

MINUTES of the meeting of the **RESOURCES AND PERFORMANCE SELECT COMMITTEE** held at 10.00 am on 17 September 2021 at Council Chamber, Woodhatch Place.

These minutes are subject to confirmation by the Committee at its meeting on Friday, 17 December 2021.

Elected Members:

- * Nick Darby (Chairman)
- * Will Forster (Vice-Chairman)
- * David Harmer
- * Robert Hughes
- * Rebecca Jennings-Evans
- * Robert King
- * Steven McCormick
- * Rebecca Paul (Vice-Chairman)
- John Robini
- * Tony Samuels
- * Lesley Steeds
- * Hazel Watson
- * Jeremy Webster

(* = present at the meeting)

26/21 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS [Item 1]

None received.

John Robini was absent.

27/21 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETINGS: 18 MARCH 2021 [Item 2]

The minutes were agreed as a true record of the meeting.

28/21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST [Item 3]

None received.

29/21 QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS [Item 4]

None received.

30/21 CABINET MEMBER PRIORITIES UPDATE - TIM OLIVER [Item 5]

Witnesses:

Steve Bax, Deputy Cabinet Member to the Leader
Leigh Whitehouse, Executive Director of Resources

Steve Bax deputised for Tim Oliver, the Leader of the Council, for this item, as the Leader was not available to attend this meeting.

The aspects of the Leader's portfolio that came under the Select Committee's remit were equality, diversity and inclusion, and communications.

Key points raised during the discussion:

1. The Deputy Cabinet Member to the Leader introduced the report, mentioning the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategy that had been approved by Cabinet in February 2021. A Trans at Work policy was being developed by the Human Resources (HR) team, which included processes to prevent and tackle discrimination in the workplace. As part of the development of this policy, the Council was working with Stonewall, an LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) rights organisation, and was hoping to become a more attractive employer to LGBT people.
2. The Deputy Cabinet Member continued to explain that the Council was looking to improve accessibility for disabled staff and residents, including making adjustments for disabled staff and changing the Surrey County Council website to make it more accessible for people whose first language was not English.
3. The Deputy Cabinet Member outlined the statistics for representation of groups with protected characteristics within the Council's workforce, as follows:
 - a. The proportion of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) staff in the Council was roughly equal to the proportion of BAME people in the Surrey population as a whole (10% and 9% respectively), which was in line with the Council's notion that the workforce should broadly be representative of the communities it represented.
 - b. Despite this, less than 1% of employees in senior management roles were BAME, and, according to staff surveys, BAME staff were less likely to have a good experience working for Surrey than non-BAME staff.
 - c. The proportion of women in the Council's workforce exceeded the proportion of women in the Surrey population as a whole.
 - d. A high proportion of the Council's staff were aged 50-59. Younger employees were likely to have a better experience of working for the Council, while those over 60 were likely to have a worse experience.
4. High levels of non-disclosure of protected characteristic information amongst the Council's workforce affected the accuracy of data, representing a challenge for the Council, particularly with regards to data on disabilities, religion, and sexual orientation. The communications team was trying to encourage staff to declare protected characteristics, and the HR team was also exploring data around recruitment and whether the Council was attracting staff with protected characteristics.
5. Moving onto communications, the other aspect of the Leader's portfolio that came under the Select Committee's remit, the Deputy Cabinet Member stated that the communications team consisted of 25 full-time posts, and the budget for the team, excluding staff salaries, was approximately £250,000.
6. A Member highlighted the statistic that the Deputy Cabinet Member had given, that only 1% of senior management roles were occupied by

BAME staff, saying that this figure stood out for being particularly low. How would the Council tackle this issue? The Deputy Cabinet Member replied that there was indeed work to be done on ensuring there was a higher proportion of BAME staff in senior management roles. It was important that the HR team looked at the recruitment process to ascertain why there were not more BAME staff in senior management roles currently.

