

# Surrey Heath Borough Council

## Executive

17 October 2023

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### Residents Panels

<b>Portfolio Holder:</b>	<b>Cllr Helen Whitcroft</b>
<b>Strategic Director/Head of Service</b>	<b>Resident and Community Services</b>
	<b>Sally Kipping</b>
	<b>HR, Performance &amp; Communications</b>
<b>Report Author:</b>	<b>Sally Kipping (as above)</b>
<b>Key Decision:</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>Date Portfolio Holder signed off the report</b>	<b>2 October 2023</b>
<b>Wards Affected:</b>	<b>All</b>

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#### Summary and purpose

This report develops proposals for the launch of resident panels within the borough of Surrey Heath and the process through which to hold a panel. The aims of the panels are to:

1. Bring residents and partner agencies together to examine the big issues facing local residents.
2. Improve engagement between the Council and Surrey Heath residents and communities.
3. Empower residents and partner agencies to have their voices heard when resolving major issues that impact across the borough.

Residents panels may review broader issues that are not necessarily within the direct control of the Council for example: the cost of living; health care provision; transport; crime and housing (this is not an exhaustive list).

#### Recommendation

The Executive is advised to RESOLVE that the procedure for residents to apply for and attend a residents panel through the petitions process be adopted by the Council and communicated on the website.

## **1. Background and Supporting Information**

1.1 The Short Term Plan adopted by the Council in August 2023 had the following actions:

1.1.1 Develop proposals for the launch of resident panels to bring residents and partner agencies together to look at the big issues facing local residents in a particular area, including issues such as cost of living, health/care, highways, crime and housing.

1.1.2 To explore the best option for enabling residents to better hold the Council to account through a stronger petitions process.

1.2 It is proposed to strengthen the petition process by linking it with the opportunity to hold a residents panel.

## **2. Proposal and process for residents panels**

2.1 The proposal is to link the petitions and residents panel process as follows:

2.1.1 A petition is received with more than 49 signatures

2.1.2 The petition is checked to see whether it meets the eligibility criteria below

2.1.3 The residents panel is held which scopes the issue in full and identifies any potential resolutions

2.1.4 Panel findings are referred to the appropriate scrutiny committee.

2.1.5 The scrutiny committee takes the appropriate action (for example recommendations to Executive)

2.1.6 Actions are fed back to residents as appropriate

2.2 The eligibility criteria for a residents panel are as follows:

2.2.1 The issue impacts residents from more than one Ward

2.2.2 The issue cannot be resolved from a more suitable resolution route such as a complaint or appeals process

2.2.3 The issue does not duplicate the existing Community Trigger process

2.2.4 The issue does not involve a Planning or Licensing application or a statutory petition

2.2.5 The issue cannot be resolved through the application of established Council processes that are already available

2.2.6 The issue is not one dealt with by the Employment Committee

2.2.7 The issue is not one dealt with by the Joint Action Group (JAG) such as a neighbourhood dispute

2.2.8 If the issue relates to an external organisation, the resident panel must not duplicate or contradict the external organisation's own complaint/dispute process (for example the Housing Ombudsman)

2.3 Residents panels will not be used to pursue cases that are identified by the Monitoring Officer as being vexatious, abusive or otherwise inappropriate.

- 2.4 Residents panels can also be requested by any portfolio holder to engage with the public on issues relating to their portfolio that also meet the criteria above.
- 2.5 Residents panel will be particularly encouraged that address inclusion issues within the borough, and as such, the Council will work with residents to ensure that a wide range of voices are heard on each panel. An equalities impact assessment will be undertaken on panels and the Lead Officer will seek appropriate advice, guidance and support from residents and experts where equalities impacts are identified.
- 2.6 The final decision whether to hold a residents panel will be the Monitoring Officer's.
- 2.7 If the decision to hold a panel is refused, then the reasons for the refusal will be put in writing to the resident who submitted the petition. There is no right of appeal to this decision.
- 2.8 The procedure for holding residents panels has been reviewed and agreed by the Community Engagement Working Group and is attached for information as Annex 1.

### **3. Contribution to the Council's Five Year Strategy**

- 3.1 This proposal forms part of our commitment to be an effective and responsive Council, to listen to our residents and to advocate for the community on issues outside of our direct control. We recognise that more can be achieved by working together with partners and residents and that this will provide stronger and better outcomes for the communities of Surrey Heath.

