

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – RESOURCES**

14 January 2025

\* Councillor Philip Brooker (Chair)

\* Councillor Dominique Williams (Vice-Chair)

\* Councillor Phil Bellamy

Councillor Dawn Bennett

\* Councillor Honor Brooker

Councillor Jason Fenwick

\* Councillor Stephen Hives

\* Councillor Vanessa King

\* Councillor Masuk Miah

\* Councillor Richard Mills OBE

\* Councillor Katie Steel

\* Councillor Sue Wyeth-Price

\*Present

Councillors Catherine Houston (Lead Councillor for Commercial Services), Richard Lucas (Lead Councillor for Finance and Property), Julia McShane (Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Housing), and Carla Morson (Lead Councillor for Community and Organisational Development) were also in attendance, with Councillors Merel Rehorst-Smith (Lead Councillor for Regulatory and Democratic Services) and Fiona White (Lead Councillor for Planning) in remote attendance.

**OSR31 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

The Committee was advised of an apology from Councillor Dawn Bennett.

**OSR32 LOCAL CODE OF CONDUCT AND DECLARATION OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS**

There were no disclosures of interest.

**OSR33 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 December 2024 were approved.

**OSR34 IMPROVEMENT PLAN - 6 MONTH UPDATE**

The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Housing and the Chief Executive both declined the Chair's invitation to comment, and the item began with questions from Committee members.

During the ensuing discussion a number of points were responded to, and clarifications offered:

- With reference to the development of an improved approach to complaints, a member of the Committee asked for a breakdown of Council complaints and requested information on complaints about anti-social behaviour (ASB), particularly those relating to housing. In response, the Head of Business Improvement advised the meeting that in the previous 12 months the Council had received approximately 15 complaints about ASB. She informed the Committee of the timeframes for responding to corporate complaints and advised that within housing services a draft ASB policy was shortly to be consulted on and guidance for officers was being developed. The Head of Business Improvement indicated that details of other ASB services were available on the Council's website. She advised that any further available performance data could be provided to the Committee member.
- In reply to a question on the commencement of the Council's new procurement strategy, the Head of Business Improvement confirmed that fresh procurement regulations would be introduced in February and the Council's Strategy would be considered by the Executive and by overview and scrutiny prior to its introduction in the spring.
- In response to a query about the introduction of a process to monitor the exercise of officers' delegations, the Head of Business Improvement indicated that the proposed action was dependent on full Council approving the new officer decision making protocol. She outlined the proposed approach and informed the meeting that training on the new procedures would follow the adoption of the protocol.
- In reply to a question on the delay to recruit permanent procurement staff, the Assistant Director of Finance advised the Committee of a delay to recruiting to a shared procurement team (with Waverley Borough Council) and a recent decision to recruit procurement officers for the Council.
- In response to questions on the progress and timescale of implementing the Council's Improvement Plan, the Head of Business Improvement referred to the progress achieved within the first six months of the

three-year plan and acknowledged that significant issues and risks remained. She stated that the main driver for the plan was to address the risk of the Council failing its Best Value Duty. The Chief Executive indicated that the purpose of the three year improvement plan was broader than avoiding a risk of failing the Best Value Duty; he indicated that the plan aimed to improve services for residents and businesses and ensure that services provided excellent value for money.

- In reply to a question on the need for councillors to prioritise their own training, the Chief Executive outlined the benefits to the organisation of having engaged and trained councillors and officers.
- A member of the Committee praised the work undertaken by officers on delivery of the Improvement Plan before questioning whether delivering the recommendations within it would correct the strategic shortcomings of the Council that had been identified in the SOLACE report. He suggested that the range and depth of the issues and risks where the Council had been found wanting by the SOLACE report, especially a culture of quick fixes for issues rather than longer lasting solutions to resolve the causes of problems, required greater action and change than was laid out in the plan. In reply, the Chief Executive acknowledged the differences between the strategic issues raised in the SOLACE report and the specific recommendations it proposed. He indicated that delivery of the SOLACE recommendations would not automatically solve the underlying issues identified by SOLACE. He advised that the Independent Assurance Panel had been established because of a SOLACE recommendation and that the Panel would support the Council in addressing its strategic issues. The Chief Executive noted that the improvement plan was a living document and would be continually updated and added to, and that the actions within it were themed around the specific strategic objectives desired. The Head of Business Improvement indicated that in addition to the SOLACE report, work from different areas of the Council (such as the all-staff survey and tenant satisfaction measures) was beginning to inform the Improvement Plan.
- In response to a question on the need to set benchmarks and targets for the Corporate Strategy, the Head of Business Improvement indicated that the delivery plan for the Strategy was under development and would be considered by overview and scrutiny prior to its adoption in

late spring. She advised that actions to deliver the Corporate Strategy would be measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.

