

## **Scrutiny & Overview Committee**

Meeting held on Tuesday, 6 June 2023 at 6.30 pm in the Council Chamber, Town Hall,  
Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

### **MINUTES**

**Present:** Councillors Rowenna Davis (Chair), Richard Chatterjee (Vice-Chair),  
Leila Ben-Hassel (Deputy-Chair), Jade Appleton, Simon Fox and  
Eunice O'Dame

**Also Present:** Executive Mayor Jason Perry

**Apologies:** None received.

### **PART A**

#### **35/23 Minutes of the Previous Meetings**

The minutes of the meetings held on 16 and 22 May 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

#### **36/23 Disclosure of Interests**

There were no disclosures of interest made at the meeting.

#### **37/23 Urgent Business (if any)**

There were no items of urgent business for the consideration of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee at this meeting.

#### **41/23 Executive Mayor Update to Scrutiny & Overview Committee**

The Committee considered a report on pages 21 to 52 of the agenda which provided an update from the Executive Mayor on the key achievements from his first year in office and his priorities for the year ahead. An update from the Mayor was included within the Committee's work programme for the first meeting of each new municipal year to provide the Committee with the opportunity to scrutinise the Mayor's record in the preceding year and his priorities for the year ahead.

In addition to Executive Mayor Perry, the Council's Chief Executive, Katherine Kerswell, Corporate Director for Resources, Jane West and Assistant Chief Executive, Elaine Jackson were also in attendance at the meeting.

The Executive Mayor introduced the report, highlighted his pride at being the first elected Mayor in the history of Croydon and reconfirmed his commitment to delivering his election pledges and restoring pride in the borough. There was a need for significant change within the Council to address the long-term issues to ensure that the Council was financial sustainable. The Mayor's Business Plan had been agreed at the end of 2022 which set out the commitment to delivering the Mayor's manifesto pledges, with the Council's financial sustainability being a key driver. Listening to residents would also continue to be a priority for the Mayor as the Council continued to reshape its services to become a more sustainable authority.

The Chief Executive advised that the Corporate Management Team (CMT) had also reviewed delivery over the past year, which had revealed positive signs that the culture of the Council was moving forward and the way the Council worked was improving. Improvements such as the new telephony system were having a positive impact by making it easier for residents to get in contact with the Council. Work continued on the Council's improvement journey with a range of transformation programmes due to be launched in 2023-24. This transformation work would require ongoing work to ensure that staff were onboard with delivery and able to manage their business as usual roles.

The first question put to the Mayor asked whether his manifesto pledges would need to be revised in light of the government's intervention at the Council, through the Improvement & Assurance Panel, and the findings from the 'Opening the Books' review. In response, the Mayor highlighted that the pledges had been created within the context of the Council's financial situation and did not require significant additional spending to deliver. As such the manifesto commitments remained in place and the Administration remained committed to delivering these for residents. A key priority for the Mayor had been to gain a thorough understanding of the Council's finances which was why the 'Opening the Books' exercise had been commissioned, leading to the discovery of a number of legacy issues. The relationship with the Improvement and Assurance Panel was very much business as usual, with the finer detail of the Panel's role expected to be clarified by the Government imminently.

In response to a requested update on the progress made with delivering the People and Cultural Transformation Strategy, the importance of the strategy

to staff was emphasised. The strategy was particularly important to help rebuild the relationship with staff who had experienced trauma from having worked through the challenges experienced at the Council over the past few years. Despite these challenges, staff at the Council remained committed to delivering improvement and providing services for residents. It was recognised that work force retention was an issue across local government, but at present Croydon was a net gainer of staff. The action plan for delivering the People and Cultural Transformation Strategy had now been completed following a co-creation process with over 200 members of staff. The Committee commended the work that had been invested in working with staff to co-create the strategy and its accompanying action plan. It agreed that the Committee would schedule a review of the action plan, along with the indicators for the strategy, as part of its 2023-24 work programme.

It was questioned what the Council would look like at the end of its transformation journey and whether there was a clear vision being communicated to staff. It was advised that the change process would be ongoing, evolving to take account of new factors as they emerged. A clear message was being given to staff that once a decision had been made, it would be followed through to implementation. The Mayor's Business Plan provided the strategic direction from which the work of the Council would flow from. It had been recognised that ongoing work was needed to rebuild the trust of staff, with regular webinars held to provide staff the opportunity to raise any concerns. The creation of internal control boards had also given staff greater opportunity to be involved in the improvement journey of the Council. There was a range of different improvements related to areas such as compliance, finance and staff training that were also being progressed.

