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Guildford Borough Council

Report to:	Full Council
Date:	3 December 2024
Ward(s) affected:	All
Report of Director of:	Pedro Wrobel, Chief Executive
Report Author:	Pedro Wrobel
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Lead Executive Member:	Cllr Julia McShane
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Status:	Open
Key decision:	No

Improvement Plan – 6-month progress update

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 On 23 July 2024, Council endorsed the report on the SOLACE governance reviews and the Improvement Plan. The Improvement Plan aims to address the recommendations from the reviews and achieve our outcome of meeting our Best Value duty and becoming a well-managed and resilient council. One of the recommendations of the SOLACE report, agreed by Council as part of the Improvement Plan, is that Full Council should receive an update, every six months.
- 1.2 This report is the first of these six-monthly updates. It summarises the activities and achievements of our first six months of Guildford Borough Council's Improvement Plan. It is presented to Council alongside the first assessment from the Independent Assurance Panel (see Appendix 3).
- 1.3 The Council remains committed to delivering the Improvement Plan and becoming a resilient and well-managed council for our residents, communities, businesses, and staff.

- 1.4 The Council has made significant progress against the Improvement Plan over the last 6 months. In particular, clear direction has been established through the Corporate Strategy and Values; financial monitoring has improved, and the Council closed its accounts on time for the first time in recent years. Financial planning is underway and aligned to our strategic objectives. Progress has been made in improving governance with numerous revised policies and procedures. The Housing service has strengthened their compliance with Financial and Procurement rules and have increased their engagement and work with the Tenant Engagement Group. There has been progress in improving our culture and service delivery and the staff survey should give us more information to work with. Section 7 set out this progress in more detail.
- 1.5 Whilst progress has been made in the first six months, the Council's aim of delivering the Improvement Plan and meeting our statutory duty to deliver Best Value requires continued effort, dedication and collaboration from both Members and Officers. The Council recognises there is more to do to improve our operations, governance and culture, and deliver the high-quality services that our communities, tenants and businesses deserve. The Improvement Plan takes a risk-based approach, recognising we cannot deliver all the actions at once. The actions and timescales within the Improvement Plan are reviewed regularly to ensure it reflects the Council's priorities and the Council has sought the support from the Independent Assurance Panel on this prioritisation.
- 1.6 The Independent Assurance Panel is playing a critical role in monitoring and advising on these efforts, ensuring that Council has visibility and assurance on its journey of improvement. The Council is grateful for the support the Independent Assurance Panel has given in the first six months of the delivery of the Improvement Plan and welcomes their independent assessment on the Council's progress.

2. Recommendation to Council

That the Council resolves:

- 2.1 To note the progress made in the first six months of Guildford's Improvement Plan.
- 2.2 To refer this report to Overview and Scrutiny - Resources, for the purpose of reviewing the report and the progress being made with the delivery of the Improvement Plan.

3. Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 Monitoring delivery is central to provide assurance on the progress being made by the Council against its Improvement Plan, and that we are fulfilling our statutory duty to deliver Best Value.
- 3.2 Scrutiny of the Improvement Plan demonstrates transparency and good governance.

4. Status of Report

- 4.1 No parts of this report are exempt from publication.

5. Strategic Priorities

- 5.1 The Improvement Plan supports the Council's Corporate Strategy 2024-2034 by contributing to the Corporate Priority: *Priority 5: A resilient and well-managed council.*
- 5.2 By delivering our Improvement Plan, the Council is developing an improved governance framework, culture and operations and is the key strategic work programme for the delivery of the outcome: *The Council has delivered its Corporate Improvement Plan and is consistently and effectively meeting its statutory duty to deliver Best Value.*

6. Background

- 6.1 On 23 July 2024, Council endorsed the report on the SOLACE governance reviews and the Improvement Plan which aims to address the recommendations from the reviews and achieve our outcome of meeting our Best Value duty and becoming a well-managed and resilient council.
- 6.2 The Improvement Plan has six objectives, and the actions contribute to delivery of these objectives. These are Strategic Direction, Value for Money, Governance, Culture, Service Delivery, and Housing. Within the Housing objective, there is a linked improvement plan focused on addressing the Housing recommendations within the SOLACE Governance Review of the Housing Landlord function.
- 6.3 In July 2024, Council also agreed to appoint an Independent Assurance Panel for three years to monitor the Council's progress and provide an independent view to Council every six months. The Panel has four members, two of whom were the lead members of the SOLACE review team. The panel members each have different specialities and focuses: Leadership, Governance, Housing and Finance.
- 6.4 The first assessment from the Independent Assurance Panel is included alongside this progress report on the Improvement Plan (see Appendix 3).
- 6.5 The Improvement Plan is a live programme of work and is expected to evolve to remain relevant and responsive to emerging priorities, changes in our internal and external environment and best practice.
- 6.6 It is also expected to change and evolve with learnings from the Independent Assurance Panel, the Regulator of Social Housing, our Executive and Corporate Leadership Board, our staff, internal audit and the Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

7. Improvement Plan progress

- 7.1 The Council's Improvement Plan is themed by 6 objectives that we want to deliver, and the actions contribute to these. Progress has

been summarised in this section, and specific updates, including slippages, are provided in the Appendices.

- 7.2 Overall, there has been significant progress in improving the Council's governance, operations and culture and the Council is proud of the efforts of both Members and Officers on this progress. There have been slippages, and the Council is working hard to mitigate these delays and have a clear path forward for delivery. We recognise the considerable amount of work still required to deliver our Corporate Strategy objective of becoming a Well-Managed and Resilient Council. The Improvement Plan is a long-term programme of work that will adapt to the Council's challenges and priorities as needed.

7.3 Strategic Direction

Within this objective, there are 14 actions, of which 12 are completed. The delivery of this objective has been paramount as this work establishes the foundation for everything the Council does and starts the journey to deliver more for our residents, businesses and communities.

The adoption of our Corporate Strategy, alongside our internal shared values, in July was the beginning of setting clear strategic direction for the Council. This has provided a clear focus for the development of the annual Delivery Plan, budget planning process, service planning, performance management and risk management.

There is ongoing work to engage with our residents, businesses, communities, partners and staff around our Corporate Strategy. There have been internal event launches for staff at Millmead, the Hive, Woking Road Depot, Stoke Park and Heritage sites. A series of engagement events with our partners are also in progress. These conversations will inform the development of the Delivery Plan 2025-2026.

The outstanding actions include a LGA Peer Review, scheduled for mid-next year, and developing new strategies that align to our Corporate Strategy and provide direction for the Council's service delivery. These are in progress and the Delivery Plan should be finalised in Spring 2025.

7.4 Value For Money

Twelve out of the 16 actions are complete within this objective. Notably, Guildford closed its accounts on time, and our budget and Medium-Term Financial Planning (MTFP) began much earlier than previous years and is progressing in partnership with services and the Executive. The Council also boosted its reserves position with a VAT refund of circa £3.5m in September and reviewed its capital programme. We have also improved budget monitoring processes and revised our Financial Procedural Rules.

The new Procurement Strategy has been delayed but will now be moving forward for approval. However, officers and members have had training and briefing sessions on the new Procurement Act, and we are in the process of implementing a new contracts database to improve contract management and visibility. There is now a reporting schedule to the Executive on our Procurement Pipelines to improve our transparency and forward-planning with our upcoming procurements.

There is work to do to review the finance staff structure and recruit more permanent staff within our Finance and Procurement teams, to replace the interim staff in post. The Council will also be progressing the budget planning process in response to the Autumn Budget and Local Government Finance Settlement announcements.

7.5 Decision-making and Governance

Improving our governance and decision-making is key to ensuring our services are delivered in the right way for our residents, tenants and communities. Twelve out of the 25 actions have been completed.

There has been significant progress made within this objective. There has been training for Members and Officers in Best Value, Member/Officer Protocol, and decision-making. Statutory officers now meet regularly and there is work progressing to improve Executive decision-making and officer decision making, and monitoring these delegations.

The Joint Constitutions Review Group has helped revise several policies and procedures which were approved subsequently including the Officer Employment Procedure Rules, Council Procedure Rules, Financial Procedure Rules, Contract Procedure Rules, Local Choice Functions, Scheme of Delegation to Officers and a Joint Protocol on Councillor and Officer relationships.

There is ongoing work to improve the operation and arrangements of our committees and to support Members. This includes improving our scrutiny function and the Council's arrangements for our Companies, Charities and Trusts so the Council fulfils its duties in respect of the shareholder function and in respect of best value and continuous improvement.

The Constitution Review will continue, with a timeline of September 2025 for completion. There will be ongoing work to support staff and Members to embed the governance changes across the Council.

7.6 Culture

Nine out of the 13 actions have been completed, with the aim of building a public service culture within the Council that is outward-facing, innovative and supports partnership working with our communities and businesses.

The Council has updated the Whistleblowing Policy, established a weekly staff briefing and increased our communication with services and stakeholders. Staff networks have been created.

There has been a delay in receiving the independent cost-benefit analysis which has delayed subsequent actions to review our collaboration partnership with Waverley Borough Council. Progress has been made and we are now anticipating an update on our Collaboration with Waverley Borough Council to be presented in early 2025.

7.7 Service Delivery

To ensure our service delivery is focused on achieving the right outcomes for residents and businesses, we have completed 9 out of the 11 actions.

Notably, our corporate performance and risk frameworks have been reviewed. This has led to the need to develop a new risk management strategy which aligns to our Corporate Strategy. There have been initial improvements to our performance reporting, and this work will be ongoing to improve our corporate, service and project performance delivery, monitoring and reporting.

A new service planning process has been developed, aligning to service budget and resources. This is in progress and will continue alongside the budget planning process.

There also been an initial review of the Council's operating model to consider how the Council handles different processes and the relationship between the case and frontline services. This has recently concluded and there now will be work to understand and implement the recommendations.

7.8 Housing

The Housing objective has its own Housing Improvement Plan which is delivered by different services across the Council. Fifteen out of the 38 actions have been completed.

