

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD
Havering Town Hall, Main Road, Romford
3 July 2025 (7.00 - 9.36 pm)**

Present:

COUNCILLORS

Conservative Group	Dilip Patel, Keith Prince and David Taylor
Havering Residents' Group	Philippa Crowder and Julie Wilkes (Vice-Chair)
Labour Group East Havering Residents' Group	Jane Keane and Matthew Stanton Martin Goode

All decisions were taken with no votes against.

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

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Councillors Laurance Garrard, David Godwin, Philip Ruck and Bryan Vincent.

Councillor Ruck was in attendance via videoconference.

2 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interest.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Board held on 16 April 2025 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4 SAVINGS PROGRESS UPDATE

Officers advised that of the £15m savings identified in the 2024/25 budget, around £10m had been delivered, £3m delayed and £2m had not been achieved. Some non-delivered savings in areas such as Early Help had not been achieved due to changes in Government policy following the agreement of the Council's budget.

Members requested that the relevant Cabinet Member and Strategic Director attend future meetings where budget or savings issues were being scrutinised. Officers anticipated that the delayed savings listed in the report would eventually be made. Members asked for further clarity over what the £150k projected saving for the libraries service represented. Non-achieved savings would be picked up via the Budget Monitoring process.

Updates were also requested on the issues with the introduction of modular housing. A contractor had been appointed for the Family Welcome Centre but details would be forwarded of the reasons for the delay in construction. The decision not to proceed with a particular saving was political in nature and would be taken by Cabinet.

It was suggested that any future version of the report should be presented to the Board alongside the Risk Register to enable scrutiny of the two documents. It was agreed that an updated version of the report should be presented to the Board with the Cabinet Member and Strategic Director present to assist the scrutiny process.

It was accepted that the full saving on the agency levy may not be reached as the Council was now using less agency staff. A Member suggested this could be clarified in the report.

It was agreed that a fuller breakdown of savings achieved or anticipated should be given in future versions of the report.

Councillor Prince apologised to the statutory scrutiny officer and to all present for an incident earlier in the meeting.

5 CORPORATE HR METRICS - AGENCY WORKERS AND SICKNESS ABSENCE

Officers advised that the proportion of agency workers had dropped from 17.3% to 14.2% as at May 2025. The target of the London average figure for this expenditure stood at 12%. The focus was on reducing the number of agency workers earning in excess of £75. It was noted that expenditure on agency workers would be the responsibility of the Head of Procurement from now on.

All agency workers with more than two years service were being reviewed and all officers at assistant director level or above were being asked to look at their agency staff numbers. The number of agency staff who had worked at the Council for more than two years totalled 118 and officers were working on which of these could be made permanent and hence save costs. There now very few agency social workers at Havering. It was noted however that the OFSTED judgment had led to three additional social work teams being introduced. Some agency staff had been used to fill these posts due to the national shortage of social workers.

Casual and seasonal workers were not included in these figures. Exit interviews were undertaken to understand the reasons why staff were leaving. The issue of key person dependency was acknowledged and succession planning was considered with HR colleagues to establish which staff could be trained for promotion etc.

Sickness levels had reduced to 9.8 days per employee per annum and the London average for this was 9.1 days. The cost to the Council of sickness absence had now reduced to £3.1m. The list of reasons for sickness absence had been improved and the results of a benchmarking exercise were presented at appendix 3 to the report. It was confirmed that sickness absence data did not include figures for agency staff.

Officers were not aware of any Council that currently used an in-house agency recruitment team but procurement could be asked to look at this. The use of the current Adecco agency did give advantages of larger scale and reach. The proportion of agency workers in senior roles who lived outside the borough could be supplied. Generally, Havering had a high proportion of local residents amongst its staff with around 63% of employees living within the borough.

A new occupational health provider had recently been appointed. Data was not available as to why certain age ranges e.g. millennials had higher levels of sickness. The Council's sickness policy was aligned to its contract of employment. The policy was under review but length of sick pay periods etc were similar to other Councils.

Fewer calls to the wellbeing line were received from men to the perceived stigma associated with men seeking out support. Domestic abuse support was part of the contractor's wellbeing offer. A breakdown of the legal support requested could be supplied.

It was accepted that previously supplied figures for the cost of sickness absence had not been accurate but officers were confident that this had been resolved. The time lost due to sickness absence across the Council was approximately 4%. Some 10% of staff had been on a period of long term sickness over the last 12 months although it was emphasised that these absences were not simultaneous.

It was recommended that the figures reported should include the number of absences rather than just total length. It was also suggested that the use of language such as 'sickness tolerant' would be considered as part of a review of the policy.

Display screen equipment assessments were undertaken for staff working from home in order to address musculoskeletal and mental health issues. Reduced price chiropractic treatment had been made available to staff and more stress and mental health categories had been added to the recording system. The Board recommended that it be investigated if the working from home policy was leading to increased levels of sickness. Officers confirmed

that the work from home policy was under review. Anonymised data summarising the reasons for people exiting the organisation could be brought to a future meeting of the Board.

The extent to which people were able to use their leave was monitored. It was accepted that staff should not have in their out of office messages contacts who were themselves away and this could be addressed. On-call arrangements in services such as social care were discussed with unions and designed to ensure that on-call staff received sufficient rest.

6 UPDATE - CUSTOMER SERVICES STRATEGY

The Council's lead on the customer service strategy explained that it was wished to make good customer service the norm. The strategy had launched in October 2024 and had included a new intranet page and the establishment of a Customer Services Champion Network. The customer experience of residents would be reviewed and a mandatory customer service objective was included in staff PDRs.

Customer service staff would now be in the office at least once a week and were available on reception. An area adjacent to reception was being renovated to provide additional desk space which could allow staff to attend physically more frequently and be present on the Town Hall reception.

Results of customer service benchmarking would be shared more widely. No additional resources would be needed to implement the strategy which sought to introduce innovative ways of working. Work was also in progress to ensure services were made accessible to all residents. The strategy would be tested by the introduction of a residents' panel and undertaking mystery shopping exercises etc. It was accepted that some standards were challenging but they had also been set at an aspirational level.

An external survey would be run in early 2026 which indicate the impact of the improvements within the strategy. Complaints monitoring was also being undertaken to investigate the main themes of complaints. It was aimed to deal with any lack of response to customers. It was confirmed that assistance could be offered at the Town Hall reception to non-IT literate residents but this help was available at libraries.

Officers wished to make it easy to accept complaints but it was agreed that it should not be necessary to make a complaint in the first place. A Member felt that many residents were confused about who to approach re Council services and added that there were now fewer libraries where people could seek advice.

Information for staff on the customer service strategy was being developed and officers were also attending team meetings to discuss the strategy. Work would be undertaken to extend the strategy to Council contractors. It

was agreed that commitment to the strategy was needed from senior management.

Members asked for statistical information to be brought to a future meeting of the Board in order to show how the strategy had been progressing. The Board agreed a recommendation that participation in the Customer Service Strategy should be extended to include the Council's out of hours contractor and the Mears call centre.

7 ANNUAL REPORT 2024/25

It was agreed that the Board's annual report should include a statement of thanks to the Statutory Scrutiny Officer. The report was otherwise approved to be presented at the forthcoming meeting of full Council.

Chairman