Reassurance was given that staff understood there was a need for pace and urgency in the delivery of improvement across the Council, but at the same time the Council had a duty of care to its staff, to avoid burnout and ensure that any improvement delivered was sustainable. It was essential that clear messaging was being to staff on what was being improved and how it would be delivered.

Regarding recruitment, it was recognised that there was a challenge in recruiting staff within social care and associated roles, such as occupational health, across the sector, but particularly in local authorities in London. It was also challenging to recruit experienced housing staff. Despite the recruitment challenges across local government, Croydon provided an excellent opportunity for staff to be part of an improvement journey. Although delivering improvement required hard work, it also offered individuals the opportunity to make their mark professionally.

As a follow-up, it was questioned how the recruitment challenges in social care were being addressed. It was advised that the Council was, in conjunction with Croydon College and Southbank University, looking at how it would grow its own staff through health and care training. Apprenticeship were also another area being explored.

It was questioned what the Council was doing to ensure it was meeting its best value duty and what were the key areas of risk. The Mayor advised that ensuring best value required the Council to be delivering ongoing improvement to its services. Potential breaches of the Best Value Duty would include a council not setting a balanced budget, a council failing to provide its statutory services or providing services that were not value for money. The key areas of focus reflected the priorities identified by the Improvement and Assurance Panel which were Finance, Housing and Transformation.

The Council continued to provide its statutory services and through its transformation programmes, was working to deliver improvement and efficiency. Other areas of work such as the ongoing review of council contracts and putting a robust procurement plan in place also contributed towards ensuring that value for money was being delivered. The 'Opening the Books' process provided further indication that the Council now had a more thorough understanding of its finances.

In March 2023, the Government had advised that it would be formalising the powers of the Improvement and Assurance Panel, as the Council had not been able to set a balanced budget for 2023-24 without the Government's permission to allow further capitalisation. The detail on the new arrangements for the Panel was expected to be forthcoming in the near future. The Council had requested support from the Government to address its unsustainable debt, as without a solution being found it would not be possible for the Council to meet its Best Value Duty of delivering a balanced budget. It was highlighted that Best Value Duty was the only legal power the Government had to intervene in a council, when it considered the duty had been breached.

An exit strategy was being prepared which would set out how the Council would reach sustainability by the time the Panel role with the Council was due to end in March 2025. As part of the exit strategy, there was a need to establish how the Best Value Duty would be measured, as the Government would want to know if the Council would still be resilient in its improvement when it left in March 2025.

There had been a lot of time invested in strengthening the risk management processes of the Council and in ensuring the delivery of robust control

systems. Most recently the new NEC Housing system had completed its testing phase and was due to go live, which was a big step forward for the Council. As well as introducing new, fit for purpose, systems, there was also a process in place to decommission older systems that were no longer required.

Regarding the Council's transformation projects identified through the 2023-24 budget setting process, it was advised that work was underway to aggregate the original list of 40 projects into grouped programmes of work. At the same time the software to be used to monitoring transformation and report on progress was being rolled out across the organisation. It was recognised that there would need to be a greater level of ambition in transformation projects going forward, as transformation became more embedded in the culture of the Council. As such the current workstreams included a focus on building the skills within the organisation necessary to delivering successful transformation.

In response to a question about whether the Council had strengthened its risk management processes, reassurance was given that Croydon had a good system of risk management. The new project software would be linked into the risk system, to enable project risks to be reviewed on a granular level. It was highlighted that after initially flagging concerns about the Council's risk management processes, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities had revised this view following a review and were satisfied with the risk management of the Council. The Council's Risk Manager regularly attended directorate management team meetings to discuss area specific risks and had identified risk champions within each directorate.

The Committee welcomed confirmation that key performance indicators (KPI) were being developed to monitor the delivery of the Mayor's Business Plan and it was advised that these were likely to be available within two Cabinet meeting cycles. The Committee agreed that the KPI's should be able to provide an indication of the tangible benefits delivered for the people of Croydon through the Mayor's Business Plan.

