

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD
Havering Town Hall, Main Road, Romford
12 December 2024 (7.00 - 9.47 pm)**

Present:

COUNCILLORS

Conservative Group	Dilip Patel, Keith Prince and Viddy Persaud
Havering Residents' Group	Laurance Garrard (Chairman) Julie Wilkes (Vice-Chairman) Philippa Crowder, Bryan Vincent and Julie Wilkes
Labour Group	Mandy Anderson and Matthew Stanton
East Havering Residents' Group	Martin Goode
Residents' Association Independent Group	

All decisions were taken with no votes against.

The Chairman reminded Members of the action to be taken in an emergency.

13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Councillors Philippa Crowder, David Godwin, Dilip Patel (Viddy Persaud substituting) and Philip Ruck.

14 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

5. CITIZENS ADVICE SERVICE.

Councillor Mandy Anderson, Personal, Councillor Anderson is on the Board of Trustees of the Citizens Advice Service and, whilst observing the discussion, did not take any part in this item.

6. AGENCY STAFF SPENDING AND SICKNESS ABSENCE.

Councillor Viddy Persaud, Non Pecuniary, Councillor Persaud works in the Human Resources industry.

15 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of the Board held on 22 October 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

16 **CITIZENS ADVICE SERVICE**

Along with the Havering Volunteer Centre, the Citizens Advice Service (CAS) was one of only two organisations to receive a grant from the Council and scrutiny of this area had originally been suggested by a member of the public.

The Chief Executive Officer of the CAS explained that the service had been established in 1939 and continued to provide advice to Havering residents. The top issues dealt with by the CAS related to benefits, debts and housing. Work by the CAS at a national level generated investment locally and work also aimed to save public money by e.g. reducing numbers of evictions. The resultant increase in people's wellbeing also served to boost the local economy.

Council funding was used for core CAS operations. Larger funding was received from the Department for Work and Pensions but this was solely for the CAS service giving phone advice on claiming universal credit and helped clients from a wider geographical area. Should the Council's funding cease, the CEO felt this would affect the overall viability of the service and it would be difficult to continue.

Alternative organisations that could provide advice services had been mapped by the Council but the CAS was the only generalist advice service in Havering. A phone advice line as available Monday – Friday, 9 am – 5 pm and face to face appointments could be made in Havering Library if necessary. Contact details were publicised via the Over 50s Forum, Romford Recorder and social media. All CAS services were only for Havering residents except for the Help to Claim service which was DWP funded.

The CEO accepted that many other organisations also provided advice but CAS services could not be provided by others with many residents requiring e.g. an advocacy service separate from the Council. The CAS was also quality assured by an external provider. Advisors were trained by the CAB and advice given was checked externally. Not all advisors were legally trained with some only having the CAS qualification but the CEO emphasised that advice given was of high quality.

Around £300k Council Tax arrears was recovered each year following people approaching the CAS for assistance. Council officers felt that it would not be assessed as to whether these figures could still be achieved if CAS funding was to be withdrawn. The CEO reported that the changes to the Winter Fuel Allowance had not been that big an issue thus far.

The CAS level of reserves helped to manage cashflow if e.g. grant payments were late and it was considered good practice to build these up to a target of three months of operating costs. The Council was trying to assist the CAS via the funding system and the planned Thames Freeport.

The specific case management system used by the CAS could not be shown to Members due to data protection. Reports could however be generated showing overall themes etc. People seeking advice were asked for their postcodes to establish if they were a Havering resident. Council housing officers would refer people to the CAS for housing benefit advice. The CAS had good relations with senior Council housing officers.

The Council received £30k per year rent from the CAS. Whilst being based in the Town Hall would not be appropriate, other accommodation options for the CAS were being considered. S. 106 funding could be used for this but the funding was limited. It was agreed to recommend to Cabinet that it be investigated whether the Angel Way and Como Street developments could use S. 106 funding to provide the CAS with accommodation.

A Member asked why the agreed saving of CAS funding had not been implemented. The Strategic Director of Resources responded that officers had felt that this could not be withdrawn without ensuring that the CAS remained financially viable. This officer decision had been reported to scrutiny in the quarterly budget monitoring and savings report. Alternative funding had been found for the CAS for this financial year but this would need to be revisited for next year.

It was clarified that the advice given by the CAS to Council tenants covered benefits and debt advice. Specialist housing advice was a separate function. A Member asked if a breakdown by area or postcode of residents helped could be provided. It may also be possible to use Community Infrastructure Levy funding to assist the CAS.

