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To: All Members of the **EXECUTIVE**

The following papers have been added to the agenda for the above meeting.

They were not available for publication with the rest of the agenda.

Yours sincerely

Damian Roberts

Chief Executive

SUPPLEMENTARY PAPERS

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4. Public Question Time	3 - 4
To answer any questions received in accordance with Part 4, Section E of the Constitution.	
6. Corporate Peer Challenge	5 - 6
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21 NOVEMBER 2023 EXECUTIVE, PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS.

Question 1 (Submitted by Mr Edmond Bain)

"Can the Leader of the Council advise me on how I (and others) might be given access to the Published Accounts of the Council for the years 2015/16, 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19 as it is clear from correspondence with the Council that this is being denied to me".

Answer

Firstly I would like to clarify that no-one has been denied access to the accounts. The Council has always followed paragraph 10(3) of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015, which states that,

"once the audited accounts have been published, an authority must:

- keep copies of the statement of accounts, narrative statement and annual governance statement for purchase by any person on payment of a reasonable sum."

The Council holds these accounts following the accepted practice for accounting records (and in accordance with HMRC direction) that we should hold for the current accounting year and the six previous.

Mr Bain has previously asked us to publish the sets of accounts he requires on our website. The Council had previously published online the accounts for the years he has requested, but when the Council refreshed its website, it only retained published accounts going back to 2018/19 as part of the overall approach to improving the performance and ease of navigation of the website. This also accorded with paragraph 10(3) of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015, which further states that, again once the audited accounts have been published, an authority must:

- ensure that those documents remain available for public access for a period of not less than five years beginning with the date on which those documents were first published in accordance with that paragraph.

Thus on our website we have the audited 2018/19 accounts and the draft 2019/20 accounts (pending BDO audit).

However, the finance service does still hold copies of the accounts he has mentioned (2015/16 through to 2017/18) and as per the guidance the Council can provide these. These can be made available on request to the Strategic Director Finance and Customer Services. This can either be in digital form (a 'pdf') free of charge, or in a paper copy for a nominal fee of £25 per set of accounts.

Question 2 (Submitted by Mr Edmond Bain)

"Can the Executive Committee confirm the wording of the Minutes for the Executive Meeting held on 9th November 2016 which states that in regard to the acquisition of the House of Fraser that the acquisition was being pursued for investment purposes and that it was noted that the proposed purchase was similar to that of the St George's Industrial Estate in March 2015". "If confirmed this will have an impact on the accounting treatment".

Answer

The relevant minute relating to property acquisition is currently exempt, and Council Officers will review whether it is able to be disclosed and put in the public domain and will respond to you within 7 days.

QUESTION 3 (Submitted by Mr Edmond Bain)

"Does the Leader of the Council share my concern that the indications are that BDO might be reduced to offering solely a disclaimed audit report rather than a qualified report (or better an unqualified report). Residents have been lead to believe that the gap between the Council and Auditor was narrowing focusing principally on two issues, the property valuations and debtors. A qualification might indicate the areas of concern, resulting in an element of reassurance to residents and others, and place a stake in the ground from which to move forward with the Draft Accounts for the subsequent years for absent this has the Council moved forward as hoped. It doesn't reflect well on either party".

Answer

As the member of the public has been advised, this question has not been accepted for consideration at the meeting, as it does not meet the requirement of Part 4 Section E of the Council's constitution for questions to be relevant to a matter included on the meeting's agenda.

It has been suggested that you instead ask this question to the Audit, Standards and Risk Committee at its meeting on 14 December 2023.

**Comments and observations from the Performance & Finance Scrutiny Committee on 15
November 2023 – Peer Challenge**

- The Committee comment that the plan included a significant number of action and queried whether it was achievable. Officers noted this was a ‘long list’ and that the final action plan would be shorter and focus on deliverable actions within resources available that would make the most impact on the areas of recommendation.
- It was questioned whether all the actions had to be delivered by April. Officers reported that members of the Peer Challenge Team would return to the Council in April or May, but that not all actions had to be completed by that date. What would be looked for was a strong indicator of progress.
- It was suggested that a future Member Development Plan should include a Member skills audit.
- The relative priority of the different actions was queried. Officers responded that, while this was not explicitly set out in the Peer Challenge Report, the highest priority would be bringing the Council’s finances back to a sustainable position.
- It was suggested that when policies were being reviewed or implemented these should be linked back to the Peer Recommendations and action plan. It was commented that many of the areas within the recommendations were areas where there was already strong examples of achievement (for example the Menopause Policy).
- It was noted that some actions were already completed, for example the public question time that had taken place at the start of the Committee, which was a positive outcome.
- Councillors commented that there was already a strong digital approach at the Council, for example with the new website and Member ICT equipment. Officers agreed and commented that the approach to the Peer Challenge was to embrace suggestions even in areas of existing strength to enable the Council to achieve yet more strongly.
- The Committee discussed upcoming AI technology and its application for the Council and a number of views were discussed. Some Members commented that the risks of AI needed to be understood. Other Members noted that it should be embraced as an opportunity and acknowledged that AI was already in use and the Council didn’t want to be left behind, although this had to be within sustainable resources. Cyber security should be audited on an annual basis. It was suggested that ICT colleagues could brief Members on the opportunities of AI and to dispel any fears about its introduction, and Officers agreed this could be added to the programme of Members briefings. Officers commented on the already positive opportunities for AI that were being used, for example in the introduction to the Borough video used in Members’ induction. They noted that its application for use in transactional services, for example planning applications, was more problematic particularly where personal information was involved.

