

Minutes of a meeting of the **Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held at the **New Council Chamber - Town Hall, Reigate** on **Thursday, 19 January 2023 at 7.30 pm.**

Present: Councillors N. D. Harrison (Chair); H. Avery, M. S. Blacker, G. Buttironi, M. Elbourne, J. C. S. Essex, G. Hinton, A. King, N. C. Moses, A. Proudfoot, R. Ritter, M. Tary, S. T. Walsh (Vice-Chair) and R. Absalom (Substitute)

Attended remotely: Councillor R. S. Turner

Visiting Members present: Councillors R.H. Ashford, M. A. Brunt, C. Neame, K. Sachdeva and T. Schofield

53 Apologies for absence and substitutions

Apologies were received from Councillor Parnall with Councillor Absalom substituting.

54 Minutes

RESOLVED that the minutes (both public and exempt) of the meeting on 8 December 2022 be approved and signed.

55 Declarations of interest

There were none.

56 People Portfolio Holders Briefing

Several advance questions on this item had been submitted prior to the meeting. The advance questions and their responses can be viewed here:

[Document Advance Questions and Answers OS 19 January 2023 | Reigate and Banstead Borough Council \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

The Executive Member for Housing & Support invited Members to ask questions on the portfolio briefing provided in the agenda pack. In response, the following clarifications were provided:

Housing & Support

- Temporary accommodation: the authority had between 120 and 126 self-contained, temporary accommodation properties. Some are owned by the authority whilst others are owned by Raven and Accent. Members were advised that the two properties under offer to provide emergency and temporary accommodation were



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different from that previously purchased and would take less time to make available for use. Whereas the previous property had been a House of Multiple Occupation which had required work to make it suitable for living, these were family homes which only needed minor works. The number of houses on which offers had been accepted had increased from two to four since the agenda had been published.

- Housing Register: there were a lot of reasons why those who apply may not be accepted onto the Housing Register. Where there was no eligibility but there was a threat of homelessness, tailored information was provided on the housing options available.
- Homelessness Funding: one of the problems faced was that funding was year-on-year, meaning a lack of certainty for the Council. However, it was reported that the Homeless Prevention Grant had been confirmed for the next two financial years giving some security for workstreams. Additionally, it was noted that homelessness remained an area that still attracted funding, which had increased during Covid and was expected to continue. The Financial Sustainability Programme picked-up the risks associated with the funding and had monitoring in place. The homelessness funding available through the revenue budget and grants was sufficient to cover the extra Bed & Breakfast provision and staff costs resulting from the Homelessness Reduction Act. However, this was predicated on levels of homelessness not increasing. The risk of any potential increase was monitored and reported quarterly.
- Asylum seekers: it was reported that there was a significant concentration of asylum seekers, both temporary and long term, with some awaiting their asylum decisions within the borough. This was putting pressure on the local infrastructure. This included GP space and capacity, public health prevention, mental health support and school places. Housing was working very closely with partners including those in health, public health, and children's services. Concerns are continually raised with accommodation providers and the Home Office. Some success had been achieved with a recent meeting having been held with the Home Office where the pressures on the ground were explained and that some accommodation was not fit for purpose. Transport for asylum seekers was acknowledged as a significant challenge. The location of accommodation was far from ideal and caused challenges in terms of accessing services. It was explained that the authority had no formal role in monitoring the accommodation provided. The four hotels that were accommodating asylum seekers in the borough were directly contracted by the Home Office. However, this did not prevent the Environmental Health team being involved in ensuring accommodation standards in the usual way. It was not known if any asylum seekers housed within the borough were couples. The only information on numbers was supplied by the Home Office. Whilst it was possible that some spoke English, it was not possible to use them as interpreters due to confidentiality, safeguarding and data protection considerations.

Intervention

- Refugee resettlement: the authority was delivering the scheme on behalf of the East Surrey cluster which additionally comprised Mole Valley and Tandridge. A Syrian cookbook, which provided support for those resettling during Covid as well as raising funds, had proved popular and was on a second print run after an initial edition of 150 copies. It was acknowledged that there were a number of Syrian

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refugees, who since 2016, had been successfully supported through the resettlement scheme such that they were now living without support from the authority. It would be possible to provide precise numbers after the meeting. Whilst there were approximately 30 out of 297 Ukrainian guests in private rented accommodation, the majority were still accommodated with their original sponsors. Some guests had needed to move into alternative accommodation. Arrangements were subject to continual change including through the rematch system.