There has been significant progress in improving the knowledge and compliance with financial and procurement processes within Housing. Housing complaints have been reviewed, with service improvements made and Housing staff will be a key stakeholder in the wider Complaints Review for the Council. The Housing Service has undertaken a skills and qualification audit which will inform the service's future training needs. The Council now has a permanent Strategic Director and Assistant Director who lead our Housing service, and there have been two staff days to bring Housing staff together and prioritise key areas for the service.

The Housing service has strengthened its relationship with the Tenant Engagement Group and there is now a Housing Operations Board to keep the Council accountable to tenants and Members in its performance, policies and decision-making. Following our regulatory judgement, there has been continued engagement with the Regulator of Social Housing to assure our compliance with statutory duties.

Some Housing actions have slipped due to capacity. They are all in progress but will take longer to complete than anticipated. We have brought in additional resource to support the Housing service.

Recruitment of permanent staff in Housing is an ongoing challenge due to the labour market and the need to have immediate expertise to support the Council during this crucial time of improvement.

Looking forward, the Council will use the findings from the external assessment of how we meet the new Consumer Standards as well as learnings from the Regulator of Social Housing inspection at Waverley Borough Council to review the Housing Improvement plan. There may be a need to re-prioritise existing actions and add new work. This will happen with our staff, Tenant Engagement Group and the Executive. We will continue to communicate progress to Councillors and the Housing Operations Board.

Whilst good progress has been made, the Council recognises that there is significant work needed to improve our Housing governance, culture and operations so our tenants and service users experience a high-quality service from the Council.

7.9 New Actions

The Council has developed new actions which will be added to the Improvement Plan.

Housing

- Review Housing General Fund budgets to ensure correct appropriation between the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account (Finance & Housing)
- Develop a glossary of terms and acronyms used within housing to improve our communications and inclusion with colleagues, partners and residents. (Housing)
- Review and update our terms of reference for Housing-related Boards and Group meetings (Housing)
- Develop and implement Housing service policies that respond to legislation and ensure a consistent approach to delivering Housing Services for our residents and tenants.

Governance

- Develop a S151 Protocol (Finance/Legal & DS)

- Develop a joint approach for the development and monitoring our Annual Governance Statement so it is better used as an improvement tool within the organisations (Finance, with key services)

Service Delivery:

- Improve the way we deliver programmes and projects by developing a new joint methodology and framework that is proportionate and aligns to our Corporate Strategy. (Strategy & Corporate Services)
- Review and develop an improved approach to complaints, ensuring that public voices and concerns are central to our learnings, processes, systems and culture (Communications & Customer Services)
- Develop a new risk management strategy and approach to meet sector best practice. (Strategy & Corporate Services)
- Review our use of data, considering how we can improve accessibility and use of data, our data culture, literacy and maturity to improve our decision-making and service delivery. (Strategy & Corporate Services)

Value for Money:

- Review the way the Council manages debt recovery: considering our approach to debt consolidation across services, debt enforcement and supporting residents and businesses (Finance)
- Prepare for the Budget and MTFP process 2026/27, ensuring it aligns to our Corporate Strategy, service planning and Improvement work. (Finance, Strategy & Corporate Services, Feb 2025-March 2026)
- Explore considered and appropriate income-generating opportunities to improve our financial sustainability. (Commercial Services)
- Review and consider a coordinated approach to the use of Interims with the aim of reducing our reliance and spend. This includes developing a policy and a plan to reduce interim spend as well as reviewing our People Offer to recruit and retain talented permanent employees. (Finance, HR)

Culture:

- Review our HR structure, practices, procedures and policies to ensure we are meeting sector standard, providing the right

support for employees and improving service delivery. (HR, Legal & Democratic Services)

7.10 Engagement and Communications on the Improvement Plan

An [external webpage](#) on the Improvement Plan was created in July 2024, and this was updated in November 2024.

From May 2024, there have been monthly email updates on Improvement Plan progress to all councillors, our Tenant Engagement Group and staff. An internal staff site on the Improvement Plan is also in place.

The Council has started a Guildford Improvement Champions Group which is an internal staff group. It is for all staff who want to be involved in Guildford's Improvement. The Group meets monthly at different sites including the Hive, Guildford House, Woking Road depot and Stoke Park Nursery. Their suggestions are helping the Council shape training, staff engagement and ways of working.

7.11 Looking forward

As a Council, we are proud with what we have delivered so far, but this is a long-term programme of work and there is still much to do and the implementation of the Improvement Plan will continue.

As a live programme of work, there will be changes and additions to the actions and the timelines in which we want to deliver them by.

The Council will also receive the internal audit findings on the Improvement Plan in Quarter 3 from which we will use to learn and make any changes to our framework.

8. Consultation

8.1 The Group Leaders, the Overview & Scrutiny and Corporate Governance and Standards Committee chairs, the Portfolio Holder, the Corporate Leadership Board, and the Executive have all been briefed on this report.

8.2 As part of our recommendations in Section 2, we are proposing that Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Resources review this report as part of their work programme.

8.3 The Housing Operations Board received an update on the Housing Improvement Plan on 25 September.

9. Key Risks

9.1 The two SOLACE reports identified a number of corporate and service level risks that the Council needs to respond to. The key risk identified in the reports was that the Council is at serious risk of failing in its statutory duty to deliver best value and the Improvement Plan has been designed to address the issues identified.

9.2 The Improvement Plan takes a risk-based approach knowing the Council cannot deliver all the actions at once. The actions and timelines within the Improvement Plan are reviewed regularly to ensure it reflects the Council's priorities and the Council has sought the support from the Independent Assurance Panel on this prioritisation.

10. Legal and Governance Implications

10.1 Section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999 provides that the Council "must make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness". Section 4 of the Act, as amended by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, provides that the Council must have regard to statutory guidance when deciding how to fulfil that duty.

10.2 The SOLACE report in early 2024 concluded that the Council is at serious risk of failing in its statutory duty to deliver best value and their recommendations are designed to assist the Council to avoid such a failure.

10.3 Section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 provides that the Council must designate one of their officers to be known as the Monitoring Officer, and that it shall be the duty of that officer if it appears to them that any proposal, decision or omission by the

Council has given rise to a contravention of any enactment, to prepare a report to the Council.

10.4 In July 2024, we reported to Full Council that there is a risk that the Council is failing to comply with the provisions of the Local Government Act 1999 in respect of the best value duty, but the delivery of the Council's Improvement Plan should negate that risk and ensure continued compliance.

10.5 The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government has the power, under section 230 Local Government Act 1972, to issue a formal Best Value Notice on a local authority, to obtain assurance in respect of securing continuous improvement. Ultimately the Secretary of State has the power under s15 Local Government Act 1999 to intervene by way of statutory directions where satisfied that a local authority is failing to comply with its Best Value Duty.

11. Financial Implications

11.1 In early 2023, significant financial issues were identified, and the Council was warned of the risk of being in a s114 position in July 2023. The Council approved a Financial Recovery Plan in August 2023, which set out a plan to deal with the financial deficit and had a separate workstream dealing with improvements to financial governance.

11.2 A significant amount of work has been done to address the key risks identified, but there is still work to be completed and this is captured within the Improvement Plan. The Financial Recovery Plan has been superseded by the Improvement Plan.

11.3 Investment has been required to improve governance across the Council and to strengthen both the finance and legal functions as part of the Improvement Plan.

11.4 Resources needed to deliver the Improvement Plan are part of the Council's annual budget setting process for 2025/26.

12. Human Resources Implications

12.1 There are actions within the Council's Improvement Plans that rely on input from the Council's HR function. A key action included in the Improvement Plan is to ensure the Council has a refreshed and effective people strategy in place which has been drafted.

13. Equality and Diversity Implications

13.1 There are no direct Equality and Diversity Implications arising from this report.

14. Climate Change and Sustainability Implications

14.1 There are no direct climate change / sustainability implications arising from this report.

15. Next Steps

15.1 Officers recommend that the Council approves all the recommendations set out in section 2 of this report. Alternatively, the Council could resolve not to agree or to amend any or all of the recommendations.

15.2 Full Council will receive the next update on the Improvement Plan in six months, Summer 2025.

16. Background Papers

16.1 [SOLACE Governance Review](#)

16.2 [SOLACE Housing Governance Review](#)

16.3 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/best-value-standards-and-intervention-a-statutory-guide-for-best-value-authorities>

17. Appendices

Appendix 1: Improvement Plan – with updates

Appendix 2: Housing Improvement Plan – with updates

Appendix 3: The Independent Assurance Panel’s Report to Full
Council on the Corporate Improvement Plan

Report clearance progress:

Finance	Richard Bates	20/11/2024
Legal & Governance	Susan Sale	22/11/2024
Human Resources	Francesca Chapman	15/11/2024
Equalities	Ali Holman	15/11/2024
Strategic Director	Pedro Wrobel	13/11/2024

Guildford Borough Council: Improvement Plan

Key: Completed/in place, On track, Not Started Delayed

Strategic Direction: Establish a clear strategic direction and values for the Council, providing a basis for performance management and continuous improvement						
Objectives	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
1. Coordinate all improvement activity relating to the themes of this Corporate Improvement Plan, including all SOLACE report's recommendations.	1.1 Draft an improvement plan, for which the Chief Executive and CLB will be accountable.	May 2024	6.2, 6.8	Chief Executive	CGSC 15 May Full Council 23 July	First 6 monthly update – Dec 2024
	1.2 Corporate Governance and Standards Committee to scrutinise the Plan and Full Council to adopt plan, with progress reported to Council six monthly for three years.	July 2024	6.8	Chief Executive	Full Council 3 December	
	1.3 Appoint a Head of Business Improvement to lead on developing and coordinating actions at pace to deliver the plan.	May	6.8	Head of Business Improvement	n/a	
2. Develop a corporate approach to continuous improvement to ensure it is resourced and treated as business as usual by all services.	2.1 Appoint an Independent Improvement and Assurance Panel to provide a critical friend function.	Completed	6.9	Chief Executive	CGSC 15 May Full Council 23 July Council: 3 December for first report	Year 1: Monthly meetings since August 2024 Year 2 & 3: quarterly meetings Terms of reference agreed.
	2.2 Carry out an initial restructure of JLT to address governance and finance capacity and capability.	Completed	4.4, 7.14		Head of Paid Service	
	2.3 Propose new structures to be agreed by Executive as part of 2025/26 Budget process following options appraisal of capacity and capability.	Budget to be approved February 2025	4.4, 7.14		Budget process dates (5.5)	
	2.4 Arrange a peer review for 2025/26	Summer 2025	6.3		n/a	Agreed with LGA: May 2025
	2.5 Carry out peer review	May 2025	6.3	Chief Executive	TBC Council	Initial conversations with LGA Autumn 2024
	2.6 Create a refreshed Annual Governance Statement template to ensure it is used as an improvement document. Provide training for staff developing the statement.	August 2024	6.4	Strategic Director of Finance (\$151)	n/a	
	2.7 Annual Governance Statement to be prepared by Finance, consulted on with Executive and O&S and owned by CLB, prior to formally being taken to Corporate Governance and Standards Committee for adoption and review mid-year.	Draft AGS by September 2024	6.4	Statutory officers	Executive Briefing 11 September CGSC 26 September Next: May 2025 TBC	Document has been used as an improvement document, with input from different teams. Internal audit on AGS Autumn 2024. Use findings (& WBC Findings) to improve AGS 24/25. AGS working group created.
3. Produce and embed a strategic framework (including strategies, policies, risk and performance management approaches) and set of	3.1 Develop and publish corporate strategy	July 2024	7.13i 7.13ii	Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services	O&S 10/11 July Executive 15 July Full Council 23 July	Link to Corporate Strategy Engagement events – external and internal planned for Autumn/Winter 2024.