It was questioned how the Mayor would be fulfilling his promise to listen to Croydon. In response it was highlighted that there had been two question time events so far and these would be increasing in frequency going forward. There would also continue to be public consultation on a range of different areas. The Mayor advised that he frequently attended events with local businesses and community groups which also provided an opportunity to listen to residents. The Town Centre Working Group had been re-established to work with partners and businesses across the town centre to encourage its redevelopment.

Regarding the biggest risks within the saving plan, it was advised that delivering £36m of savings was a big challenge, which needed to be closely monitored to ensure delivery. The reality for the Council was it would be doing less in the future, but the services it continued to provide would need to be delivered to a high standard. As it was still very early in the financial year, it was too early to pinpoint specific areas of risk.

The Committee welcomed the delivery of a new telephony system and asked whether there was any indication of the difference the new system had made. It was advised that since the installation of the new system, call waiting times had reduced from 7 minutes down to 56 seconds. Residents were also more likely to get their calls answered, which could be evidenced from the call drop-off rate reducing from 60% to 1-2%. The new system provided a range of other data, which would be used to drive ongoing improvement in other areas such as the information provided on the Council's website. It was flagged that a possible improvement in customer interaction would be to ensure that all calls were being followed-up by an email as a matter of course.

It was questioned whether there had been any progress in the discussion with Government to find a solution for the Council's unsustainable debt. It was confirmed that council officers were meeting with their ministerial counterparts on a weekly basis and at the same time the Mayor was having discussions on a political level. It had been made clear to the Government that a solution was needed for 2024-25 budget setting process. However, as any solution would require the creation of a new framework for supporting councils with financial challenges such as those in Croydon, no firm timeline had been given at present.

It was confirmed that both the Mayor and the Chief Executive had replied to the Government consultation on the role of the Improvement & Assurance Panel, but it was not known if any other submissions were made. The Government had indicated that it was open to having regular meetings with as many partners involved in the recovery of Croydon as possible, but this was pending confirmation on the arrangements for the Improvement & Assurance Panel.

Given the financial challenges facing the Council, the Mayor was asked whether his manifesto commitment to re-opening Purley Pool could still be delivered and if it represented value for money. The Mayor confirmed that re-opening Purley Pool remained a key manifesto priority and was essential to the vitality of the area and the mental and physical health of residents. It was originally envisioned that Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding could be used to fixing the pool, but a more detailed investigation had revealed that

the degradation of the pool was more significant than initially anticipated. The Mayor continued to have conversations on the future of the pool, with an update likely to be provided in the near future.

It was noted that both the Adults and Childrens social care services were likely to be inspected in the next year. Further information was requested on how the Council was preparing for these inspections. It was advised that the preparation for inspection was ongoing and involved both self-assessment and peer reviews. The Mayor met with officers and the respective Cabinet Members monthly to review any issues arising within the directorates and had additional meetings on specific issues as needed.

In response to a question about how the Council was helping to support Croydon College following a recent negative Ofsted inspection, it was advised that they were having ongoing conversations about the support that could be provided. It was highlighted that the college provided good outcomes for young people in a number of areas and the negative outcome of the inspection had been based on a specific area.

It was questioned when the Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) in the town centre would be reviewed. It was advised that the current order had only been in place for a month, in which time 28 notices had been issued. Most of the notices issued related to individuals drinking alcohol in the street. When the PSPO had been set up, it was agreed that the boundary would be reviewed after the first few months of operation to check if there was an issue with displacement. It was important for residents to report any issues arising because of displacement, as this data was essential to assessing the impact of the PSPO. Although it was acknowledged that the PSPO was open ended, it was suggested that online information on the PSPO should include an indication of the review date to encourage residents to report any issues promptly. The Committee agreed that it was also important to ensure that there was support provided to individuals subject to orders and agreed that further reassurance on the support available would be sought after the meeting.

It was confirmed by the Mayor that the redevelopment of the Town Centre was a key priority, with regular meetings held with the developer to seek updates on the delivery of a masterplan and to encourage the identification of meanwhile uses for vacant units. The Town Centre Advisory Board had recently been set up to enable a wider conversation with key partners on the delivery of regeneration in the town centre. It was hoped that within twelve months the plans for the town centre would have progressed to the pre-application stage of the planning process. The possibility of finding a

meanwhile use for the Alders building in the town centre had been delayed as the poor state condition of the property had meant that more work than originally anticipated was required.