- Family Support Programme: wait times had increased from four to six weeks for support through the programme. This was due to the complexity of the issues facing families. This work was being delivered on behalf of three authorities with the service provided detailed in Memoranda of Understanding and Service Level Agreements. These were regularly reviewed by colleagues in Commissioning with it being agreed that the service provided was to the expected standard. The increased complexity for families was being reported with work ongoing with partners to overcome the issues faced.
- Money Support: it was explained how the authority worked closely with local and national charities to provide frontline prevention help, to help maximise income and to make the most of money through budgeting. It was acknowledged that the authority was not a debt management specialist and always referred on.

Leisure & Culture

The Executive Member for Leisure & Culture provided an update on her portfolio in addition to the information provided in the agenda pack.

It was explained that leisure and culture had positive benefits for physical and mental health. Making culture and wellbeing services accessible to and able to meet the needs of communities and visitors was part of the Council's five-year plan. This had become even more important with the energy crisis and rising costs-of-living.

Whilst the pandemic had created a lot of disruption to the delivery of leisure and culture services, GLL, the operator of the authority's three leisure centres, had recently reported membership growth. The authority had supported GLL during the pandemic by freezing the monthly management fee, but this would now be reviewed. GLL had fulfilled the motion passed by Surrey County Council to offer a full membership to care leavers and had made its own offer to Ukrainian refugees. In the face of increasing costs, in order to maintain the offer of a good service across all three sites, the number of pool operating hours had been reduced.

There had also been an increase in leisure development activities through R&B Active. It was the Council's aim to help young residents by maintaining a healthy weight, learn new skills, improve self-confidence, enjoy the outdoors, develop social skills and improve physical and mental health. They had benefitted in 2022 through school holiday activities, the Surrey Youth Games etc.

The Harlequin saw a slow return to the theatre and cinema at the beginning of 2022. However, this had picked-up as with live shows and outdoor theatre. The pantomime Cinderella had staged 43 shows and welcomed around 17,000 theatre goers, generating nearly £250K with strong secondary food and beverage sales. In addition to the regular calendar of events, The Harlequin hosted the Jubilee celebrations and other civic events including the proclamation. It was planned to publish the authority's new Leisure and Culture Strategy within the next few months. This aimed to achieve

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the ambition of reducing funding for The Harlequin from £380K per annum down to £280K in 2022/23 (with further savings next year) by improving visitor numbers and reach to neighbouring areas as well as increasing participation in leisure services.

The Executive Member for Leisure & Culture invited Members to ask questions on her portfolio. In response, the following clarifications were provided:

- GLL: it was confirmed that the provider offered parity in its pricing across all three of its sites. In response to concerns that the online booking system retained since the pandemic was excluding groups of users including those who were older and those with special needs, it was emphasised how hard the authority worked with GLL to ensure the offer met needs. Where it fell short, the authority would press hard. Members were asked to bring their specific concerns directly to officers. Whilst GLL had moved to a much more technical solution for activity bookings there were always non-digital solutions for those who found them difficult.

The offer for care leavers was a full membership. A different approach was needed to offer membership to those in care. This was more complicated but was being addressed. Demographic data was expected from GLL. This would allow a better understanding of which groups had seen a decline in usage.

The contract with GLL was up for renewal in 2024. The current contract with GLL gave it the ability to determine prices whilst the authority benefitted from a fixed management fee. Rising energy costs had been addressed by reducing operating hours by 23% across all three sites. This had allowed a reduction in costs whilst minimising the reduction in service to residents.

- The Harlequin: in response to concerns expressed about the operation of The Harlequin, it was noted that the Leisure & Culture Strategy was forthcoming which would provide a framework for Leisure & Culture in the borough including the operation of The Harlequin.

It was specifically noted that The Harlequin was available for conference hire and had recently seen it host an event for 600 people over two days. The need for additional equipment to be installed into the Studio after the work done in 2019 was to make the venue suitable for live screenings and therefore to give increase scope to raise revenue. It was intended to reduce the Council's subsidy by increasing the revenue realised. Many avenues were being explored. A costed business plan for The Harlequin would be forthcoming subsequent to the Leisure & Culture Strategy.

It was reported that income was on a trajectory to reduce the subsidy which had been endorsed by the Finance Team. The income achieved by the pantomime was yet to be finalised with the ticket revenue to be split with the provider. It was the third best take by a pantomime in the history of The Harlequin. Information on the highest grossing activities were not usually provided as this was commercially sensitive information. It could be explored how it might be possible for this to be shared with the Committee. Whilst there was a big focus on the operation of The Harlequin, the Leisure & Culture Strategy was about more than the operation of this one venue. It was noted that it had achieved some sell out events with the popularity of live music and comedy, along with the focus on attracting teenagers. Its success was demonstrated by the decline in the subsidy required. It was requested that advertising at street level be improved.