Guildford Borough Council: Improvement Plan

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values that articulate the Council's vision and priorities, and provide a golden thread through service delivery and performance management	3.2 Develop and publish corporate values	May 2024	7.13iii, 9.12		Internal only – By the Wey May 2024	Values were published in May internally to staff and added to Intranet. Posters around GBC sites.
	3.3 Communicate the new strategy, values, challenges of the Council and the Improvement Plan.	July 2024	7.16		Comms plan shared with Executive 19 July.	Live comms plan in process. External webpages of Improvement Plan and Corporate Strategy being refreshed: Autumn 2024
	3.4 Review the range of strategies and policies, identify gaps, clarify timescales and ensure resources in place, starting with people strategy, IT strategy and procurement strategy.	Review: July 2024 Ongoing	7.15		New strategies will run through committee process.	People Strategy and Procurement Strategy in development.
Value for money: Ensure we provide the best value for money by embedding effective finance practices with sufficient capacity, and alignment between the organisation's priorities and its use of resources, including procurement and contract management.						
Objectives	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
4. Establish and embed effective finance and budget policies and procedures with sufficient permanent capacity and resource to create accountability of budget holders .	4.1 Redesignate the S151 officer as a Strategic Director, reporting to the Chief Executive.	Completed	7.4	Chief Executive		
	4.2 Appoint a permanent Section 151 Officer, reporting directly to the Chief Executive	Completed	7.3			
	4.3 Revised and implement financial and budget policies and procedures for consistency and clear ownership, with a clear plan for regular review.	Completed	7.5,10.3 10.11	Strategic Director of Finance (S151)	Financial Procedural Rules: Full Council July 2024	
	4.4 Ensure capacity and capability of the finance team through recruitment of permanent staff. Recruitment of permanent staff launched, to replace some of the interims.	Ongoing	10.11		TBC	Finance structure will be reviewed. Joint Away Day with GBC & WBC finance colleagues – August 2024
	4.5 Finalise the Budget book and implement to improve finance knowledge and ensure ownership by the budget holders. Relaunch Budget monitoring reporting processes. Finalise all budgets and ensure sign off by s151 officer.	Budget book issued Expenditure report published May 2024	10.3 10.11		n/a	Budget books - Guildford Borough Council
	4.6 Implement improved budget planning and processes that are documented and reviewed regularly.	Completed and ongoing	10.3 10.11		n/a	Progress commenced earlier this year with reporting starting in July 2024.
	4.7 Regular review of approved and provisional capital programme to ensure continued relevance and prioritisation of spend	First iteration completed Autumn 2023, ongoing.	10.7		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic Programmes & Project Board Executive Working Group: ongoing Revenue & Capital Outturn Report 23- 	Ongoing review of the capital programme.

Guildford Borough Council: Improvement Plan

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					24: Executive 3.10.24	
5. Ensure accountability to the public purse through revised contract award and management controls, and alignment with the priorities of the Council.	5.1 Renew Procurement Strategy and pipelines	New Procurement Strategy in Summer 2024	7.15		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capital and Investment Strategy 2025-26 to 2029-30: Council 5 Feb 2025 	
	5.2 Implement appropriate controls around contract awards and management, with robust monitoring and a new reporting regime.	New reporting being developed	8.12 9.11	Strategic Director for Legal and Democratic Services Strategic Director of Finance (\$151)	TBC likely to be part of procurement reporting to committee	Procurement Pipelines report has been approved at Executive 3.10.24, a further paper discussing awards will come later. Procurement Strategy went to Joint Leadership Team 6/11 for feedback.
	5.3 Recruit Head of Procurement.	Spring 2024	7.15	Strategic Director of Finance (\$151)	n/a	Commenced June 2024
	5.4 Emphasise accountability to the public purse, and value for money, through the Corporate Values.	May 2024	9.9 10.12	Strategic Director of Finance (\$151) Chief Executive	Internal – Corporate values	Corporate Values adopted – VFM included.
	5.5 Commence Budget and MTFP processes in the summer. This will align with the Corporate Strategy.	MTFP review started in July 2024	9.9 10.12	Strategic Director of Finance (\$151)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update report – Resources O&S 9/7, Council 23/7 MTFP Update - Resources O&S 10/9 Council 8/10 MTFP Update - Resources O&S 12/11 Council 3/12 Potential MTFP Update: January 25 Budget Setting - 14/1/25 Resources O&S, 23/1/25 Executive, 5/2/25 Council 	Budget scrutiny training delivered 10/9 to O&S.

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	5.6 Put together service review programme with in-depth reviews into services which procure large contracts in order to identify any issues that might exist.	September 2024	11.10			Budget challenge sessions completed for every service. Challenge packs have included budgets, establishment, bids, savings, income and contract information	
	5.7 Replenish the Council's reserves position which has been depleted in recent years, becoming an adverse indicator on OFLOG finance indicators.	September 2024	NEW		Budget updates to Committees	VAT return of Circa £3.5m received. £17.450 of usable and £17.961 of legally ringfenced. Review completed and some reserves moved and closed.	
6	Implement regular reviews and reporting arrangements which ensure value for money and best use of public money.	6.1 Corporate Governance and Standards Committee to consider formal action and/or a formal response to the External Auditors in respect of the Value for Money matters it raised in September 2023. The issues raised have been addressed through the Financial Recovery Plan.	Formal response to be presented at CGSC Cttee meeting	10.13	Strategic Director for Legal and Democratic Services Strategic Director of Finance (\$151)	Corporate Governance and Standards Committee	VFM response complete and will go to CGSC 29/9
		6.2 Ensure regular review of arrangements for managing the property portfolio and report to committee.	Review to be commissioned Summer 2025	10.7	Strategic Director of Finance (\$151) Strategic Director of Economy, Planning & Place	Fund Report is an appendix of annual Capital & Investment Outturn Report	
Governance: Implement effective governance across the organisation, so decisions are made at the right level, with accountabilities and responsibilities clear. Decision-making will be open and transparent, supported by evidence and a committee system that provides constructive challenge.							
Objectives	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update	
7	Increase officer and member awareness of the Best Value Duty , and improve quality of challenge between members and officers.	7.1 Member and officer development programmes to be revised and relaunched	September 2024	6.7, 8.18	Strategic Director for Legal and Democratic Services	Councillor Development Steering Group, CGSC	Joint Member Development Programme presented to Councillor Development Steering Group 14.10.24
		7.2 Briefing session on Best Value duty to be carried out for all staff and all members	Autumn 2024 October: Councillor training November: officer training	6.7		n/a	Delayed due to external trainer availability. Training to councillors: 17/10, SS will do follow up training to all officers in November/December.
		7.3 MO briefing note on Best Value duty will follow the briefing sessions.	June 2024	6.7		n/a	To mitigate the delay in 7.2, SS sent out a briefing note out to all councillors 01.07.24

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	7.4 Finance training to be provided to all members of Overview & Scrutiny Committee in advance of budget scrutiny	January 2025	9.3	Strategic Director of Finance (\$151)	n/a	External training delivered 20 June. Training offered before each O&S (resources)	
	7.5 Review and update our member / officer relationship protocol, including training for councillors and staff	March 2025	NEW	Strategic Director for Legal and Democratic Services	Full Council 23 July 2024	Training took place: Councillors on 8th July 25 July for officers (2 sessions) & 24 September	
8	Ensure decision-making happens in the right places with clear accountability .	8.1 Review and update the Council's constitution through JCRG, underpinned by a programme of training, followed by regular monitoring. (The Joint Constitutions Review Group is in operation, reviewing and updating the constitutions.)	Complete Constitution review by September 2025		9.13	Joint Constitution Review Group	Councillor Development Steering Group 14/10: training to be scheduled on the new Council, Procedure Rules (Mock Council meeting, Scheme of Delegation & decision-making).
		8.2 Joint Constitutions Review Group to include review of scheme of delegations, followed by regular review of schemes of delegation and decision-making protocols.	June 2024		8.20	Full Council 23 July 2024 Minor amends to Scheme of Delegations – MO delegated authority	Revised joint scheme of delegation approved, minor amends will be ongoing. Scheme of Authorisation for services - to be published on website
		8.3 Ensure process of monitoring the exercise of officers' delegations.	Develop process by July 2024.		8.12		Officers delegations were approved in July 2024, and the process of monitoring these was due to be commence in Autumn 2024.
	8.4 Ensure that all decisions are evidenced and recorded following good principles of public law. The development of the new Corporate Values emphasises the importance of evidence-based decisions, and cost-benefit analysis to deliver value for money.	Corporate Values adopted May 2024	9.14	Strategic Director for Legal and Democratic Services Strategic Director of Finance (\$151)		Ongoing	
	8.5 Implement revised and ongoing member and officer development programmes, training for officers on decision-making. Review capacity and training to ensure cost-benefit analyses underpin decisions.	Development programme relaunch September 2024	6.7	Strategic Director for Legal and Democratic Services	Councillor Development Steering Group, CGSC	Regular training for officers on decision-making Member officer development programme	
	8.6 Implement regular meetings of statutory officers with appropriate agendas and minutes, focusing on strategic issues, performance and risks, rather than on operational matters, including regular meetings with external auditors.	Completed	8.7 8.9	Chief Executive	n/a	Monthly meeting Terms of reference agreed and standing agenda. Minutes taken.	
	8.7 Officer decision-making will be reviewed to ensure decisions are made at the right level, with a decision	Completion September 2024	8.19i 8.8	Strategic Director for Legal and	JCRG November 2024	Officer meetings have been reviewed. Terms of references	