7. A Member asked whether there were any particular demographic groups that the Council struggled to reach or engage. The Deputy Cabinet Member responded that the Council's experience of struggling to reach certain groups had largely come from the Covid-19 vaccine programme. Certain communities in Surrey, including Black, Afro-Caribbean and Muslim communities, were statistically more likely to show vaccine hesitancy; this was a trend reflected nationwide. Eastern European people were another community more likely to show vaccine hesitancy. To tackle vaccine hesitancy for all these groups, social media was being used in order to encourage vaccine uptake, roving vaccination vans went to particular community sites, videos were recorded by community leaders, and posters were translated into various languages and placed in community hubs.
8. Welcoming the Council's prioritisation to attract more LGBT staff, a Member highlighted the fact that Stonewall was an active lobbying organisation and asked what the best practice was when evaluating the suitability of partners for the Council. Was Stonewall an appropriate service provider in light of best practice? The Deputy Cabinet Member said that the Council's membership of Stonewall was not for the purpose of lobbying; rather, membership provided the Council with tailored support and advice, and access to useful materials such as webinars. Stonewall's support supplemented the expertise within the Council's HR department. Ultimately, the Council would devise its own policy; Stonewall would only offer advice. The Council was balancing competing rights and priorities to ensure that the needs of one protected characteristic were not prioritised at a detriment to others.
9. A Member enquired what key changes were expected to arise from the Trans at Work policy, and whether an impact assessment would be conducted to identify the implications of the new policy for other protected characteristic groups. She also requested that the policy be shared with the Select Committee before it was put into action. The Deputy Cabinet Member said it was currently too early in the process to know the key changes that the policy would bring about. However, the Council would take a pragmatic view to balance competing needs, and take legal advice before implementation. In line with existing protocol, an equality impact assessment would be produced. There was not yet a draft to share with the Select Committee, and the Deputy Cabinet Member stated that the Select Committee might not be able to sign off the policy, as it was an operational matter for staff. The executive and the scrutiny team would work together to decide how to proceed. The Member responded that it was not a case of the Select Committee wanting to have sign-off of the policy, but rather having visibility of the policy.

10. A Member enquired whether the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities were included within the protected characteristics groups. The Deputy Cabinet Member confirmed that these communities were included as a protected characteristic as set out by the act and in the view of Surrey County Council. The Council was keen to ensure good relationships with this community.
11. A Member asked how the Council trained and monitored officers carrying out recruitment interviews to ensure they had EDI awareness and were adhering to best practice. Interviewers may need to make adjustments for people with disabilities, for example. The Deputy Cabinet Member responded that he would seek more information on this and provide an answer to the Select Committee after the meeting. He also emphasised that staff disclosure of protected characteristics was important to ensure that adaptations could be made where necessary.
12. In relation to the point above, the Executive Director of Resources added that over the last 18 months, there had been widespread training for staff, including senior managers, on unconscious bias, which was important to tackle ignorance or a lack of empathy when it came to minority groups. The Council also had several staff networks (for example, a Deaf Staff Network and an LGBTQ+ Staff Network), each of which had a corporate leadership team sponsor and a Cabinet Member sponsor. These networks could help raise awareness of protected characteristics groups.
13. A Member questioned whether the communications department's budget was sufficient to provide a good service to residents. The Deputy Cabinet Member highlighted new forms of communication (such social media) which were significantly cheaper than older methods (such as leaflets and posters) and also had a much more effective reach that could be targeted using free analytics technology. The Member stated that some residents were digitally excluded and did not have access to social media or a mobile phone. The Deputy Cabinet Member replied that digital methods could reach the majority of people, and that there were also other methods the Council used in order to reach people who did not use digital technology.
14. The Select Committee agreed that, since HR had been discussed numerous times during this item, it would be useful if the Director of HR attended the Select Committee in future to present an item on the HR service.
15. A Member requested more information on the Member task group on councillor diversity, as mentioned in the report. The Deputy Cabinet Member stated that the Member Development Steering Group was due to consider the scope of the councillor diversity and inclusion review at their meeting in November 2021. Membership of the task group was not yet decided. Analysis of councillor diversity had been conducted after the May 2021 election; this analysis could be shared with the Select Committee after the meeting. Members agreed to look at potentially reviewing the topic of councillor diversity, pending discussions at the Member Development Steering Group.

