

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

2 June 2020

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

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

\*Present

Councillors Joss Bigmore (Deputy Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Service Delivery), Angela Gunning, Gordon Jackson, Julia McShane, (Lead Councillor for Community), John Redpath (Lead Councillor for Economy), Maddy Redpath, Caroline Reeves, (Leader of the Council and Lead Councillor for Housing and Development Control), and James Steel (Lead Councillor for Environment) were also in attendance.

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 23(j), Councillor Ramsey Nagaty attended as a substitute for Councillor Patrick Sheard.

### **OS1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

The Committee was advised of an apology for absence from Councillor Patrick Sheard and a substitute as detailed above.

### **OS2 LOCAL CODE OF CONDUCT AND DECLARATION OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS**

There were no declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests.

### **OS3 MINUTES**

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 3 March 2020 were agreed.

### **OS4 RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

The Chairman stated that the aim of the meeting was to provide Councillors and the public with an overview and update about the Council's response to COVID-19. With reference to the critical friend role of overview and scrutiny, the Chairman indicated that the Committee would provide direct support and challenge to the Executive and senior officers and aim to be a forum for Councillors to feed into and help the Council response.

The Leader of the Council introduced the Council's response to COVID-19. She praised the efforts and adjustments made by Council staff and the Borough's residents and businesses during the crisis. The Leader of the Council indicated that the financial implications of the crisis would require the Council to review all its activities. She advised the meeting that lessons for the future would be learnt from the experience of the crisis.

The Managing Director gave a presentation outlining the Council's response to COVID-19. He outlined the impact of the crisis, including its mortality rates, together with the restrictions on people's lives and the economic implications. The meeting was reminded of timelines and governance relating to COVID-19 and advised of the Council services that had been

maintained and suspended in the crisis. In addition, the Managing Director informed the meeting of the new and extended services delivered by the Council during the emergency.

The Managing Director provided details of the help and support for the Borough's vulnerable residents, including food parcels and prescriptions delivered. The meeting was advised of the communications efforts undertaken by the Council with residents during the crisis and the aid provided to local businesses, which included grants to local businesses totalling over £19 million and a business rates holiday totalling almost £41 million.

The Managing Director's presentation outlined the impact of the crisis on staff, including redeployment of 87 staff and over 300 home working. The Committee was advised that there had been no increase in sickness absence and low levels of COVID-19 symptoms amongst staff. He indicated that a staff survey would be undertaken on home working and the levels of support staff needed and other experiences.

The Director of Resources presented headline details of the financial impact of the crisis on the Council. She indicated that the Council had received £1.5 million emergency funding from central government. She informed the meeting that no further funding from government would be forthcoming in the immediate future. The Director of Resources advised that Council expenditure on the crisis was forecast to be £1.9 million by July 2020, with an additional £9.6 million projected as lost income. The presentation to the Committee showed lost income from car parking to be over £5.5 million, from planning and development control over £850k, from sports and leisure over £400k, and from tourism over £200k. The Committee was advised that the figures presented were based on a four-month lockdown period, rather than the shorter lockdown confirmed by recent government announcements. The Director of Resources indicated that the Council could need to call on reserves of £8 million in the current financial year. She advised that the Council would need to rebuild its reserves by approximately £5 million in the next few years and that significant decisions about service provision would be required.

The Managing Director updated the Committee on actions to aid the local recovery, including measures to address the Council's finances and review its strategic priorities. He advised that the Council's Future Guildford transformation programme would be shaped to address the budget shortfall and that plans would be needed to resource the Council's response to COVID-19 for a sustained period.

The Managing Director advised of proposed actions to help local businesses across the Borough recover from the crisis. He indicated that the Lead Councillor for Economy was leading on a piece of work with Experience Guildford and others to ensure support for businesses across the Borough. In addition, the Managing Director indicated that support would continue for the most vulnerable people affected by the crisis in the Borough, including the provision of accommodation for the homeless. The Committee was informed that measures to help the voluntary and community sectors included a re-assessment of the priorities for grant funding under existing schemes and the introduction of a new crowdfunding platform as a new fundraising stream.

The Chairman thanked the Managing Director and the Director of Resources for the presentation and invited members of the Committee to ask questions. During the ensuing discussion a number of points were made and clarifications offered:

- The Committee was advised that it was too early to determine the reasons for the apparently high mortality rate in Surrey.
- The Housing Advice Manager confirmed that the MHCLG (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) had requested the Council's next-step support

plans for rough sleepers housed during the pandemic. She indicated that the Council would be applying for further grant funding and that plans were being prepared to try and ensure there was no return to rough sleeping for anyone in the Borough once the crisis was past.