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	hierarchy, compatible terms of reference, agendas and minutes.			Democratic Services	CGSC January 2025 Full Council January 2025	<p>have been agreed for senior leadership meetings, and minutes are recorded.</p> <p>Officer Decision Making Protocol in development to provide guidance on the new officer delegations.</p> <p>Review of our Internal Boards will be ongoing.</p>
9 Undertake the Governance Work Programme to revise the constitution and ensure the Council uses best practice governance processes and procedures .	9.1 Reviewed Council Procedure Rules to be adopted	Completed	7.15		JCRG: 28 March CGSC: April Full Council: April	Adopted a new set of Council Procedure Rules in April 2024 Good practice to keep the committee terms of reference under review. Consideration of Council Procedure Rule 6: 21.10.24 JCRG
	9.2 Review the way Committees operate and plan their work, to ensure that council services are appropriately scrutinised.	Ongoing (see below)	8.17i, 8.3, 8.4			
	9.3 Review terms of reference of all Committees	May 2025	8.17		JCRG Work Programme 24/25 CGSC, Council.	CGSC & Audit committee terms of reference are being progressed. O&S Resources & Services terms of reference: JCRG Dec 2024, CGSC January 2025
	9.4 Review matters reserved to full Council and local choice functions	May 2025	8.17i		12 Aug 24 JCRG Sim Standards 26 Sept 8 October Council	
	9.5 Give consideration to a dedicated Committee to be responsible for the statutory audit function of the Council	May 2025	8.17iii		JCRG: 12 August, 12 October Sim Standards 26.09. CGSC 14 November	Review of the terms of reference of the Corporate Governance & Standards Committee and the new proposed Audit Committee
	9.6 Review operation of Executive, including agenda planning and decision-making	May 2025	8.17i 8.3		Review of Executive Working Groups 8/08/24	Executive Decision-Making Protocol Terms of reference review
	9.7 Review the way the Executive operates through the Executive Procedure Rules, bring the protocol to Full Council	May 2025	8.17i		Executive Decision Making Protocol &	Individual Executive Member Delegations

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					Individual Executive Member Delegations TBC	JCRG Jan 2025, CGSC February 2025, Council March 2025.
9.8 Review the effectiveness of the Council's scrutiny function, considering abolishing the Executive Advisory Boards and creating an additional Overview & Scrutiny Committee.	May 2024	8.17ii 8.4				EABS abolished, second O&S Committee in place. Overview & Scrutiny Procedure Rules on JCRG work programme
9.9 Review the arrangements and operation of the Executive Shareholder and Trustee committee to ensure good governance practice, and that the Committee has oversight and responsibility for the Council's shareholder relationships.	January 2025	10.14			CLB: Companies, Charities & Trusts (internal) JCRG: September Sim Standards 26 September Full Council October Joint Chief Executive: delegated authority for Director appointments	Executive Shareholder and Trustee committee 8 August. Next ESTC: 28 November: review of Council's governance arrangements. Appointment of a temporary company lawyer to review governance documents including Articles of Association and Shareholder Agreements and providing training to Trustees, Directors and Officers. Reviewing director appointments
9.10 Develop a written agreement and engagement Local Arrangements approach with the Unions Guildford Borough Council recognise which clearly states what we will consult on with them, and how we will engage with them.	January 2025	NEW	Strategic Director for Legal & Democratic Services	G&W Union Collaboration meetings		Started, being discussed at G&W Union collaboration meetings
9.11 Review the governance process and reporting on declarations of officer interests, gifts and hospitality	March 2025	NEW	Strategic Director for Legal and Democratic Services	TBC		
9.12 Develop a new Money Laundering Policy	Summer 2024	NEW	Strategic Director of Finance (\$151)	CGSC Spring 2024		Approved with Anti Fraud & Corruption Strategy, Anti Bribery Policy, Counter Fraud Policy & Fraud Prosecution Policy

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Culture: Embed a public service culture, outward-facing, innovative, building partnerships, listening to and working with our communities and businesses to deliver effective services that are value for money						
Objectives	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
10 Embed a positive culture of sharing information , whilst respecting the duty of confidentiality. We listen and respond to colleagues, residents and businesses.	10.1 Review, adopt and promote new whistleblowing policy.	Completed January 2024	8.13	Strategic Director for Legal and Democratic Services	Adoption by Executive, 25 January 2024 Annual Report 23/24: CGSC 16 Jan 2025	Next Review: Jan 2026
	10.2 Review officer code of conduct and HR policies.	Review officer code of conduct April – Jun 2024 & communicate to all staff by Summer 2024. Kick off review of all key HR policies Summer 2024	8.19iii 8.13 8.14	Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services	TBC	Code of Conduct and the related codes have been reviewed. Pay policy has been updated and interim JE framework and policies for joint posts introduced. Relationships at Work Policy complete, needs to be added to Constitution. Current focus for HR policy update is the bullying and harassment procedure to comply with new legislation and in response to union feedback.
	10.3 Training for all of JLT by HR specialist on how to conduct employment investigations.	Summer 2024		Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services	JLT (internal)	Training took place for 8 th October.
	10.4 Increase and improve communication between services, colleagues and stakeholders. Establish new weekly staff engagement forum has been to encourage a more open, collaborative culture.	Complete	9.8	Chief Executive	n/a	Weekly staff briefings – By the Wey 6 month review meeting of weekly staff briefings
	10.5 Ensure CLB explicitly takes a more open approach, including Member briefings on contentious issues, supported by clear confidentiality duty. All-Member briefing in May 2024 to run through this report and improvement plan.	Complete	9.8	Chief Executive	All-member briefing May 2024	
	10.6 Briefing for members and councillors on exempt and confidential information	Summer 2024	9.4	Strategic Director for Legal and Democratic Services	n/a	Completed 15 May

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	10.7 Share this report with Waverley Borough Council to discuss implications with WBC Members. Report shared with WBC, and members briefed.	May 2024	4.4 12.14	Chief Executive	n/a	Report shared with WBC Executive, WBC group leaders briefed
	10.8 Upskill key officers in fraud awareness and prevention	Summer 2024	NEW	Strategic Director for Legal and Democratic Services	n/a	Senior officer from housing, legal and finance attended and cascaded the training.
11 Embrace opportunities for innovative working , including through partnerships .	11.1 Waverley Borough Council to consider carrying out a similar review.	WBC have commissioned a review from SOLACE, date to be confirmed.	12.14	Chief Executive	TBC	Initial discussions with SOLACE have begun, planning for March 2025.
	11.2 Establish effectiveness of the collaborative working arrangements, including benefits. (£700k of financial savings delivered so far, with an additional £400k between both authorities budgeted for 24/25.)	Full cost benefit analysis to be produced over Summer	12.11 12.5	Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services Strategic Director of Finance (\$151)	Transformation & Collaboration Board (internal) Full Council.	Local Partnerships completing the independent cost-benefit analysis – delayed currently Group Leader session, JLT workshop complete. Expecting report in November.
	11.3 Review the: aims; short and long term priorities; programme governance arrangements; and current and future resourcing, of the Transformation and Collaboration Programme.	July 2024	11.12, 12.11 12.15, 12.8 10.9			Internal review complete, and update for GBC & WBC Executives will be presented in early 2025. Interim joint staffing arrangements were agreed at GBC & WBC Executives in October 2024.
	11.4 Develop a plan for spend on the Transformation and Collaboration Programme to access flexible use of capital receipts regime.	May 2024	10.9, 11.12			Flexible Use of Capital Receipts policy live in the Feb budget paper.
	11.5 Undertake a gap analysis between revised Transformation and Collaboration Programme and current resource and capability levels.	July 2024	12.15, 12.8, 10.9, 11.12	Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services	Due to some promotion and other team changes, WBC are Business Transformation Officer and Business Analyst resource. Recruitment to GBC due to start shortly so we have support within both councils.	