16. A Member queried how the Council's EDI policy fed into its HR policies to ensure equality, diversity and inclusion were reflected in pay promotion and flexible working policies, for example. The Executive Director replied that the Director of HR and OD had been a member of the EDI steering group within the Council, so she was a direct link between HR and EDI policies. At the moment, the Council was also taking views on workforce strategy from a range of sources. There was a strong link between EDI and HR.
17. A Member asked how the Council was addressing resource concerns and how it was taking this into account for the future. The Executive Director agreed to provide a response on this after the meeting.
18. A Member expressed his satisfaction with the daily update briefings and weekly parliamentary briefings that all Surrey Members received. However, some of these briefings contained articles with a paywall (meaning access to these articles was restricted to users who had paid to subscribe to the site or media publication). What could be done to ensure no councillors were left behind, without councillors having to take out their own subscriptions? The Deputy Cabinet Member suggested that Members could buy a physical copy of the newspaper or publication in which the article in question was published; newspapers were also often available for free in local libraries. Bulk buying subscriptions for Members was not a good value use of the Council's budget. The Member responded that this was a problem as it was important that all Members were kept up-to-date. Having a subscription for each Member was probably not necessary, but nor should Members have to buy a physical copy of the publication. The Council should look at how to keep Members up-to-date in a cost-effective way. The Deputy Cabinet Member clarified that it was not the case that some Members had access to paywall articles and others did not; if any Members had access to paywall articles, this would only be because they had personally taken out their own subscription. He agreed to follow this issue up after the meeting and see if more could be done, such as a digest or summary of articles.
19. A Member enquired what the Council was doing to tackle digital exclusion. Some digitally excluded people were particularly vulnerable and in need of information or advice. The Deputy Cabinet Member stated that while the bulk of the Council's communications were conducted online, some publications were still sent out in physical form. Perhaps certain communications could be sent out with the physical copies of council tax bills that all district and borough councils in Surrey (apart from Elmbridge) sent out to residents every April, in order to reach residents who did not use digital pathways. Surrey County Council was also open to suggestions from Members on how best to tackle digital inclusion. The Member asked whether the Council could target certain communities that intelligence suggested were less likely to be online. The Deputy Cabinet Member said that this was potentially possible; data from the census could also be used. However, very precise data would be required in order to effectively target digitally excluded residents without wasting resources, and it could be difficult to find data specific enough to do this.

20. A Member suggested that the Council could use existing data on whether a resident had opted to have their council tax bill delivered digitally or in paper form in order to identify whether they were likely to be receptive to digital communications or not. Perhaps a more coordinated approach on digital exclusion was needed. It was also important to ensure that communications were available in a variety of languages to ensure that residents who had a first language other than English were not excluded.
21. A Member stated that it could be useful for Members to be provided with a set of standard, prepared emails on common topics, such as programmes being promoted by the communications department, to ensure consistency in Members' communications with residents. The Deputy Cabinet Member agreed that brand consistency was helpful, while also acknowledging and respecting that all 81 Members had their own individual ways of communicating. One suggestion that had been made to the communications team was to put together an A-Z directory on a range of common issues, such as potholes. This could be a useful resource for Members and would encourage consistency. There was also lots of information on the Member portal, to which all Members had access through Microsoft Teams. He suggested that Members contact officers for specific services if they were struggling to access information on any particular topic.
22. A Member noted that the report mentioned four high-level strategic communications initiatives (these were: An Unstoppable Force, Make it Happen, One Surrey Story, and What does SCC do for you?). What were the financial costs and costs in officer time in conducting those initiatives? The Deputy Cabinet Member responded that there were no individual budgets for each scheme; rather, there was the central £250,000 budget to cover the whole of communications, once staffing costs had been taken out.
23. A Member expressed concern that the councillors' communications briefings tended to focus on good news and Council-controlled stories; however, it was useful for Members to see the bad news as well as the good news stories in order to be aware of these. The Local Democracy Reporter for Surrey regularly published stories that it might be useful for Members to see.