An update was requested on the delivery of the Mayor's manifesto commitments on graffiti removal and grass cutting. It was advised that graffiti removal service was working to remove graffiti when reported through the Clean Streets app. Although the service was not currently working at capacity, action was underway to improve this. There had been a disappointing start to the grass cutting service this year as it was taking time to find the right balance between cutting and madowing. At the present time, the service had prioritised cutting in areas such as cemeteries.

Further information was requested on the strategy guiding the delivery of savings within the Homelessness service which would also ensure the service was able to respond to the high level of homelessness in the borough. It was advised that early intervention was key to reducing demand within the Homelessness service, which included providing advice and signposting residents to the support. Separately there was an issue with other boroughs placing people in temporary accomodation in Croydon which was not sustainable, with discussions taking place through London Councils on reducing this. There was currently five access points into the Homelessness service, which was unsustainable, with work underway to reduce this to a single point of access. There was also work needed to review the supply of temporary accommodation that was available to ensure it was enough available of sufficient quality, offering value for money.

Concern was raised that the senior officers who had led on the mobilisation of the responsive repairs contracts and the re-procurement of the waste and street cleansing contracts respectively, were leaving the Council. It was advised that there was still strong teams in place that would be able to lead the delivery of these key projects.

Regarding the risks to the Council from the reprocurement of the waste and street cleansing contract, it was advised that the key risks include the potential cost of the new contract increasing and whether there would be a lack of bidders. The Council had been engaging with providers on best practice ahead of developing the contract specification to mitigate these risks. As current contract was procured jointly with three other boroughs through the South West London Waste Partnership, there was a risk that procuring the new contract individually reduce the economies of scale achieved, but as Croydon was the largest borough in the partnership this risk was lower.



It was questioned whether there had been any feedback from the Government to indicate why the Council had not been successful in its bid for Levelling Up funding. It was advised that feedback had been received which indicated that the Council's bid had been good and had met the criteria for funding. However, as only 20 schemes out of 200 bids had received funding, it had not been successful. A request was made for this feedback to be shared with the members of the Committee.

At the conclusion of this item, the Chair thanked the Mayor for his attendance at the meeting and his engagement with the questions of the Committee.

## **Actions**

Following its discussion of the item, the Scrutiny & Overview Committee agreed the following areas for further action: -

1. That scrutiny of the action plan to deliver the People and Cultural Transformation Strategy is scheduled for a future meeting of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee.
2. That scrutiny of the Council's recruitment and retention of staff is scheduled for a future meeting of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee.
3. That scrutiny of the development of the Homelessness Strategy is scheduled for a future meeting of the Homes Sub-Committee.
4. That scrutiny of the delivery of savings in children's social care whilst maintaining safe levels of care is scheduled for a future meeting of the Children & Young People's Sub-Committee.
5. That the feedback provided by the Government on the Council's bid for levelling-up funding is provided to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee.
6. That scrutiny of the next steps for the Council in improving its customer journey is scheduled for a future meeting of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee.
7. That meetings are arranged with Thamesreach as well as the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Councillor Ola Kolade, to seek information on the joined up approach to the provision of support for

individuals subject to Public Space Prevention Orders and the encouragement of reporting.

## **Conclusions**

Following its discussion of the item, the Scrutiny & Overview Committee reached the following conclusions: -

1. The Scrutiny & Overview Committee noted that it was a continuing challenge for the Council to balance the available staff resources to enable the delivery of transformation programmes at the same time as continuing to provide business as usual services. The Committee is aware that the 2023/24 budget has an allocation of £10m in 2023-24 for transformation work to fund extra capacity. The Committee agreed that it would seek reassurance in the coming year, that this budget was being effectively allocated.
2. The Scrutiny & Overview Committee agreed that it would move the item on the Mayor and Council's Relationship with the Improvement & Assurance Panel from the 6 June 2023 agenda to its next meeting on 25 July 2023 and also include a discussion on the duty of best value.
3. Although a response was expected from the Government, until it was received there remained a concern that the specific detail on the Improvement and Assurance Panel's new statutory role with the Council had not been clarified.
4. Of more significant concern for the long-term financial sustainability of the Council, was the clarity on the outcome of the request to Government for the treatment of its unsustainable debt. Until that outcome was known, uncertainty remains in the 2024-25 budget setting process.
5. The Scrutiny & Overview Committee was disappointed to hear that it was unlikely that a planning application for the town centre would be finalised this year, but welcomed the commitment of the Mayor to continue pushing the developer, Westfield, on the redevelopment and looked forward to seeing progress on meanwhile use within the town centre in the next year.