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Service delivery: Ensure effective service delivery, focused on achieving the right outcomes for residents and businesses, and supported by an effective performance reporting, risk-management, monitoring and audit regime						
Objectives	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
12 Review current arrangements for service delivery , ensuring the right processes are achieving the right outcomes.	12.1 Review the operation of the generic back-office team handling a range of different processes, and its relationship with front line services.	Autumn 2024	11.11	Assistant Director of Communications and Customer Service	CLB Hot Topics (internal) 4 November	In progress – staff interviews and data analysis have taken place by independent contractor. Reviewing data findings and finalising report: end of November completion
13 Ensure effective service delivery through monitoring, reporting, management and auditing of performance and risks , so that relevant service risks and outcomes are identified and measured, KPIs are strategically aligned, risks are analysed and mitigated and areas of underperformance are addressed. Ensure that performance and risk frameworks are meaningful and visible to Members.	13.1 Review internal audit plan quarterly as risks and issues emerge to ensure a more robust plan and review process	IA Plan reviewed May 2024.	8.15	Strategic Director of Finance (\$151)	IA annual report 23/24: CGSC 25.07 IA Plan update Q3 & 24/25 progress report: 26.10 IA Plan update Q4 14.11 IA 2024-25 progress report 23.1.25	IA planning moved to quarterly. Directors all consulted on next quarters priority
	13.2 Review performance and risk management frameworks to ensure there is a clear golden thread between strategic goals and performance monitoring. Ensure regular performance monitoring, ensure it is visible and informs decision-making.	July 2024	8.10	CLB and Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services	Quarterly reporting: Performance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources O&S Risk - CGSC 	Risk framework has been reviewed, agreed to develop a new risk management strategy & approach the Council that meets sector best practice
	13.3 Promote the existing Performance Agreement Process (PAM), guidance and documentation. Review PAM process in line with the newly developed corporate strategy and values once those are agreed and published.	Promote PAMs April – Align with strategy and values Summer 2024.	8.11 8.19ii	Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services	n/a	Annual PAMs Summer 2025: work currently on updating the behavioural framework
	13.4 Revise quarterly performance reporting format with changes to format of risk registers to include high level Red, Amber, Green dashboard and quarter-to-quarter direction of travel.	May 2024	8.19ii 8.10 8.11		CLB R&P (internal) Joint Risk management Group Q1 Corporate Risk Register	Risk register template developed that improves the format and has a risk heatmap, with direction of travel.
	13.5 Corporate risk register to be reviewed and updated by CLB and Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services on a quarterly basis.	Completed 26 March 2024. Quarterly reviews to take place	8.10	CLB and Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services	Register CGSC 26.09.24 Q2 Corporate Risk Register CGSC 14.11.24	
	13.6 Ensure service risks are reviewed by JLT members at quarterly risk management group meetings, with any key matters escalated to CLB.	Quarterly reviews by JLT	8.10	Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services	Joint Risk Management Group (internal)	

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					CLB: R&P (internal)	
	13.7 Corporate and enterprise portfolio risk registers to be reviewed at least quarterly by CLB.	Quarterly review by CLB	8.10	CLB	Internal – CLB Risk & Performance	
	13.8 Implement a system for the consistent design and approval of service plans and their associated budgets, providing clear accountability and reflecting the scheme of delegations approved by the Council. Revised service plan design with section for budgets, awaiting JLT approval.	New service plan design and finalise documents July 2024	8.11 11.9 10.3	Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services	Internal – JLT September & October 2024, developed in consultation with portfolio holders.	Assistant Directors working on new service plans: Autumn 2024. Will be rolled out alongside budget for next f/y
	13.9 Continue collaborative working between Finance and Strategy & Corporate Services to produce service plans with accurate budget information	New service plan design and finalise documents July 2024	8.11 11.9	Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services Strategic Director of Finance (\$151)	Part of budget reporting to committee	Service plans have been designed with Finance, to ensure our service delivery and planning aligns with our budget and resources.
	13.10 Following a review of our risk framework, develop a new risk management strategy and approach to meet sector best practice.	Adoption for April 2025	NEW	Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services	CGSC: 16.01.25 Executive: 23.01.25 Full Council: 5.02.25	In progress: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> RM strategy working group Risk appetite workshop Risk Survey Draft strategy presented at CLB Risk & Performance 27/11
Housing: Ensure that housing services are effective, value for money, and recognise the vital importance of providing a safe and secure home						
Objectives	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
14 - Ensure robust governance and assurance controls are in place for Housing Services	14.1 Develop and implement a comprehensive action plan to address the findings and recommendations of the SOLACE governance review of housing	Completed	Hsg review	Strategic Director of Housing, Communities & Environment	CGSC May 2024 & Full Council July 2024	Commenced implementation with workstream leads within Housing.
15 - Ensure that landlord services are compliant with legislative requirements, including building safety and the four Consumer Standards	15.1 Commission an external expert assessment against the new Consumer Standards, to include a gap analysis and recommendations for action	Commissioned	Hsg Review	Assistant Director of Housing	Housing Operations Board Tenant Engagement Group Committee TBC	Housing Quality Network (HQN) appointed to complete a mock inspection against all RSH consumer standards over the summer, to identify areas of compliance and improvement. Findings due 4 December
16 - Deliver high quality value for money housing services	16.1 Implement a transformation programme for housing services to achieve best in sector outcomes for residents, building on the findings of the SOLACE review and external assessment.	Winter 2024		Strategic Director of Housing, Communities & Environment	Housing Operations Board & TEG	Phase 1 SOLACE Actions started; external assessment findings will be added after 4 December

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Leadership						
Ref	Actions	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
H1	Develop an improvement plan for Housing with a particular focus on leadership, cultural change, tenant engagement, building and tenant safety, compliance, staff training, procurement and budget monitoring.	Complete	1	Strategic Director Housing, Communities & Environment	CGSC 15 May Council 23 July Council 3 December	This will evolve as we receive findings from our external assessment.
H2	Introduce performance management culture, including more comprehensive monthly compliance reporting and assurance, and regular review by CLB and Scrutiny. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To review KPIs and monitor key decisions, risk logs and improvement plans at directorate management meeting. Ensure regular monitoring reports including the risk register, voids, budget monitoring and contract awards reviewed at least quarterly by directorate management teams, with non-compliance tackled swiftly. 	May 24	2, 3, 7 and 21	Assistant Director of Housing	Corporate Performance Monitoring: Overview & Scrutiny (resources) Housing Operations Board	Housing SMT meeting bi-weekly. 2024/5 KPI review completed with team leaders, and work ongoing on our performance reporting.
H3	Refresh the Housing Strategy, in partnership with stakeholders and residents to help align housing service plans to wider aspirations for Guildford Borough Council's people and places, and the Social Housing Regulation Act. Ensure the Corporate Strategy feeds into the Housing Strategy and vice versa.	December 24	4 and 5	Assistant Director of Housing	Housing Operations Board & Committee Early 2025 TBC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New Housing Strategy & Enabling Manager started in August 2024. Housing Strategy development in process, will be shaped with TEG & stakeholders. Anticipating the draft to be complete for December 2024, and committee approval will be early 2025. Corporate Strategy approved July 2024
H4	Ensure a permanent Joint Strategic Director of Housing is in place and has adequate time to devote to Housing, amongst their other priorities.	Summer 2024	8 and 9	Chief Executive	Joint Senior Staff Committee	<p>Permanent Strategic Director for Housing, Communities and Environment in post.</p> <p>The SD has been supporting Planning and Regeneration services due to a vacancy. The new SD of Economy, Planning & Place will be starting in November.</p>

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H5	Review the entire Housing staffing structure and ensure that it is fit for purpose, is robust and has the necessary capacity and skills. Ensure all job profiles are up to date and reflect organisational and service needs.	Phase 1 June 24 Phase 2 December 24	10 and 16	Assistant Director of Housing	TBC	Phase 1 complete: pivotal roles recruited to in compliance & repairs: Phase 2 will be a comprehensive review.
H6	Agree a Corporate Vision and Values and ensure that this is reflected and fully embedded within Housing. Ensure a 'golden thread' approach exists so that the Corporate Strategy feeds into the Housing Strategy, and in turn, feeds into team plans and Appraisal Targets	December 24	11 and 12	Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services	Corporate Strategy, 23 July Council Housing Strategy TBC.	Values discussion featured at all housing staff event June 2024 and embedded into performance appraisals. Housing strategy work will align with Corporate Strategy, and inform housing service plans, team plan and 1:1s.
H7	Introduce a performance culture. Ensure all housing staff have regular 121s, annual appraisals, with clear work-based and behavioural targets, with 6 monthly reviews and development plans.	September 24	13 and 27	Assistant Director of Housing	n/a	Housing have met with Corporate HR & OD. Housing staff completed PAMs in Summer 2024 complete and regular 1:1s in place. Housing service SharePoint site live for staff.
H8	Undertake a skills and qualifications audit for the housing team and ensure that senior housing managers and housing executives hold professional qualifications and if they do not, support them to obtain these qualifications.	October 24	14 and 15	Assistant Director of Housing	n/a	Audit which covers skills, qualification training has been completed by the Housing Service. These results will now inform new work on upskilling Housing colleagues.
H9	Ensure all permanent jobs are reflected within the Establishment and match with the specified staffing budgets.	Completed	17	Assistant Director of Housing	n/a	
H10	HR and Housing Service Recruitment panel members to consider references as part of the recruitment process for permanent, agency and interim candidates. (HR to retain references on file for 2 years)	Completed	18	Assistant Director of Housing	n/a	This is now standard.

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Governance and culture						
Ref	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
H11	Develop a skills requirement audit that identifies the minimum levels of procurement and financial management knowledge required for roles across the organisation, with an associated training programme to help all staff in relevant roles meet the requirements.	Training to be complete Dec 24	20	Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services	n/a	Audit which covers skills, qualification training has been completed by the Housing Service. Procurement training has been provided to all colleagues at Guildford.
H12	Engender a 'no blame' learning culture within a framework of staff taking personal accountability and responsibility and within a performance culture.	July 24	25	Assistant Director of Housing	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open discussions at Housing Away Day. • Updated Corporate Whistleblowing Policy has been embedded into Housing • Question about Whistleblowing added to Skills Audit for Housing.
H13	Encourage staff to come forward with continuous improvements, innovation and creativity whilst adhering to Good Governance and following due process.	July 24	26	Assistant Director of Housing	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Away morning: June • Housing Volunteers group & engagement with Housing workstream leads for ideas. • Improvement Champions Group for staff to be involved with wider council improvements. • Housing away afternoon – October • Feedback part of 1:1s & appraisals
H14	Review and update our terms of reference for Housing-related Boards and Group meetings	Jan 2025	NEW	Assistant Director of Housing	CLB Hot Topics 09/09/24 (internal)	Terms of reference for the following groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Operations Board (Executive Working Group) • Tenant Engagement Group (constitution, not formal TOR) • Agreed 09/09/24: Corporate Health and Safety Group: to

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Finance, Budget & the Housing Revenue Account (HRA)						
Ref	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
						include Asbestos, Fire Safety, Legionella
H15	Ensure the team follow, comply, monitor and report on procurement, contract procedure and financial rules in all work areas. Ensure all reports requesting investment, major procurement and financial expenditure include a robust business case. Ensure the HRA, Capital and General Fund (Housing) revenue budgets have detailed breakdowns. Ensure there are inbuilt financial checks and balances, with Purchase Order and procurement monitoring.	June 24 December 24	6, 28, 29, 31, 32, 34 and 57	Assistant Director of Housing	Housing Operations Board: HRA Business Plan and budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up monthly budget monitoring meetings • Shared contract and procedure rules • Identified in staff appraisals to attend required training. • Procurement training for Housing Staff: 2 x Procurement training sessions 01.10 & 08.10 • Further training to come • The HRA Challenge events will take place at the conclusion of the HRA Business Plan review by Savills.
H16	Ensure sufficient HRA experienced Accountants support the Housing Service.	September 24	30		n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Savills re-procurement completed July 24 • Meeting with Savills 23rd September on HRA business plan review and training to appropriate staff • Identified accountant within team to support Housing. She is being supported by a business partner with significant HRA experience. This is right support until we undertake a wider finance staffing review, where we ensure future appointments has HRA experience.