It was agreed to recommend to Cabinet that it be investigated whether S. 106 or Community Infrastructure Levy funding from current developments could be used to support the CAS.

17 AGENCY STAFF SPENDING AND SICKNESS ABSENCE

It was noted that the Assistant Director of Resources and Organisational Development would be bringing quarterly updates on both these areas to future meetings of the Board.

In Resources, spending on agency workers had reduced and the number of agency staff had dropped from 580 to around 550. Work was continuing to reduce the number of agency workers earning more than £75 k per year. This had been reduced from 30 to 27 staff overall. There had been little

change in sickness absence levels which remained at 10.6 days per annum compared to the London average of 9.3 days. There was no specific timeframe to reach the target of 8 days sickness per year but it was hoped this could be achieved within the next 12 months. This could be shown on future reports.

It would be clarified what discussions had been held with London Borough of Bexley around their work in these areas. It was recognised that staff may be in need of mental health support and a dedicated wellbeing officer was employed. An update could be given on this at the next meeting. The use of the Occupational Health service was monitored and the service was promoted to staff via the intranet. It was not possible at this stage to demonstrate the impact of the service but it was hoped to see a reduction in the number of mental health related absences. Details of support available to managers for supporting employees with their mental health could also be provided.

Staff with the relevant skills were used to cover sickness absence where possible although this was difficult in e.g. complex project management or specialist IT roles. Trends in sickness levels would be included in the next quarterly report to the Board.

In the Place directorate, HR monitoring was included as part of performance management with monthly reports from the HR business partner on the relevant indicators. Of around 850 staff, 191 (22%) were agency with 24 of these being on grades above £75k per year. All 24 of these posts had recently been reviewed. There were 65 agency staff in the parking service due to more enforcement officers now being used and it was possible this service could be outsourced in the future.

Housing used 15% agency staff. All 13 high grade agency staff members had recently been reviewed. Sickness figures in the service had increased slightly from 12.1 to 13.1 days although the number of staff on long term sick had reduced. Agency staff rates in planning were 10% and sickness had reduced from 13.4 to 9.8 days.

It was felt that improved contract management with new contractors would mean that the new contractor would not be able to carry significant levels of sickness.

In People, the Director met monthly with her HR business partner and further HR support was available. Around 1,200 of 1,600 staff in the People directorate were based in Starting Well of which approximately 300 were agency. The recent OFSTED report had meant the size of the service had to be increased but it was expected that the numbers of agency staff would be reduced in the coming years. There had been a rise in the number of agency staff in Education although some posts were funded by Central Government and more detail could be provided.

There were approximately 60 agency staff in Living Well, many of whom were used to backfill permanent staff who were on secondment. It was also uncertain how long the Refugee Housing team would be needed so agency staff were used in this area.

All People staff on long term sick were going through the appropriate process, including referral to Occupational Health. A total of 67 people on long term sick had left the organisation in the last 12 months and the Director would confirm how many of these had been dismissed. The overall sickness rate in People was 12.3% with this being 15% in Ageing Well, 13% in Starting Well and 8% in Living Well.

It was agreed that future reports to the Board would include historical data on agency staff and sickness absence as well as a written commentary for each directorate.

18 BUDGET CONSULTATION APPROACH

The budget consultation had opened on 23 November and had included sections on satisfaction with Council services and the possible level of Council Tax. There would be a mix of consultation and engagement and 20 hard copies of the consultation document would be available in each library. A consultation event would also be held at the Town Hall on 18 December.

The consultation pack also included a petition and a letter to local MPs and a total of 230 residents had so far responded to the petition. It was planned for the Leader of the Council to present the petition at 10 Downing Street.

Lobbying for a better settlement for Havering was continuing with Ministers and at the Local Government Association Conference.

The Board recommended that next year's budget consultation should be brought for scrutiny before it had commenced. Officers did not feel that the budget exercise was self-defeating. Consultation on a Council Tax increase was legally required but this did not apply to fees & charges.

At this point of the meeting the Board agreed to suspend Committee Procedure Rule 8 (b) and continue the meeting for a further 30 minutes in order to conclude the business.

It was noted that it was too late to implement any recommendations relating to the current budget consultation. The Board did however recommend that other boroughs be asked of their budget consultation.

19 IMPROVEMENT AND TRANSFORMATION PLAN

The Board was asked to review the Council's Improvement and Transformation Plan and select items for future scrutiny. Suggestions for the

**Overview & Scrutiny Board, 12 December
2024**

Board's work programme included the climate change report, housing issues, the debt recovery board and the Council's complaints process.

Chairman