- The Housing Advice Manager confirmed that some hotels wanted the return of the rooms used to house the homeless during the crisis. She indicated that the suspension of evictions in the private rented sector had been helpful. The Committee was advised that twenty-three households had required rehousing during the lockdown period. The Committee was informed that it was not possible to say whether there would be a sharp increase in the number of homeless people following the end of lockdown.
- In response to a question, the Housing Advice Manager indicated that much of the Rough Sleeping Initiative funding from government was committed to supporting mental health and addiction services but a small amount might be re-purposed towards more immediate support for the homeless.
- The Community Wellbeing Manager indicated that demand for meals on wheels had doubled during the crisis. She advised that its deliveries had increased notably in rural areas, the town centre, and postcode areas GU1 and GU2.
- In response to a question, the Committee was advised that the Council's day centres would reopen when government guidance permitted.
- The meeting was advised that the Council has been co-ordinating with local foodbanks. The Committee was informed that extra help from charities and community groups had been provided to those families entitled to school meals as the free school meal voucher scheme had either not worked or proved insufficient to meet need. The Community Wellbeing Manager indicated that a long-term plan to address food poverty and related issues was required.
- In response to a question about the Council's reliance on car parking and enforcement income, the Waste, Parking, and Fleet Services Manager indicated that the annual review of the business strategy for car parking would consider such issues.
- With reference to the Family Support Programme, the Committee was advised that the Council had taken over the provision for Waverley in April as planned. The Committee was informed that while the funding levels from Surrey County Council for the programme were unchanged, the details of payment by results during the crisis were being discussed. The Community Wellbeing Manager advised that a sharp increase in family support referrals was expected when schools re-opened to all pupils (because schools were a major referral channel).
- In reply to a question, the meeting was informed by the Housing Advice Manager that domestic abuse provision was being expanded by Surrey County Council to deal with the expected increase in demand once the lockdown ended. In addition, she advised the Committee about the rate and nature of reported domestic abuse crime in the area during lockdown.
- In response to a question about people in need that were not designated officially as vulnerable and as a consequence were unable to access prioritised support, the Community Wellbeing Manager indicated that all households in the Borough had

been leafletted in April with information, including the Council's emergency telephone number, and anyone requesting support would be helped.

- The Community Wellbeing Manager suggested that the role of local voluntary groups would be significant in the local recovery. In addition, she confirmed that the support available to vulnerable residents continued to be publicised on social media.
- In reply to a question about managing the relationship between the different tiers of local government in Surrey, the Leader of the Council indicated that the crisis had been a steep learning curve. She informed the meeting that lessons had been learnt for any subsequent COVID-19 wave. In addition, the Leader of the Council suggested that government announcements before plans were in place had caused issues for local government.
- In response to a request for information on the number of local businesses that were struggling and the forecast extent of redundancies, the Managing Director advised that the Local Enterprise Partnership was collating such information and that it could be provided to a subsequent meeting of the Committee. The Chairman indicated that the subject would be revisited by the Committee at its July meeting.
- The Customer Services and Business Improvement Manager undertook to provide data to the Committee members on the complaints and expressions of dissatisfaction received by the Council during the lockdown.
- With reference to the long-term financial impact of COVID-19 on the public sector, members commented on the potential shortfall in funding from central government. The Director of Resources confirmed that local government was lobbying for government funding to address the loss of income experienced during the lockdown. The Leader of the Council informed the meeting that the government had indicated that should there be a second or third wave of COVID-19 it would not fund the food boxes provided by local authorities.
- A member of the Committee questioned the extent to which joint working and shared services with other councils had been considered to achieve financial savings. In reply, the Director of Resources outlined the potential options to address the budget gap caused by COVID-19. She confirmed that these options included revisiting service challenge savings identified but not progressed under Future Guildford, re-assessing the capital programme, ending services, undertaking shared services or mergers with other local authorities, and progressing unitary status.
- The Director of Resources and the Deputy Leader of the Council both indicated that it was too early to determine the impact of COVID-19 on the Council's programme of major projects. The Director of Resources informed the Committee that a recession would affect factors such as borrowing costs, inflation, and the income streams for major projects (for example, the sale of land for housing). The Deputy Leader of the Council suggested that the potential benefits of some projects should be weighed against their relatively small cost to the Council.
- In response to a suggestion from Committee members that meetings about major projects had been cancelled due to COVID-19, the Leader of the Council indicated that her understanding was that only one meeting had been cancelled. The Managing Director undertook to liaise with the Lead Councillor for Regeneration and confirm the situation with Committee members.

- The Waste, Parking, and Fleet Services Manager informed the meeting that disinfecting public outdoor areas was not government guidance and its effectiveness was questionable. He indicated there was a focus on cleaning hands rather than on cleaning and disinfecting everything that might be touched. He undertook to re-examine making cleaning and disinfection in the town centre more prominent.
- The Managing Director indicated that Phase B of the Council's Future Guildford transformation programme would resume in September. He confirmed that Future Guildford would need to consider options such as alternative models of service provision.
- A member of the Committee questioned whether the Council's ability to deliver major projects would be adversely affected as a consequence of the impact of the COVID-19.
- The Director of Resources advised that government had made grants of £21 million available to small business rate payers and businesses involved in the retail, leisure, and hospitality sector locally (with £19.4 million paid out). She stated that an additional government discretionary grant scheme was launching that week. The meeting was informed that whether additional local grant schemes were provided by the Council would be a political decision. A member of the Committee suggested the value in all councillors being updated on grant schemes available to local businesses to enable them to advise and signpost constituents.
- The Committee was informed that local businesses could be encouraged to tender for work but national rules made it difficult to limit procurement to local businesses.
- The Deputy Leader of the Council indicated the importance of community spirit as the crisis looked to change to one with an economic and mental-health focus.

The Chairman thanked officers and Councillors for attending to discuss and provide information on COVID-19 issues.

RESOLVED: That a further update on COVID-19 be provided to the July 2020 meeting of the Committee.

**OS5 DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

The Chairman advised that the next meeting of the Committee was scheduled for 7 July 2020 at 7.00pm. He suggested that if Committee members wished to move to an earlier start time then they contact himself, the Vice-Chairman, or the Senior Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny).

RESOLVED: That the agenda for the 7 July 2020 Committee meeting include the following previously scheduled items: North Downs Housing Limited, a question session with the Lead Councillor for Environment, and the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report.

The meeting finished at 9.34 pm

Signed .....

Date .....

Chairman