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H17	Recruit permanent procurement staff.	September 24	33		TBC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Interim Head of Procurement started June 24. • Housing service has dedicated procurement resource within corporate procurement which serves both GBC & WBC. • Permanent staff will be part of a wider Finance team structure review.
H18	Review Housing GF budgets to ensure correct appropriation between GF and HRA. Move predominantly HRA budget areas into HRA. Where services are provided to other council services, these budgets are managed and commissioned by the service.	April 2025	NEW	Assistant Director of Housing, Finance	Housing Operations Board: HRA Business Plan and budget	<p>Agreed at Housing service budget challenge session – September 2024.</p> <p>Frequent meetings with Finance – new coding arrangements being prepared.</p>

Back-log of Voids (Empty Properties)

Ref	Actions	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
H19	The inspections pre and post-works to be undertaken by Guildford Borough Council surveyors. Appoint permanent surveyors	December 24	37 and 38	Assistant Director of Housing	n/a	<p>All works over £1000 post-inspected.</p> <p>Recruiting interim surveying capacity. Permanent recruitment to commence once new housing structure agreed.</p>
H20	Undertake a service review of the key to key void process with cost benchmarking and best practice.	December 24	39 and 40		n/a	Key to key void service review session in October with HQN and process maps are in development.

Leaseholds and Leaseholders

Ref	Actions	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
H21	To review leaseholder regulations and services and prepare for new Leasehold Reform Bill.	December 24	41, 42, 44, 45 and 46	Assistant Director of Housing	n/a	Leasehold lead attended leasehold reform awareness session to develop future responsibilities.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Process map the work of the leasehold team; so that new members of staff clearly understand what needs to be done, and where files are stored, etc. Comprehensive leasehold review to be scoped. Including refresh processes, clear roles and responsibilities and ensure adhered to processes 					<p>Leasehold service review session 5 November with HQN - GBC & WBC colleagues. Agreed the need for fit for purpose processes, procedures & agreed standard and good practice to prepare for new reform. Scope being agreed for HQN to deliver.</p> <p>Whilst this in progress, we anticipate this work will be completed by February 2025.</p>
H22	<p>Ensure appropriate accountancy support for Leaseholder Service Charges</p> <p>An accountant with financial responsibility for Leasehold Service Charges.</p>	September 24	43	Assistant Director of Finance	n/a	<p>Leasehold lead working with Finance and created a service charge project team.</p> <p>No Leasehold Service Charges Accountant currently, Finance agreed to recruit admin post, and awaiting final Job Description.</p>
H23	To undertake an audit and review of all HRA leasehold property let to RPs and charities. Will establish leasehold register, review earlier communication/decisions and confirm next steps.	September 24	47, 48, 49	Assistant Director of Housing	n/a	<p>This has been delayed due to capacity. We now have identified the lead to deliver this work and the audit has commenced.</p> <p>We anticipate this work to be completed by February 2025.</p>
North Downs Housing and other Local Authority Companies						
Ref	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
H24	Undertake a review of North Downs Housing.	July 2024 Ongoing	50, 51	Strategic Director Housing, Communities & Environment	Executive Shareholder and Trusts Committee	<p>Paper on NDH: Executive Shareholder and Trusts committee 8 August Review into the future of NDH commenced to include</p>

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						membership of local authority shareholder company Update given at ESTC 28 November
Compliance & Decision Making						
Ref	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
H25	Ensure Key Decision reports concerning contracts are presented to the Executive for decision and appear on the Forward Plan.	May 2024	52	Assistant Director of Housing	Forward Plan for Guildford	Housing Managers monitoring procurement and contract renewals. Housing SMT forward plan developed to map report pathways. Executive October 24: Procurement Pipelines report
H26	Prepare for the Procurement Act 2024.	September 24 Becomes Live: February 2025	54	Assistant Director of Finance	Procurement reporting – Executive	Significant work in place New Head of Procurement in post, developing Corporate Procurement Strategy. Procurement Training for Housing staff. Training will include housing related contract case study. Housing staff involved in the drafting of new Procurement toolkit for staff. Procurement created Commercial Network for all staff. Procurement Act 2023 is delayed until 24 February 2025, but the council will not delay its preparations.

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H27	Ensure that Urgency Powers are only used in exceptional circumstances and that the Strategic Director for Housing ensures that the Monitoring Officer agrees that the Urgency Powers are warranted on a case-by-case basis and that there is full constitutional compliance.	May 2024	55	Strategic Director Housing, Communities & Environment	n/a	Can only be used with agreement of Strategic Director and Monitoring Officer
H28	Ensure that all Procurement requirements are followed, and that Housing works closely with the Corporate Procurement Team and Legal Services.	May 2024	6 and 56	Assistant Director of Housing	n/a	Regular joint meetings scheduled and taking place. Procurement dashboard developed.
H29	Set out Planned Housing Works with associated costs reviewed quarterly for progress on planned works and actual to projected costs.	March 2025	58	Assistant Director of Housing	n/a	Planned works is part of the HRA Business Plan Review which will set out the 5 year MTFP for Capital Investment. This will be linked to the procurement pipelines for delivery. It will also form part of the Asset Management Strategy to be developed.

Housing Software Systems

Ref	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
H30	Upgrade the Housing Software System and ensure it interfaces with the Corporate Finance System, Business World and Housing Applications (Review of all housing IT systems and future requirements. Link to emerging corporate IT strategy)	2027	61	Strategic Director Housing, Communities & Environment	IT & Digital Board – 7 November CLB: Enterprise Portfolio Board - December 2024 (internal)	Project mandate agreed by housing senior management, and with IT. Exploring recruitment of business analysts and data support: data cleansing

Complaints

Ref	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
H31	Clarify and review the Complaints Process ensuring it is a simple and clear process, which puts customers at its heart.	Complete	63	Assistant Director of Communications	Adopted by Chief Executive in consultation with	Complaints Policy updated in April 2024, in line with HO code.

Guildford Borough Council: Housing Improvement Plan

November 2024

Key: Completed/in place, On track, Not Started Delayed

				& Customer Services	lead councillor 24.04.24	
H32	Analyse complaints and identify themes; so that service and policy improvements can be made.	June 24	64	Assistant Director of Housing	Annual complaints report: Housing Operations Board 31.07	Review complete and service improvements identified Complaints now regularly reviewed at Housing SMT
Agency Staff						
Ref	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
H33	Review recruitment, induction and management of all agency staff. To ensure that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the relevant software system (Business World) flags when contracts should be reviewed. all agency staff have the references, relevant and necessary qualifications and experience all agency staff disclose if related to or know existing permanent and/or agency staff and councillors all staff policies apply to agency and permanent staff. 	June 24	65, 66, 67 and 68	Assistant Director of Strategy & Corporate Services	n/a	HR review on agency staff Agency staff do follow key policies as part of induction. Relationship policy now in place.
Housing Data, Corporate Property & HRA Land Data						
Ref	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
H34	To ensure all HRA land and assets are documented and listed.	March 25	70 and 71	Assistant Director of Housing	TBC	Asset management strategy project mandate is drafted and with internal stakeholders for comment. Initiated work with Procurement & initial market engagement with suppliers.
H35	Housing to liaise with Corporate Assets and Property Team to ensure that maintenance & repairs of Housing garages and Housing car parks are undertaken by the most effective and appropriate services	December 24	72	Assistant Director of Housing	n/a	SLA review to complete by December 24

Guildford Borough Council: Housing Improvement Plan

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Preparation for and Compliance with the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2024						
Ref	Actions and status	By when?	SOLACE Para	Owner	Governance Mapping	RAG & progress update
H36	<p>Prepare for and comply with the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023. Develop data management, improvement plan and processes to adhere to legislative and regulatory requirements with reference to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RSH consumer standards • H&S compliance, • Tenant Satisfaction Measures • Building Safety compliance 	Ongoing	53, 73, 74 and 76	Assistant Director of Housing	n/a	<p>Housing Away Days: June 24, October 24.</p> <p>HQN conducting external assessment against Consumer Standards – findings due 4 December.</p> <p>Following RJ, ongoing engagement with the Regulator of Social Housing to meet standards.</p>
H37	Strengthen and document engagement with tenants and broaden and refresh the representation of TEG (The Tenant Engagement Group).	July 24 (now ongoing)	75	Assistant Director of Housing	Tenant Engagement Group	<p>Numerous TEG sessions have taken place: Introduction to Improvement Plan, vision for TEG & 3 year plan. Shared Regulatory Judgement with TEG. TEG receive monthly email updates on Improvement Plan TEG Constitution in place TEG AGM November</p>
H38	Consider commissioning a Social Housing Management Peer, or independent Review for Consumer Standards.	Completed	77	Assistant Director of Housing	TBC	HQN conducting external assessment against Consumer Standards

GUILDFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL - 3 DECEMBER 2024

THE INDEPENDENT ASSURANCE PANEL'S REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL ON THE CORPORATE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This is the first report of the Independent Assurance Panel (the Panel) to Full Council following its appointment in July 2024. The report reviews the Council's progress in implementing its Corporate Improvement Plan which is a critical document for the authority. The report provides the Council with the opportunity to consider the Panel's comments and recommendations.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Panel recommends that the Council:

- 2.1 Requests the Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Resources to review this report and offer comments on the progress being made with the delivery of the Improvement Plan.

3. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The purpose of the report is to provide the Panel's comments on the Council's progress in implementing its Improvement Plan and is intended to assist the Council in its work to implement the Plan.