- In reply to a question, the Assistant Director of Finance informed the Committee that the Council's reserves had been returned to the levels that the Section 151 Officer judged appropriate.
- With reference to appendix 3 of the report submitted to the Committee, the Chair welcomed the offer from the Independent Assurance Panel to assist in assessing the options on Weyside Urban Village. The Head of Business Improvement informed the Committee that there was a finance specialist on the Panel and support on such a major programme for the Council would be welcomed.
- In response to a question, the Head of Business Improvement indicated that the Council's HR capacity was a challenge. She advised the meeting that there was a strategic review of the HR function underway and that this included the structure, practices, procedures, and policies within the service. In addition, the Head of Business Improvement indicated that a workforce strategy was under development. The Chief Executive added that the day-to-day running of HR was not a concern, rather it was the strategic aspect of the function that had been identified by the Independent Assurance Panel.

RESOLVED: (I) That the Executive be recommended to accept the offer from the Independent Assurance Panel to assist with the assessment of the Weyside Urban Village options.

(II) That the Committee's continued scrutiny of the Council's Improvement Plan at the anticipated six-monthly frequency of the Independent Assurance Panel reporting to full Council be noted.

### **OSR35 PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT 2024/25 QUARTER 2**

The Chair reminded the meeting that the Committee was concerned primarily with the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) within two of the Council's priorities: decent and affordable homes and a resilient and well-managed council. He confirmed that all Committee members had had time to consider the supplementary information published earlier that day on the Decent Homes Standard, Council housing voids, and Affordable Housing.

The Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager introduced the report submitted to the Committee. He advised the Committee that of the thirty KPIs reported on for quarter 2 of 2024-25, three were red rated and six were to be confirmed due to performance data not provided and service targets not agreed.

A Committee member praised the Council's call wait times and the improvement in staff retention achieved. She asked if the departments or services requiring increased staff resource or management restructuring to deliver improvements had been identified. The Chief Executive advised that some results from a recent staff survey were expected to be received by the end of the month, including breakdowns by department. He identified housing, planning, and corporate services as three areas under stress at that time.

With reference to the percentage of Freedom of Information (FOI) and Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) responses provided within the statutory timeframe, a member of the Committee asked if the downward trend was due to process or resource issues across departments. In reply, the Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager suggested that a written response would be provided to Committee members to explain the variances between service areas. The Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Housing suggested that an assessment of the FOI requests received and a corresponding increase in information provided on the Council's website might reduce the number of FOI requests submitted to the Council. The Chief Executive suggested the importance of tackling failure demand within the Council.

In response to a suggestion from a Councillor, the Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager agreed to provide the number of FOI and EIR requests for previous quarters within the information provided for the COUNC 10 KPI.

A member of the Committee questioned why the background information provided for the HOMES 1, Decent Homes Standard KPI, in quarter 1 had not been included for quarter 2 and requested that the missing information be provided. In reply, the Strategic Director for Housing, Communities, and Environment indicated that he could provide further written information to the Committee.

With reference to the HOMES 2, Housing repairs completed on time KPI, a member of the Committee questioned if new contractors had been secured and a programme of works agreed. The Strategic Director for Housing, Communities, and Environment indicated that emergency one-year contracts were in place and the procurement of longer-term contracts was being planned. He advised that the capacity of the Council’s own direct labour organisation would be reviewed.

A member of the Committee noted that the reported number of void housing properties held within the Housing Revenue Account had increased from 145 in quarter 1 of 2024-25 to 215 in quarter 2 of 2024-25. In reply, the Strategic Director for Housing, Communities, and Environment indicated that the quarter 1 figures had under-reported structural voids and the quarter 2 increase was not as considerable as presented in the report. He suggested there would be a decrease in voids reported for quarter 3.

The Chair thanked officers and Councillors for attending.

**OSR36 NEXT MEETING**

The Chair advised the meeting that the Committee’s next meeting would consider the Council Budget proposals on Tuesday 21 January at 7pm.

The meeting finished at 8.02 pm

Signed .....

Date .....

Chair