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**Comments from the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee on 15 November 2023 –
Short Term Plan and Mid-Year Performance Update**

- The Committee thanked Officers for their work in pulling together the reports.
- Progress was queried on ENV01b, the playground at Whitmoor Road, which was the only item marked as 'red'. It was stated that this refurbishment was now urgent due to the closure of a footpath allowing residents to access Lightwater Country Park, and Members asked if there was an update on a response from Surrey County Council (SCC) to move this forward. Officers reported that a meeting had been held with SCC earlier that day, and they were moving forward with a lease arrangement. Conversations regarding an increased level of financial contribution had also taken place. A letter to SCC from the Chief Executive to try to expediate the matter would be sent shortly. It was queried whether the nearby Albert Road playground works could be brought forward given the circumstances and Officers undertook to explore this with the relevant team and respond outside the meeting.
- Members requested some more information regarding the items marked 'Complete' on the Short-Term Plan. Officers confirmed that this information was held and would be circulated to the Committee following the meeting.
- Members felt that the phrase 'complete and on-going' was confusing. It was commented that this had been used in scenarios where the initial action was complete but there was further work to embed or roll out the new arrangements. Officers agreed that the word 'on-going' would be avoided in future reports for clarity.
- The action "Assess provision of children's activity & play equipment" in the Short Term Plan was highlighted and it was queried whether the 'ward-based gap analysis' had been completed. Officers stated that this had taken following a report at the Improving Places Working Group through engagement with individual Ward Councillors.
- Members queried whether the newly agreed structure for the finance team (as referenced in the Short Term Plan) could be self-funding through improved controls and fewer agency staff. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that the reduction of agency staff, improved efficiency and financial stability had all been taken into account in respect of the costs of the new structure.
- Members commented on delay in the launch of the electric vehicle charging points caused by the delay in connection by the DNO. Officers confirmed that the Council was reliant on the DNO and it was a known risk in the project and that this continued to be raised and escalated. Once a date was confirmed it would be circulated. Officers also confirmed that the spaces continued to be used by the public in the meantime, and the Council was not yet paying for the charges.
- Members requested that Officers give some background into the recent performance on planning appeals. Officers reported that the recent low performance was inconsistent with high performance within the previous eight quarters, and it was disappointing. The Council had been the fifth highest performer nationally in 2020/21. Officers considered that the quality of Planning Inspector's decisions varied, and the Council had received a number of decisions where the Local Authority had followed policies consistently, but the Planning Inspectorate had taken a different view on policies. A letter of complaint had been sent to the Planning Inspectorate and a response was awaited. Officers were making sure there was learning internally looking at reasons for refusal.
- Members raised the performance on processing new Housing Benefit claims, which had missed the target, and were concerned about the potential impact on vulnerable people. Officers noted that the nature of claims dealt with by the Council had change. Simple claims were dealt with by the DWP, which left more complex claims to be dealt with by the Benefits Teams. Often delays were in evidence being provided to the team. Feedback received from DWP was that the Council's performance was within top quartile nationally, and every effort

was made to set stretching targets and strive for improved performance. Officers would confirm to Members following whether the target referred to working days or calendar days. It was clarified the comment regarding 'changes' was related to the separate target relating to processing changes to existing housing benefit payments due to changes of recipients' circumstances. Officers would also confirm that correct target for the processing of benefit changes was 5 days, as 10 days had been referred to in a previous report.

- Members noted that HQL09 referred to work undertaken with Frimley Health ICS, and noted that some of the Surrey Heath villages instead lay under the Surrey Heathlands ICS, and were concerned there might be a lack of accountability for those residents. Officers confirmed that no part of the Borough was disregarded. Members also noted that many GP surgeries in areas including West End and Chobham tended to refer to the Frimley ICS area, which meant those residents also benefited from this provision.
- Members raised ERC05 which related to the target for a new Customer Relations Management (CRM) system, which was currently delivered by an older system which was approaching the end of its support period, although this had been extended to January 2025.
- The performance on Meals at Home was raised and it was queried whether the drop was due to customers no longer being able to afford the service. The Social Prescribing performance was also raised, which had significantly exceeded its target, and it was queried whether there was sufficient resource to support this. Officers undertook to provide more information after the meeting.

Comments and observations from the Performance & Finance Scrutiny Committee on 15 November 2023 – Revenue Budget Management Report

In future quarterly Revenue Budget Management reports it would be useful to include previous financial years' predicted overspend by the relevant quarter, and the percentage of that year's revenue budget, in order for contextual analysis.

Other points were made by Members of the Committee during the debate on the item but were not required to be advised to the Executive. Those such points would be captured in the meeting's minutes.

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Capital Budget Management Q2 Report- Comments from the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee on 15 November 2023

Summarised points of the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee

There were a number of projects which required reprofiling into future financial years. Although there were no associated borrowing costs to the rescheduled spending, such necessary changes were unpreferable because of the negative effect on Officer time.

Other points were made by Members of the Committee during the debate on the item but were not required to be advised to the Executive. Those such points would be captured in the meeting's minutes.

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