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- Reigate Priory Museum: it was explained that this was not included in the presentation as it was not within the Portfolio Holder's brief. It would be feasible to look at how it would be best to share information about the Reigate Priory Museum with the Committee.
- School holiday activities: these were focused on hard-to-reach areas and those who could not afford to travel elsewhere rather than seeking to spread out across all parks.

Community Partnerships

The Executive Member for Community Partnerships provided an update on the portfolio, referencing the presentation provided in the agenda pack.

The authority had three community centres at Banstead, Woodhatch and Horley which had all originally been part of the 1970's day centre concept. This was now outdated. Originally run by a management committee, between 2016 and 2020 the Council outsourced their management to a charity. However, in 2020 the decision was taken to bring their management back in house. This happened just before the start of the first Covid lockdown. With the average age of users at that point being 82 years, the priority therefore became to keep them safe.

Transforming the three sites into modern Community Centres was approved by The Executive in July 2021 with the key aspiration to have an offer for all ages. This had to be handled sensitively so not to alienate existing users, and with the work being slowed by Covid restrictions. The intention was to step away from a one-size fits all approach because each centre needed to reflect the broader needs of its local community. A survey of 1,500 residents took place which generated huge interest and established that the top outcome desired was a place to connect. The potential to widen the offer by closer working between the centres and Community Development Teams was acknowledged. The transformational project involved renaming and rebranding the centres allowing them all to be identified as Reigate and Banstead community centres but with their own unique identities within this. Whilst the former management committees were initially sceptical each has now funded improvements.

Since autumn 2022 a series of Open Days have been offered and with heavy promotion, they have been very successful in bringing in first-time visitors of all ages. It was explained that the time was right to move to a Business-as-Usual model. Centre Managers were working on new business plans using feedback from the Open Days and experience gained from running them since the relaunch. An example of use was provided where Barclays was hiring a room to enable face-to-face banking services to still be offered in Banstead.

The Executive Member for Community Partnership invited Members to ask questions on his portfolio. In response, the following clarifications were provided. In order to keep the centres current and relevant, it was important for the service to keep challenging and questioning itself. There was a need to keep offering a variety and vibrancy of services through refreshed business plans. It was important for the centres to keep learning from each other and to avoid complacency. It was acknowledged that the team was very proactive in gaining feedback and using this to generate lots of ideas. Establishing a model that would allow work with other centres to develop satellites was supported and it was reported that some conversations were already happening.

RESOLVED to note the People Portfolio Holder updates and observations for consideration by Executive Members as set-out in the minutes.

57 Budget and Capital Programme 2023/24 - Update for Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Overview

The Executive Member for Finance and Governance was invited to introduce the update on the Budget and Capital Programme for 2023/24. It was noted that this provided an overview of the final consolidation of the budget proposals, including the Government's settlement, which overall had been positive for the authority.

Further detail was provided by the Chief Finance Officer. It was confirmed that the Government settlement had been positive, which was different from the experience in previous years. The positive measures included the allocation of a new grant to achieve the Government's aim of all authorities having an extra 5% in core spending power. This minimum funding guarantee and the ability to increase Council Tax by a further 1% had achieved a positive overall impact on the 2023/24 budget. This made it possible to avoid drawing on reserves as much as had been anticipated when the budget was previously reviewed by the Committee in November 2022. A supplementary table would be provided for Members with the minutes of the meeting to illustrate the movements in the budget between November 2022 and January 2023.

It was emphasised that each year's settlement stood on its own. This meant that it was entirely feasible that the settlement in subsequent years would not be as positive.

Council Tax and Business Rates

Members asked for further clarity to be provided on the changes to Council Tax and non-domestic rates. The Chief Financial Officer explained that it was possible for 2023/24 to increase the Council's share of Council Tax by 2.99%, generating an extra £150,000. Having previously taken a cautious view, the authority's Council Tax base was also buoyant, meaning there were an increasing number of properties on which Council Tax could be levied.

The Collection Fund was used to account separately for Council Tax income on behalf of all precepting authorities. Having taken a prudent view in November 2022, it was now possible for the Council to include in its budget its share of the Collection Fund surplus. The same situation also applied to Business Rates. A strong collection performance had resulted in a significant surplus.

Overall, this meant that the authority would benefit from more Council Tax and Business Rates income than had been anticipated in November 2022.

Government Funding Risk Reserve

The Chief Financial Officer explained to Members why it was necessary to maintain a Government Funding Risks Reserve and how it was used. An example being Housing Benefit Subsidy risks where there was a likelihood that insufficient funding would be provided by the Government to cover all costs of benefits paid. This gap in funding

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had a range of technical causes including the type and mix of households that were eligible to claim Housing Benefits were not aligned with the regulations that determine the level of funding (subsidy) for those benefits from Government. This funding was claimed retrospectively, after the authority had incurred the costs. The authority acted as an agent for the Government when administering the housing benefits scheme with its contribution towards the costs of the benefits paid increasing year-on-year. It was therefore necessary for the budget to reflect this risk.