Recommendations:

The Select Committee recommends that:

1. Cabinet is to consider how Surrey County Council engages with organisations that undertake political lobbying and/or are involved in matters that some might consider controversial;
2. Surrey County Council should ensure that any impact on other protected characteristic groups are identified and carefully taken into consideration before finalising the Trans at Work policy;
3. The Trans at Work policy is to be presented to the Select Committee prior to being finalised;
4. More focus is to be given to the range of topics covered in internal communications in the daily media email update to Members. In particular, all references articles in the daily media briefing to be made accessible to all Members;

5. A report on digital exclusion is to be provided to this Select Committee at a future meeting.

Actions/further information to be provided:

1. Deputy Cabinet Member to the Leader to provide more information on how the Council trains and monitors officers carrying out recruitment interviews to ensure they have EDI awareness and adhere to best practice;
2. Democratic Services officers to share councillor diversity analysis conducted after the May 2021 election with the Select Committee;
3. Executive Director of Resources to provide information on how the Council is addressing resource concerns and how it is taking this into account for the future.

31/21 CABINET MEMBER PRIORITIES UPDATE - BECKY RUSH [Item 6]

Witnesses:

Becky Rush, Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources and Deputy Leader
Leigh Whitehouse, Executive Director of Resources

The aspects of the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources' portfolio that came under the Select Committee's remit were finance, the Orbis partnership, HR&OD, IT and digital, procurement, and legal and democratic services.

Key points raised during the discussion:

1. A Member asked what the main challenges were regarding the setting of the 2022/23 budget, and how confident the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources was that these challenges could be addressed. The Cabinet Member replied that at the moment the Council was in the early stages of putting together the first view of the budget, which currently estimated a budget gap of £47.1m; however, this figure was prone to change on a daily basis. This figure represented part of the £200m gap in the Council's finances forecast over the medium term in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).
2. The Cabinet Member continued to explain that the main areas of challenge were adult social care (ASC) and children's social care, in particular, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Regarding ASC, there had been an increase in the number of people requiring care following the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as an increase in provider costs, and therefore ASC generated 60% of the budget gap for the 2022/23 financial year. Regarding children's social care, there was significant pent-up demand for these services following the pandemic, including an increase in the number of looked after children and looked after children assessments, leading to an increase in the cost of placements and an increase in the number of external placements. The Council was looking to address the overspend in the field of SEND, which represented 22% of the 2022/23 budget gap. Directorates were currently working to address budget pressures by identifying efficiencies, and had expressed confidence that they would be able to address the gap. The Council would be using a new 'twin-track' approach, working across directorates, to tackle the £200m gap.
3. The Executive Director of Resources added that another challenge was that the government would usually give local councils a multi-year

indication of resources, but for the last few years, including the current year, indications from government had been shorter term and had not been released until December (soon before the final setting of the budget). The Council was expecting a spending review to be released at the end of October, but in the meantime the Council was basing its budgeting on its best estimate of the results of the government's spending review; it was expected that the review would result in negative changes to the Council's funding from central government.

4. A Member noted that the government had recently announced an increase in national insurance contributions, the money raised from which would be used to fund the NHS and social care systems nationally, and asked for witnesses' thoughts on this and how this would affect the Council's budget generally. The Executive Director responded that the potential impacts were that there would be an increased cost of national insurance for the Council as an employer (this could also have an impact on the supply chain as providers that were also employers would have to account for this increased cost) and, conversely, increased funding for the Council as a provider of ASC. There was not yet enough clarity to know the exact impact on the Council and the wider supply chain. The Member highlighted that this was a potentially serious issue.
5. A Member enquired how Surrey County Council would be consulting effectively with district and borough councils on the effects of the increase in national insurance and the ASC precept increase. According to the Member, there had been concerns about a lack of consultation with district and borough councils in the past. The Executive Director, who was also the section 151 officer for Surrey County Council, explained that he would meet with the section 151 officers for Surrey district and borough councils. Dialogue and consultation with district and borough councils would continue throughout the year.
6. A Member enquired whether the Orbis partnership provided good value for money for the Council and residents. The Executive Director of Resources explained that the Orbis partnership, between Surrey County Council, East Sussex County Council and Brighton and Hove City Council, had delivered significant savings since its inception. He emphasised the benefits that came from sharing resources and expertise. Since 2018, the Orbis partnership had been refined; Surrey County Council had drawn its finance, HR and land and property services back in-house, showing that Surrey County Council would adapt its role in the partnership based on what represented good value for residents.
7. A Member asked what plans there were for consultation with residents on the 2022/23 budget. The Cabinet Member stated that the Select Committee's comments on budget consultation had been taken on board and the Council planned to run a more in-depth programme of resident budget engagement this year than it had done in the last few years. The Cabinet Member expressed the hope that the feedback gained in this round of budget consultation could be applicable for a number of years to come. The consultation programme on the 2022/23 budget would begin in September or October 2021 and would include