- 3.2 In 2023 the Council commissioned two reviews - one into the Housing Management service and the other of the Council's governance. At its meeting in July 2024 the Council received both reports and approved their recommendations. This includes the appointment of an Independent Assurance Panel.

- 3.3 The purpose of the Panel approved by the Council is:

- To provide external advice, expertise and a 'critical friend' function to the Council in driving forward the development and implementation of the Improvement Plan
- To provide an external view to the Council and our residents on the Council's progress on delivery of the Improvement Plan every 6 months
- To provide independent advice to the Chief Executive.

- 3.4 The Council's Improvement Plan has these six themes:

- I. Strategic Direction
- II. Value for Money
- III. Governance

- IV. Culture
- V. Service Delivery
- VI. Housing

3.5 The Panel operates as a collective body, bringing the expertise of its members to the challenges facing the Council. The Panel's members lead on individual areas that are linked across the six themes of the Improvement Plan.

4. THE PANEL'S VIEW ON PROGRESS WITH THE COUNCIL'S IMPROVEMENT PLAN

4.1 Theme 1: Strategic Direction

4.1.1 Following the completion of the SOLACE review the Chief Executive and Strategic Directors moved quickly to develop and propose a new corporate strategy which set out refreshed objectives, priorities and values. The Council approved the new corporate strategy at its meeting in July 2024. This provides a clear direction of travel for the Council which members, employees, contractors and partners can understand as well as a coherent basis for performance management and continuous improvement. Equally, the adoption of fresh values for the authority, along with their active promotion, will contribute to improvements in the organisation's culture. The joint presence of the Executive and Corporate Leadership Board at the recent launch events for the new strategy was a powerful signal about commitment to the new strategy.

4.1.2 The Improvement Plan is a key document in respect of the Council's direction of travel. The Council approved the Plan at its meeting in July and effective action has been taken by the Chief Executive to commence its implementation. This is supported by the appointment of an officer to coordinate all improvement activity relating to the themes of the Plan. Progress with implementation will be a critical factor influencing the Council's ability to deliver its corporate strategy.

4.1.3 As well as appointing the Panel and ensuring it was established promptly, the Council has, through the Chief Executive, ensured that the Panel has been able to carry out its work in line with the terms of reference. The Panel has met monthly since August (i.e. four times so far), and has reviewed progress with the Plan as a whole and the key issues of finance and governance in depth. Members of the Panel feel supported in the work they are carrying out for and with the Council.

4.1.4 All this represents good progress. These are important steps in ensuring the Council complies with Best Value standards.

4.1.5 The challenges and risks that lie ahead in respect of this include:

- i. Maintaining focus on the Council's strategic direction as fresh challenges emerge and are tackled;
- ii. Embedding the strategy and values into service plans and the day-to-day life of the organisation;

- iii. Ensuring the Council's decisions on the budget for 2025/26, the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and other strategies (particularly for IT, People and procurement) support the corporate strategy;
- iv. Ensuring the Improvement Plan continues to be fit for purpose.

4.2 Theme 2: Value for Money

- 4.2.1 The Council has demonstrated good progress on many of the actions identified in this section of the improvement plan with many of the initial actions being completed, and with clear plans and target dates set for the remaining areas.
- 4.2.2 One of the recommendations in the Solace report in this area was for the Council to move the status of the senior levels of the Finance team from being temporary or interim staff members to a more permanent staffing establishment. Work on this is in progress with the Section 151 Officer now being permanent and is also now a designated member of the Senior Management Team. The second tier (Deputy Section 151) post is to be filled in the new year. This is welcomed, together with work on developing a more resilient staffing structure at lower levels.
- 4.2.3 The Council's forecasting arrangements for the current year and budget planning for 2025/26 are operating well. With regard to the current year the forecasted half year underspend of £300,000 is noted. A series of 12 budget challenge sessions have been completed and this will be used to both develop and inform potential savings as well as growth items in the 2025/26 budget ensuring that the MTFP is updated, the budget is balanced and that the MTFP remains linked to the Council's core strategies and objectives. Reserve levels remain at a level which provide adequate cover. The budget process has been reviewed by internal audit who commended the process.
- 4.2.4 With regard to the future whilst there is still uncertainty as to both the level of Government support for 2025/26 and future years. It is noted that the Council has commenced work on developing solutions to legacy issues arising from historic investment decisions, with a report being made recently on North Downs housing. However, this is still very much a work in progress in the second area, Weyside Urban village, and the Panel would be willing to assist in assessing options on this area as it could have a significant impact on the Council's revenue budget in later years.
- 4.2.5 In common with most Local Authorities the Council has had the external audit of previous years accounts "backstopped", and work is now underway on the audit of the 2023/24 accounts. The External auditors Value for Money report for the years 2020/1 & 2021/2 was received by the September 2024 Audit and Governance Committee. The Council responded positively to comments made in previous reports.
- 4.2.6 Officers have developed a revised procurement strategy and this will be brought forward soon for approval by Members. The regularising of procurement processes is welcome. With further training to be given to managers in the near future and review of award criteria, this area should assist the Council in both delivering its core strategies and delivering savings.

- 4.2.7 With the volume of work which needed to be undertaken, we acknowledge that there has to be prioritisation and note that work on managing the non-housing property portfolio will not take place until the Summer of 2025. We would suggest that this review should include both management and utilisation of the portfolio.
- 4.2.8 The Challenges and Risks in this area primarily relate to changes to external factors. These include changes to the funding regime from Central Government over which the Council has no control but has mitigated in part by not assuming any increase in cash terms in central government support. Changes in employment costs arising from the October 2024 budget both direct to the Council and to its suppliers which may be mitigated in part by the Treasury and the impact of decisions by other public sector bodies such as the County Council on the borough's service provision and residents.

4.3 Theme 3: Governance

- 4.3.1 A number of recommendations are included in the improvement plan designed to improve the Council's decision-making procedures and processes in order to provide effective governance across the organisation, to ensure that decision making is open and transparent and that decisions are made at the right level, with clear accountabilities and responsibilities.
- 4.3.2 The Council's Monitoring Officer is the Corporate Lead for this strand of the Improvement Plan and has made very good progress in putting in place a decision-making framework for the Council which is fit for purpose. A number of controls have been introduced including a review of the Council's Key Decision and spending thresholds, a review of the Officer Scheme of Delegation and an overhaul of the Council Procedure Rules and the Financial Procedure Rules. Training is planned for late 2024 to embed good decision making and report writing practice and there is ongoing work underway to ensure that all decisions are evidenced and recorded in a consistent way in accordance with public law requirements. A review process now needs to be developed to monitor how decisions are exercised to provide assurance that everyone concerned understands and complies with the new procedural requirements.
- 4.3.3 Progress has been made to improve the quality of officer meetings to ensure that meetings are focussed and that the Corporate Leadership Board (CLB) work and take decisions effectively and in a timely way. The Statutory officers are meeting on a monthly basis and terms of reference have been agreed for senior leadership meetings with minutes recorded. These improvements are welcomed.
- 4.3.4 A key issue highlighted in the Governance Review was the urgent need for the Council to commission and support a development programme for Councillors (particularly Members in leading roles) to support them in building a deeper understanding of their roles and the ability to provide effective scrutiny and constructive challenge. A Joint Member Development Programme was presented to

the Councillor Development Steering Group in October 2024 and will be relaunched with external training for officers and Members on the Best Value Duty as well as training for Members on effective scrutiny. Member training will be introduced on a regular basis before Council meetings to increase attendance at training and to provide regular member updates on new developments. The commitment of Members to this work will be critical to the future success of the Council in realising its ambitions and delivering the improvements it wishes to see.

- 4.3.5 A Joint Constitution Review Group has been established and work is ongoing to review all parts of the Constitution by September 2025. Work is also underway on a review of the terms of reference for a number of the Council's Committees including the Council's Overview and Scrutiny and the Corporate Governance and Standards Committees and a new separate Audit Committee will be in operation from April 2025. The Council's Committee structures have been streamlined to provide greater clarity on where decisions are taken and to improve the scrutiny process.
- 4.3.6 These actions represent good progress in putting many of the foundations of good governance in place. However, significant challenges and risks remain.

Challenges and Risks

- 4.3.7 The scale of the work currently being undertaken to overhaul the Council's governance and decision making processes should not be underestimated and there has been an urgent need for additional resource in the Governance team in order to support the Monitoring Officer in implementing the changes required. The structure for a new Joint Governance Team has been agreed and there are a number of vacancies still to be filled. With her new team in place this should provide greater resilience within the Governance Team and enable the actions within the improvement plan to be progressed in a timely way. This should include appropriate support for the Executive and Senior Officers and regular training sessions for officers and in supporting Members, particularly in fulfilling their Scrutiny function.
- 4.3.8 As with all change programmes there is a cultural shift and a need for greater awareness and understanding of the need for compliance in order to ensure that the Council is complying with its best value duty. In particular there is an urgent need for officers to understand the importance of the Council's Democratic Services Team providing a "gatekeeping" role in relation to the recording and publication of decisions to ensure that decisions are being taken in a lawful and transparent manner.
- 4.3.9 An area of ongoing risk is in relation to the Council's Trustee and Shareholder function for its various Companies, Charities and Trusts. A report was taken to the Executive Shareholder and Trustee Committee in August 2024 to address some of the key actions needed to be taken to regularise its governance and constitutional arrangements as well as work which is required to review the aims and objectives, management arrangements, financial and performance monitoring of these Companies and Trusts. A key area of risk is therefore now ensuring that the Council

understands and undertakes its shareholder and trustee functions and the provision of appropriate support for these functions within the Council.

4.4 Theme 4: Culture

- 4.4.1 The Panel has been impressed by the work undertaken by the Council to address the Culture of the organisation including the setting up of a number of staff networks working across Guildford and Waverley and work on the new Corporate Strategy including launch events and external engagement events with key partners. A new weekly staff engagement forum has been established to encourage a more open, collaborative culture. The introduction of a full staff survey, launched in November, demonstrates progress and will contribute to the new culture that is being engendered. Staff training has been carried out in undertaking employment investigations. The Council has introduced a new Whistleblowing Policy as well as a suite of new policies to address fraud and corruption including a new Money Laundering Policy, and Anti-Fraud & Corruption Strategy, Anti-Bribery Policy, Counter Fraud Policy & Fraud Prosecution Policy.
- 4.4.2 Member Briefings have taken place to ensure that a more open approach is taken in relation to access to information, and to ensure that Members are kept informed of contentious issues, supported by a clear confidentiality duty.