The explanation provided was endorsed by the Leader. Whilst the Housing Benefits regulations were being applied in accordance with regulations, the Government's funding formulae did not take account of the changes in eligibility of applicants. The net result was the risk of a budget pressure valued at approximately £500K. Authorities, including Reigate and Banstead, were continuing to raise the issue directly with Government and it was thought it would eventually be resolved. However, it was possible that the authority would not be reimbursed for its previous contributions. This could have a significant financial sustainability impact where an authority had lower levels of reserves.

Central Budgets

The Chair pointed out that Central Budgets had increased by an amount of about £1,900k for secondary employer pension contributions. This figure was not known in November 2022 but had since been confirmed by the scheme actuary after the triennial valuation; it was not unexpected being at the same level as prior years.

Despite this increase, overall, the positive movement in the net budget forecasts since November meant that the call on reserves for this authority was not as significant as had previously been anticipated.

IT Strategy Funding

In response to the request for additional information on the allocation for IT funding, it was explained that this related to the IT Strategy that was approved by Members in Spring 2022 to invest in cyber security, disaster recovery and resilience. The sum reflected in the budget was the first draw on the allocated funds.

Levelling-Up Funding

The Managing Director confirmed that the authority had not been successful in securing Levelling-Up funding despite a bid being made for funding in support of People Services delivery. It was thought this reflected the situation for most if not all other Surrey districts and boroughs. However, it was intended to make further bids should the opportunity become available.

Economic Pressures Reserve

The Executive Member for Finance and Governance confirmed that it had been decided to allocate a sum equivalent to the additional £150K raised in Council Tax to establish an earmarked reserve. This would be used to address the economic pressures anticipated during the year ahead. It was thought this would be called on by the community and housing portfolios in response to the rising costs-of-living and homelessness. The reserve would be used to provide an additional safety net.

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Public consultation

It was explained by the Managing Director that the public consultation on the budget for 2023/24 had closed four days previously. Further information would therefore be provided after the meeting with officers willing to answer any further questions. The Leader confirmed that the Executive intended to proceed with the planned cuts in voluntary sector funding as reported in the November 2022 budget proposals. This decision was taken having reflected on the public consultation feedback that indicated that this was not supported and against a backdrop of a more favourable financial position.

RESOLVED to:

1. Note the updated elements of the Budget for 2023/24 and Capital Programme for 2023/28 and set-out in the briefing; and
2. Provide the observations set-out in the minutes to the Executive at its meeting on 26 January 2023.

Further information on the Budget and Capital Programme 2023/24 was made available following the meeting and can be found here:

[Document Follow on Information OS 19 January 2023 - Budget Briefing Note | Reigate and Banstead Borough Council \(modern.gov.co.uk\)](#)

58 Calendar of Meetings 2023/24

The Committee received the Calendar of Meetings for 2023/24 and cover report. This would go to the Executive for recommendation for approval by Council at its meeting on 9 February 2023.

Members asked that the meetings scheduled in the School Easter Holidays in 2023 be moved so that they could take place in termtime. This was to achieve fairness for those Members with school age children.

RESOLVED to note the Calendar of Meetings for 2023/24 for approval by Council at its meeting on 9 February 2023 subject to the further suggested changes.

59 Overview and Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme 2022/23

The Committee received the Overview & Scrutiny Forward Work Programme.

It was noted that the Leisure and Culture Strategy may come forward to the Committee's meeting on 16 March 2023. Should this happen, the Leader's presentation would be moved to the beginning of the new municipal year in order to make sufficient space on the agenda.

RESOLVED to note the Overview & Scrutiny Forward Work Programme (with the suggested changes) and the Action Tracker.

60 Executive

It was reported that there were no items arising from the Executive that might be subject to the Call-In procedure in accordance with the provisions of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule.

61 Any other urgent business

The Chair had given notice of an item of urgent business. This concerned consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities consultation on the national planning policy framework. This was dealt with as urgent business given the deadline for contributions to the consultation was 2 March 2023. The Head of Planning had briefed the Chair that a draft response to the consultation on behalf of the authority was being prepared. It was intended to circulate this to Committee Members after the meeting. The Chair sought the authority of the Committee on behalf of himself and the Vice-Chair to establish a task group to review the draft. The Chair noted the existence of the Development Management Action Group chaired by the Executive Member for Planning Policy and Place Delivery. It was acknowledged that this would be considered in the set-up of a task group to consider the planning consultation.

RESOLVED that the Committee gave the Chair and Vice Chair the authority to establish a task group to review the authority's response to the consultation on the national planning policy framework.

The meeting finished at 22:05