was unknown but due to the constant nature of the issue an initiative was to be expected.

The Assistant Director, Community Services, indicated that the Council's refugee and resettlement team employed a number of Ukrainians, which helped in particular with the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

During the ensuing discussion a number of issues were raised and responded to:

- The Committee was informed that the Council's refugee and resettlement team consisted of two staff members, plus an additional staff member from regulatory services completing relevant housing compliance checks and a housing officer working specifically on the resettlement schemes.
- In reply to a question about the resourcing of the refugee schemes, the Assistant Director, Community Services, advised that the funding of the refugee schemes as such was not the main issue, rather there was a need for central government to adequately support statutory services such as education and mental health services.
- A Committee member thanked the Assistant Director, Community Services, and the Family Support Team Leader – Refugee and

Resettlement Lead, for their work at the East Horsley hotel used to house asylum seekers.

- In reply to a question, the Committee was advised that Guildford Borough had one of the highest intakes of refugees within Surrey. The meeting was informed that an increase in refugees from Ukraine was expected during the winter. The Assistant Director, Community Services, praised Guildford's church network and indicated that many of the refugee hosts belonged to church communities.
- With reference to support for Ukrainian children, a member of the Committee questioned the Council's involvement with schools. In reply, the Assistant Director, Community Services, stated that direct involvement with schools was limited to occasions when issues arose.
- In reply to a question about the Council's efforts to encourage host families for refugees, the Assistant Director, Community Services, suggested the reduction in hosts could be attributed to the cost of living crisis and the impacts from dealing with the traumatic experiences of refugees. In addition, the meeting was advised that many of the Ukrainian refugees wanted independence and had viewed staying with a host as a stepping stone.
- The Assistant Director, Community Services, stated that while there was continuous marketing to attract people to be hosts, coverage of events in the news tended to encourage potential hosts to come forward. The Lead Councillor for Community and Organisational Development spoke of the efforts across the local area to help refugees and suggested the report demonstrated Guildford to be an inclusive Borough. The Lead Councillor for Finance and Property noted that in as well as host families, many parts of the community helped and sought to make refugees feel welcome and wanted.
- With reference to sections 7.11 - 7.13 of the report submitted to the Committee, the Chair requested more information regarding the offer of housing provided by Mears and the ability for officers to exercise discretion for any ARAP family wanting to move to Guildford with appropriate funding support. The Assistant Director, Community Services, advised that Mears was a housing provider subcontracted by

the Ministry of Defence to source homes for larger Afghan families living in temporary accommodation. She indicated that a Home Office scheme for ARAP families to find their own private accommodation was for a three year period and it was at the discretion of the Council whether to support the family for the three year period and receive the tariff funding. The Assistant Director, Community Services, indicated that what would happen to families after the three year lease period was a concern because the Council would then have a responsibility to re-house families unable to remain in a property. She indicated that the Executive would be asked to delegate authority to officers to decide whether to support the allocation of ARAP families wanting to move to Guildford. The Committee agreed to recommend to the Executive its support for delegating authority for such decisions to the relevant Strategic Director and Assistant Director.

Committee members praised the Assistant Director, Community Services, and the Family Support Team Leader – Refugee and Resettlement Lead for their work supporting refugees.

RESOLVED: That the Executive be recommended to support the delegation to officers of decisions relating to ARAP families as outlined in sections 7.11-7.14 of the report submitted to the Committee.

OSS20 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT, 2023-24

The Senior Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) introduced the item. He indicated that the report submitted to the Committee outlined the work undertaken by overview and scrutiny (O&S) during the past municipal year and the ongoing work programmes of the Council's two O&S committees. In addition, the Senior Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) advised the meeting that the four decisions taken during the past municipal year under the urgency provisions were outlined in section 11 and detailed in appendix two of the report.

The Senior Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) advised that on 10 September the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Resources had considered the O&S Annual Report and agreed to the suggestion at section 18.3; namely, that all key decisions taken as a general exception would be reported by the Leader of the Council at the next ordinary meeting of full Council. The Committee was informed that this change would improve

confidence that key decisions are made under the general exception provisions only when there were good reasons for doing so.

With reference to the resourcing of O&S, the Committee was informed that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Resources had recommended to full Council that the O&S budget of £5k be re-established.

With reference to the discussion during the Lead Councillor question session item, the Committee was reminded of the need to widen the remit of the O&S working group setup to scrutinise the monitoring of the Leisure Partnership Agreement contract to include looking at the tender process for the new contract.

A member of the Committee questioned whether, following the meeting of the Corporate Governance and Standards Committee on 26 September, Section 106 contributions and related issues would be reported to overview and scrutiny. In response, the meeting was updated on the outcome of the Corporate Governance and Standards Committee meeting on 26 September and informed that further discussions were to be held regarding the appropriate forum for the reporting and monitoring of Section 106 funds.

RESOLVED: (I) That the report submitted to the Committee be commended to full Council as the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report, 2023-24.

(II) That the current rules relating to call-in and the urgency provisions remain unchanged, subject to the addition that whenever the general exception provisions are used to take key decisions in accordance with Access to Information Procedure Rule 15 the details of those decisions shall be reported by the Leader to the next ordinary meeting of the Council.

(III) That an Overview and Scrutiny budget of £5k per annum be re-established.

(IV) That the remit of the overview and scrutiny Leisure Partnership Agreement working group be expanded to include scrutiny of the process of procuring the new leisure contract and that nominations for additional members be sought.

The meeting finished at 8.55 pm

Signed

Date

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – SERVICES:
30 SEPTEMBER 2024

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Chair