Challenges and Risks

- 4.4.3 One of the key priorities is the review of the HR function to address capacity and capability issues in order to support the Council's improvement agenda. A strong, efficient and professional HR team will be critical to the successful delivery of key strands within the plan, addressing organisational development, including the development and implementation of a Workforce Strategy and the review of the Council's HR policies and procedures.

4.5 Theme 5: Service Delivery

- 4.5.1 Ensuring effective service delivery is central to the Council's work. Whilst it is too early to point to improvements in service delivery, good progress has been made in putting the building blocks in place that will support improvements in the future. First amongst these is the introduction of a new service planning process which is aligned to financial planning. This has brought a new openness, coherence and consistency to the process across the organisation.
- 4.5.2 The introduction of interim performance and risk management systems and a new approach to programme and project management will also contribute to improvements through greater transparency and clearer accountability.
- 4.5.3 The challenges that lie ahead in this area are significant. The Improvement Plan details what needs to be done e.g. completing the review of the way in which cases are managed. The Panel's view is that the Council's officers need to press on with this

work so that Members can be confident that services are being delivered to the level required.

4.6 Theme 6: Housing

- 4.6.1 A substantive housing improvement plan was adopted in response to the Solace Review and the required actions span both the corporate issues as highlighted in the wider Council plan and service delivery issues.
- 4.6.2 The Panel has seen that the Senior Housing Team (SHT) has been fully invested in the improvement journey and is positive about the opportunity to build a housing service which is compliant and will deliver on the expectations of residents. The appointment of Julian Higson as the permanent Strategic Director has brought stability and direction.

Leadership, Governance and Culture

- 4.6.3 The focus in the early months of the housing improvement journey has been on putting in place leadership and governance arrangements, which will be key to sustainable improvement across the housing service. More robust controls have been introduced in financial management and procurement.
- 4.6.4 Positive steps have been taken to promote and begin the process of embedding a performance management culture at all levels of the establishment within the Housing Team. There has been dialogue with staff through awaydays and the staff performance appraisal process, where goals and objectives have been linked to the Corporate Strategy. Mechanisms have been put in place to encourage staff to propose ideas for continuous improvement – this has been a corporate initiative and also specific to housing, by way of a new Housing Volunteers Group.
- 4.6.5 New governance arrangements are now in place to provide for scrutiny and performance management. The SHT is meeting bi-weekly. A review of the KPIs has taken place to ensure appropriate oversight of core service areas and ensure regulatory and legal compliance. A new Member-led Housing Operations Board and Tenant Engagement Group have been constituted and are operational.

Procurement and Financial Management/Control

- 4.6.6 Following on from the serious issues identified through the Solace review in relation to failures in the control of procurement and financial monitoring, the SHT has been driving a more robust approach to budget monitoring and procurement. Procurement training has now been delivered to staff in the Housing Team.
- 4.6.7 The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) business plan is in development to ensure HRA spend is properly prioritised and the budget is sustainable going forward.

4.6.8 A need has been identified to review Housing General Fund budgets to ensure correct appropriation between them and the Housing Revenue Account where services are provided by HRA services for the benefit of other Council services. This has triggered a “deep dive” into the Housing General Fund budgets.

Staffing resource

4.6.9 Actions have been taken to provide a properly resourced and competent workforce. A skills/qualification and training audit is underway. Gaps left by loss of key staff have been filled on an interim basis pending a full structural review, with some key areas of the service, including resident engagement, housing strategy/enabling and project management having new staff resources

Service delivery and compliance

4.6.10 New service-related policies have been developed to help ensure legal compliance and provide consistency in approach.

4.6.11 In terms of service delivery ‘on the ground’ there is still considerable work to do. Those areas where improvement actions are being delivered include workstreams which carry the greatest risk in terms of legal compliance/tenant welfare and reputational risk to the Council. These are:

- Health and safety property compliance, where data relating to properties has now been moved into a dedicated data management system.
- Complaints handling, where work has commenced to manage the information flow between the corporate system and the housing management service, to prevent information being lost between the two, as was the case previously. In addition, fortnightly monitoring is now in place for every case and checking to ensure actions arising from complaints are being picked up.
- Voids management: work has progressed to deal with the backlog of void properties, which is now reducing.
- The number of empty, un-let homes and complaints handling have been a particular source of concern among elected Members and tenants. As such, progress in these areas should help to win back confidence in the service.

4.6.12 An external consultancy, the Housing Quality Network (HQN), has been appointed to independently assess the housing landlord functions against the requirements of the new housing regulatory framework, the findings of which are currently awaited and will inform the Improvement Plan. Process review sessions are underway by HQN for specific areas of the service, including leasehold services and the voids management.

Challenges and risks

4.6.13 There are four main areas of challenge and risk facing the housing service – regulatory intervention; resourcing and capacity; IT systems, data management & integrity; and Member and resident expectations.

4.6.14 **In respect of regulatory intervention** the Panel sees these challenges and risks:

- i. The Council is under regulatory engagement now following its self-referral to the Regulator of Social Housing earlier this year. Any additional improvement measures arising from the Waverly inspection will add to what is already a significant workload for the shared senior management team.
- ii. In September 2024 the Regulator of Social Housing stated its intention to carry out a Regulatory Inspection of Waverley Council in November 2024. Due to the preparation required, this has added considerable further pressure to the Housing team. Where the inspection outcome is that improvements are required, varying degrees of further intervention may follow. This could present further challenges to the Housing Team which has taken positive steps forward in recent months.
- iii. On a positive note, the learning from the inspection, coupled with the outcome of the independent assessment of the service as referred to earlier, will further inform Guildford's improvement plan. The Tenant Satisfaction Measures will also be used to highlight areas for focus.

4.6.15 **In respect of resourcing and capacity** the Panel sees these challenges and risks:

- i. Staffing has been a key issue following the loss of key staff earlier this year. The Senior Housing Team has reported that it has been frustrated by convoluted HR process and recruitment practices. Further, recruitment into the housing sector (especially technical roles) is challenging nationally and more so where there is close proximity to London. Whilst there are highly competent interims in place within the service, this is not a sustainable position either financially or in terms of long-term stability. A comprehensive review of the housing staffing structure is planned. However, there is a risk that key posts will not be filled due to the challenging employment market.
- ii. The Housing service and its plans for improvement would benefit from the improvements now being sought in the HR. Progress with this will support the forthcoming staffing review and resulting recruitment activities in the housing team.
- iii. The current pressures on the Team will require the full support of the Council in ensuring that appropriate resources are available to continue the improvement journey and sustain the improvements coming out of it.

4.6.16 **In respect of IT systems, data management and integrity** the Panel sees these challenges and risks:

- i. The Housing Software system is considered unfit for purpose and does not integrate effectively with other systems including the Corporate Finance system. As a result, Housing staff are required to use manual 'workarounds' to perform basic day to day tasks. This has created frustration, adding to workloads, in particular, asset management functions. There is a pressing need to identify and commission an appropriate IT solution to enable robust data management for housing management and maintenance services.
- ii. Work has begun corporately to scope out a project for the procurement of a new system. However, this is a long and costly project.
- iii. There is also a requirement to review and cleanse data held about the HRA asset, to ensure it is accurate and can be reliably used to provide assurance on the quality of the housing stock and to inform stock investment programmes going forward.

4.6.17 **In respect of Managing Member and Residents' expectations** the Panel sees these challenges and risks:

- i. Whilst it is expected that the improvements made in the areas of complaints and void management will be welcomed, the scale of the Housing Improvement Plan (which covers most housing functions), means that it will take time before improvements are seen by Members and residents. There is a risk that the resource being expended may be viewed as not delivering on tangible results. In turn, this may have a de-motivating effect on staff. Expectations will need to be managed.

4.6.18 The Panel recommends the following key actions as **priorities** to support the delivery of the Improvement Plan:

- i. Complete the review of the staffing structure (target date December 2024) and begin the recruitment process for permanent staff.
- ii. Review the Housing Improvement Plan (January 2025), taking into account the learning from the independent assessment of the housing service against the requirements of the regulatory standards. Apply learning from the Regulatory Inspection of Waverly Council
- iii. Continue to focus on 'high risk' areas of service delivery, including the ongoing work to reduce the number of voids and continuing to improve the complaints handling process, for which consideration should be given to providing training to staff on how to write effective responses to complaints.
- iv. Develop an appropriate procurement pipeline with a focus on future contracts for repairs and maintenance/property compliance.

- v. Complete the review of the Housing Strategy to provide a clear, goal-focused framework for the service and finalise the HRA Business Planning process.
- vi. Commence the development of the Asset management Strategy – undertake a data validation programme to ensure there is clarity on the HRA stock held and its condition.
- vii. Maintain a proactive communications campaign (internally and externally) to show the progress being made.

5 CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

- 5.1 The Panel's view is that the Council's Corporate Improvement Plan is fit for purpose. The Council has made a good start to the delivery of the Plans. Many steps are being taken to put in place robust structures, strategies and systems along with suitable management and staffing arrangements. These will enable the Council to plan and deliver improvement much more effectively and efficiently. This work is mitigating the risk that the Council could fail to meet its statutory duty to deliver Best Value.
- 5.2 Such is the range and depth of the issues and risks the Council faces that much more needs to be done to eliminate this risk. Whilst many actions have been completed, many more need to be commenced. In short, the Council needs to stay the course.
- 5.3 The Panel will continue to meet monthly with Chief Executive and Leader of the Council to review progress with the Improvement Plan and to provide advice on the work the Council is undertaking to deliver the Plan. The Panel will present a further report to the Council at its meeting in June (or July) 2025.

ENDS

Report authors – members of the Panel

Andrew Flockhart (Chair), Alison McKane, Chris Buss and Simone Chinman Russell.