## **Recommendations**

Following its discussion of the item, the Scrutiny & Overview Committee agreed the following recommendations for sub: -

1. The Committee welcomed confirmation from the Mayor that performance indicators to track the delivery of Mayor's Business Plan would be forthcoming, the Committee recommended that consideration be given to indicators that demonstrate the tangible benefits delivered for residents as a result of the Plan.
2. The Committee understood the open-ended nature of the consultation process for Public Space Protection Orders to report concerns so residents would continue to do this, but also felt that a current timeline / deadline be provided, perhaps of six months after its enactment, to give residents clarity about when the scheme would be reviewed and potentially amended.

**39/23 Improvement & Assurance Panel**

This item was deferred to the next meeting of the Committee scheduled for 25 July 2023.

**41/23 Scrutiny Work Programme 2023-24, including the re-establishment of the Homes Sub-Committee**

The Committee considered a report set out on pages 53 to 62 of the agenda which set out the principles which would underpin the work programme for the Committee and its sub-committees in the year ahead. The report also proposed re-establishing the Homes Sub-Committee for a further two years, waiving political balance requirements to allocate seats for Green and Liberal Democrat members and the allocation of the Health & Social Care Sub-Committee Vice-Chair role to the Conservatives.

The Vice-Chair of the Committee advised of a correction to the appointments listed in the report, confirming that Councillor Adele Benson was the Conservative appointment as Vice-Chair on the Homes Sub-Committee, rather than Councillor Danielle Denton as listed.

It was confirmed that the report had been reviewed by the Deputy Monitoring Officer prior to publication to ensure that it complied with the statutory notice required when proposing to waive the political balance requirements in relation to committee appointments.

**Resolved:** The Scrutiny & Overview Committee resolved to: -

1. Agree the underlying principles to guide the work of the Council's Scrutiny function in the forthcoming year.
2. Agree that the remit of the Streets, Environment & Homes Sub-Committee will be divided through the formation of a separate Homes Sub-Committee until the end of 2024-25 municipal year.
3. Agree that the terms of reference agreed for both the Streets & Environment and the Homes Sub-Committees in October 2022, as outlined in section 5, remain valid and are agreed.
4. Agree to waive the requirement for the seats on the Sub-Committees to be allocated in line with the overall political balance of the Council.
5. Agree the appointments (including regular and reserve members and chairs and vice-chairs) to the Sub-Committees.
6. Note that Sub-Committee arrangements will revert to three sub-committees (Children & Young People, Health & Social Care and Streets, Environment & Homes) from the start of the 2025-26 municipal year, unless the Scrutiny & Overview Committee resolves otherwise.

#### 41/23 **Scrutiny Recommendations**

The Committee considered a report set out on pages 63 to 70 of the agenda which presented recommendations proposed by the scrutiny sub-committees for sign-off ahead of submission to the Executive Mayor and responses from the Mayor to previously made decisions.

The report also provided the Committee with proposed recommendations based upon the discussion held at its last meeting on 22 May 2023. The meeting had ended prematurely following a fire alarm at the Town Hall, preventing the Committee from concluding its discussion on the Annual Asset Disposal Plan 2023-24 item. During a discussion on these recommendations, it was agreed that the recommendation concerning the engagement with ward councillors on asset disposals would be expanded to include the local community where appropriate.

**Resolved:** The Scrutiny and Overview Committee resolved to:-

1. Approved for submission to the Executive Mayor, the recommendations made by the Streets & Environment Sub-Committees.
2. Note the response provided by the Executive Mayor to recommendations made by the Scrutiny & Overview Committee.
3. Agree the recommendation arising from the Scrutiny & Overview Committee meeting held on 22 May 2023 for submission to the Executive Mayor.

42/23 **Exclusion of the Press and Public**

This motion was not required.

The meeting ended at 9.20 pm

**Signed:**

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**Date:**

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