online workshops and telephone surveys. A sample group of approximately 1,100 residents would be consulted, who would be demographically representative of the wider Surrey population. The aims of the consultation were to raise awareness among residents on the context of the Council's budget, explore various topics, such as transformation programmes, understand residents' spending preferences, and test residents' spontaneous attitudes towards service changes. The resident consultation would be just one piece of information amongst many that would be factored into the formulation of the budget; others included benchmarking and service views.

8. A Member requested an update on the Digital Business and Insights (DB&I) programme, in particular, the implementation of a new enterprise resource planning (ERP) system. The Executive Director replied that significant progress had been made since the last discussion on the DB&I programme at the Select Committee. Phase one, involving the procurement system, was now live. The next milestone was for the finance, HR and payroll elements to go live; this was planned for December 2021. User acceptance testing was currently being conducted, and the status of the programme would be reviewed following this testing.
9. Another Member emphasised that the implementation of the new ERP system carried risk and asked whether the programme was still on track. The Cabinet Member responded that, as September 2021 was a critical month in the programme, the Council would have to wait until the end of September to be able to say whether it was on track; however, when this information was available, the Select Committee could be informed. A decision would be made in September 2021 on whether to withdraw from the current ERP subscription before the end of 2021 or not.
10. The Select Committee discussed the Council's risk register, overall responsibility for which sat with the Audit and Governance Committee. The Select Committee agreed that if its Members wanted more information about the risk register and how this related to the budget, they could informally approach the Chairman of the Audit and Governance Committee for a discussion.

Recommendations:

1. The Select Committee recommends that Surrey County Council actively involves residents in the budget setting process and carefully takes into account relevant feedback, observing the ethos of participatory budgeting.

32/21 CABINET MEMBER PRIORITIES UPDATE - MARK NUTI [Item 7]

Witnesses:

Mark Nuti, Cabinet Member for Communities

Marie Snelling, Executive Director of Customer and Communities

The aspect of the Cabinet Member for Communities' portfolio that came under the Select Committee's remit was customer services.

Key points raised during the discussion:

1. The Cabinet Member praised the work of the customer services team throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, during which they had acted as the first point of contact for residents.
2. A Member asked what the key issues were in customer services at the moment. The Cabinet Member responded that a key priority was to keep response times as short as possible. Pre-pandemic, the average response time was 20 seconds, but this had not been possible in the last few months due to the pressures of Covid-19 and, more recently, the pressures of school admissions. The service was trying to recruit more staff to tackle this issue. At the height of the pandemic, the average response time increased to 20 minutes, which had now been reduced to four minutes. However, the 20-second response time was still the target, and the Cabinet Member expressed the belief that this would be reached once new staff were in-post by October 2021.
3. The Cabinet Member stated that the service's aim was to ensure customers always received the best quality interaction at the point of contact, and in order to achieve this the service was being streamlined, one aspect of which was making online systems available wherever possible. The majority of queries and problems reported could be addressed quickly through automated online systems, which were now in place for a number of services.
4. The Cabinet Member continued to explain that the Dakota building, from which the customer services team was now based, was a bright, airy and calm workspace. Approximately 40% of the team were working from the office and 60% were choosing to work from home; internal surveys had suggested that staff were happy with this working arrangement. The service had not suffered from the fact that more staff were working at home; if anything, the service had improved recently.
5. The Executive Director of Customer and Communities praised the attitude and efficiency of staff throughout the pandemic. The team had recently been nominated for two national awards. In fact, the four-minute response time was good when compared to some other local authorities. Also, it could be advantageous at times for teams to work together in person, particularly when handling complex or potentially traumatic calls, as support from colleagues was important in these situations.
6. The Executive Director welcomed Members to come to visit the customer services offices in the Dakota building in person.
7. A Member noted that only 40% of the customer services team were currently working in the office, even though, as the Executive Director had just highlighted, it could be advantageous for the team to work in the office together. How did the service balance that? The Executive Director responded that sub-teams were coordinated to try to ensure that who was in the office was based on need within the service. The service aspired to increase the number of staff in the office, but numbers were currently restricted due to social distancing. Whether staff worked from home or in the office also depended on the type of work they did. The service would continue to work to ensure that

business need came first but that working styles also worked well for staff.

