

**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

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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.