### **4. Resource Implications**

- 4.1 There will be resourcing issues as each panel requires a substantial amount of officer investigation, support, advice and guidance. For this reason, the proposal is that a maximum of three panels per rolling 12 months is agreed.
- 4.2 It is possible that resident panels for certain topics may need additional resources to support and the affordability of this will form part of the Monitoring Officer decision to agree to the panel.

### **5. Section 151 Officer Comments:**

- 5.1 It is anticipated that the costs of these panels will be met from existing resources and officer time. Any additional budget requirement will need to be requested in accordance with the Council's financial regulations.

## **6. Legal and Governance Issues**

- 6.1 An updated Petitions Scheme reflecting the Residents Panel proposals will be considered by the Council on 25 October 2023. If any further changes are required to the Constitution they will be considered in due course.

## **7. Monitoring Officer Comments:**

- 7.1 No matters arising.

## **8. Other Considerations and Impacts**

### **Environment and Climate Change**

- 8.1 No matters arising

### **Equalities and Human Rights**

- 8.2 No matters arising

### **Risk Management**

- 8.3 No matters arising

### **Community Engagement**

- 8.4 This is an essential tool for community engagement and empowerment

## **Annexes**

Annex 1 – Procedure to hold residents panels

## **Annex 1**

### **Procedure for holding residents panels**

The panel will be facilitated by the Council and chaired by the relevant portfolio holder or committee chair. The Lead Officer appointed for the panel (and responsible for any supporting or follow up reports) will be the most appropriate CMT member supporting the Portfolio Holder to which the issue relates and administration support for the panel will also be provided by that department.

Residents panels for petitions of 49-249 people will be held using technology. Panels for petitions involving 250 signatures or more will be held in the Council chamber with virtual options to attend also offered. Residents will be able to present to the panel including any evidence to support the issues raised. If appropriate, partners or other stakeholders may also be invited to attend and to speak. The agenda of the panel, together with attendees will be agreed with resident representatives headed by the petition raiser.

As part of the resident panel preparation, an Equality Impact Assessment will be carried out by the Council to identify any equality issues. Advice and guidance will be sought from Equalities Champions and/or the Equalities Forum as appropriate.

The panel will be limited to a maximum of 10 residents' representatives as a maximum. Those representatives should include a wide range of voices from diverse communities as identified in the Equality Impact Assessment.

### **Scoping the issue**

At the panel, residents will be able to:

- Describe the issue and give their feedback on the situation as they see it
- Provide supporting evidence/documentation
- Provide a suitable timeline summarising the length of time the issue has existed
- Provide any information relating to their preferred solution(s)
- Provide any updates on actions taken to date
- Ask questions that they would like an answer to
- Ask the Council to take specific actions
- Ask the Council to hold a follow up meeting to feedback outcomes

The Lead Officer will be able to:

- Propose an action plan
- Propose a timetable (which will be limited to a six month 'task and finish' group)
- Identify resourcing requirements, constraints and comment whether any proposed actions can be met by existing resources
- Any actions must be met from existing budgets. If additional budget is required, then this must be referred to the Executive for a decision
- Identify actions that are within the Council's control and actions that are the responsibility of another organisation (and who that organisation is).

The Chair of the Panel (who will either be the most appropriate Portfolio holder or Scrutiny Committee Chair) will be able to take the following actions:

- Place the issue on the next suitable Scrutiny Committee Agenda
- Refer the issue to the next Executive Committee Agenda
- Refer the issue to the next Full Council Agenda

Questions that the residents have asked will be put to the relevant meeting as will preferred resolutions.

A written response of the outcome will be published on the Council's website and an outcomes meeting will be offered to residents with progress against any resolution fed back to the appropriate Scrutiny Committee, Executive or Council Meeting.

### **Resolving the issue**

Panels may be resolution or engagement focussed. If no satisfactory resolution can be found using the above process, then the issue may be raised again after a period of 12 months has passed from the date of the last meeting. The Council will hold a maximum of three meetings per issue (a scoping meeting, a resolutions meeting and an outcomes meeting).

In order to keep residents panels meaningful and properly resourced, a maximum of three separate issues per year can be supported using the resident panel process.