8. A Member asked whether it would be possible for data to be collected on enquiries raised by customers relating to specific divisions, and for high-level information on this to be passed onto the divisional Member, allowing members to stay up to date on the pertinent issues within their division. The Cabinet Member replied that the service was looking at putting together a list of frequently asked questions on the top 20 or so types of enquiries. A flow chart was also being produced to show the pathways for enquiries and where delays could arise. The Cabinet Member hoped that this would be provided to Members within the next few weeks.
9. A Member asked what level of traffic the Council experienced on the Esendex service it used to send out text messages. The Executive Director agreed to provide this information after the meeting.
10. A Member enquired how the Council was communicating to elderly or vulnerable residents that BT would be switching off its landline service in 2025. Some residents may not be aware of this, and it may be the only method they used for contacting the Council. The Cabinet Member agreed that it was important to think ahead so that residents were not left stranded without a landline. There were many different ways to contact the Council available. The Executive Director expressed the opinion that the Council would probably always have some form of telephony presence. The need to continue to provide choice had to be balanced with the cost and administration of these contact pathways. The Council's strategy, informed in part by previous discussions with the Resources and Performance Select Committee, was therefore to utilise new technologies and to support residents to be able to use them. The Council recognised that some more traditional methods may be needed, particularly for more vulnerable residents, but that newer technologies should be introduced in line with their use in wider society. For example, a chatbot had been brought in, through which residents could contact the Council, aligned with the use of chatbots on banks' and other services' websites.
11. Regarding the Council's chatbot, a Member agreed that these had an important place but that sometimes they did not work well. The Cabinet Member stated that the chatbot system had worked well since it was started, with a satisfaction rate of approximately 95%. The chatbot was suitable for residents with simpler questions that could be answered quickly, and having it freed up staff time. The Executive Director added that 40% of the traffic to the chatbot so far was outside of business hours, showing its particular use when other contact methods would not be available. The chatbot was not intended to fully replace more traditional methods of contact, but rather to enable customer services to reduce a large proportion of their contact in order to focus on those who had complex queries and needed telephone-based interaction the most.
12. A Member asked what the customer services budget was and what the £200,000 in efficiencies planned actually meant. What progress had been made so far on achieving efficiencies? The Executive

Director explained that the customer services budget was £2.7m for 2021/22 and the service was on track to deliver £200,000 of efficiencies. Most of the budget was spent on staff. It was important to rationalise the efficiencies made through the use of chatbots by slightly reducing the number of staff. The Member remarked that witnesses had mentioned that new staff would be joining the service in October. How did this impact the efficiencies? The Executive Director responded that the new staff joining in October were funded by NHS England through Test and Trace, so this did not have a negative impact on the customer services budget or efficiencies.

Recommendations:

The Select Committee recommends that:

1. Consideration be given to the customer services team providing relevant information and data, based on the calls received by them, to the respective elected representatives about their wards/divisions;
2. Careful consideration be given to ensuring that the roll-out of chatbots does not result in a negative impact on digitally excluded and elderly residents;
3. An opportunity to visit the customer services contact centre be offered to Members by the service at an appropriate time.

Actions/further information to be provided:

1. Executive Director of Customer and Communities to provide information on the level of traffic on the Esendex system.

33/21 BUDGET TASK GROUP MEMBERSHIP [Item 8]

The new membership of the Budget Task Group was agreed.

34/21 RECOMMENDATIONS TRACKER AND FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME [Item 9]

The Select Committee noted the recommendation tracker and forward work programme.

35/21 DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING [Item 10]

The next meeting of the Resources and Performance Select Committee would be held on 17 December 2021.

Meeting ended at: 12.41 pm

Chairman