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**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD
Havering Town Hall, Main Road, Romford
9 October 2025 (7.00 - 9.27 pm)**

Present:

COUNCILLORS

Conservative Group	David Taylor
Havering Residents' Group	Laurance Garrard (Chairman), David Godwin, Bryan Vincent and Julie Wilkes (Vice-Chair)
Labour Group	Jane Keane and Matthew Stanton
East Havering Residents' Group	Martin Goode
Residents' Association Independent Group	Philip Ruck

All decisions were taken with no votes against.

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

8 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Councillors Philippa Crowder, Dilip Patel and Keith Prince.

9 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interest.

10 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 July 2025 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

11 CORPORATE HR METRICS - AGENCY WORKERS AND SICKNESS ABSENCE

The number of sickness absences had remained steady but the overall number of sickness absence days had fallen to 9.4 days per employee, in line with the national average. It was not currently possible to analyse the

impact of homeworking on sickness absence. Details of benchmarking sickness absence rates with other London Councils could be brought to a future meeting of the Board. Details of roles in excess of £75k salary that were covered by agency staff could be provided.

Officers confirmed that 27% of sickness absences were for musculo-skeletal problems. Data on manual handling training completed by staff could be provided. It was agreed that officers from the Council's health and safety team should attend a future meeting of the Board in order that this area could be scrutinised in more detail.

The numbers and spend on agency workers had reduced. There were now a total of 399 agency workers, the lowest since 2018. Reasons for why these staff were engaged would require a further review of the data. There were only four staff covered by off-contract agency spend and it was hoped to bring these under the corporate contract. There was not any known correlation between the numbers of agency staff and increasing levels of mental health issues in the Council's workforce. Efforts had been made to convert agency staff to permanent roles which would lessen any direct impact on staff. It was clarified that most agency staff covered vacancies rather than sickness. Agency and permanent hires were considered at a weekly recruitment panel.

Monthly wellbeing checks were to be undertaken with all staff which could detect early signs of sickness and it was planned to increase the proportion of check-ins completed. Officers accepted that performance re appraisals needed to improve and a report on the level of appraisals completed could be brought to a future meeting. It was noted that it could be more difficult to complete the appraisals process for part time workers such as school catering staff.

More detail could be given on the performance of the new provider of the Employee Assistance Programme. A report on the uptake of this programme amongst staff could be brought to a future meeting. Efforts were also ongoing to capture more fully staff reasons for leaving. The Leader of the Council pointed out that a recent Ofsted report had indicated staff had reported that they enjoyed working at the Council. The staff turnover rate was lower than the London average.

The Chief Executive felt that staff were not necessarily needed to be located within the physical Town Hall buildings. Many staff were more effective working out in the community. Desks in the Council buildings were also at a ratio of 1 desk per 2 staff.

Appraisal statistics were reviewed in Place Directorate on a monthly basis. The numbers of annual appraisals had increased and work was also in progress to increase the number of 1:1 check-ins held. These were also now being recorded correctly.

The following action points were agreed:

- Sickness benchmarking with other London boroughs to be included in next report to the Overview and Scrutiny Board
- Health & Safety officers to attend a future meeting at which the HR report is on agenda to update on manual handling training and data on this to also be provided
- Report on new Employee Assistance Programme provider and uptake of service to come to future meeting
- Report on staff appraisals to come to future meeting
- List of jobs covered by agency staff with a salary in excess of £75k to be provided

12 BUDGET SAVINGS UPDATE

Officers advised that good progress was being made on the £10.2m savings identified in the 2025/26 budget. Cash savings achieved were now shown in the report. More information was also given in the report re the savings from the libraries programme. It was hoped that amber rated savings would be achieved by year end but it was acknowledged that those savings that were red rated were proving difficult. Ratings for some savings would be revised if they proved more achievable.

No meanwhile uses for the former library sites had been identified at present. The £22k saving on business rates was not currently being achieved and it was acknowledged that library services were struggling to achieve their overall savings targets. Officers were conscious of the number of agency workers in libraries, some of whom had been kept on due to the closure programme. It was not possible at this stage to say how many permanent library staff had been redeployed although this could be confirmed. Redeployed staff were put into already budgeted roles so this was not considered a saving.

A Member raised whether the amount of support to residents re claiming attendance allowance, pension credit etc had lowered due to the library closures. Officers would respond separately on this but it was pointed out this support could be accessed in other ways rather than just via libraries. It was noted that the Council only retained 30% of the revenue from business rates. The lowering of library income from photocopying services had reduced the level of savings put up.

It was confirmed that the modular housing units had been procured and work would start in November with occupation by the end of January. This would be temporary accommodation and work was ongoing to try to procure more accommodation. The number of families living in hotels had reduced and work was in progress to lower the cost of nightly paid accommodation. Additional provision of modular units was also being considered and officers emphasised that they did not wish to have anyone living in temporary accommodation. It was noted however that the number of private sector landlord properties available continued to decline.

Further details could be given of the budget tracking process but this was undertaken at Cabinet level and £160m of savings had been made in the last 10-15 years. The savings report had not been specifically shared with Central Government but the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government had asked for an update in this area and was supportive of the Council's work to achieve savings.

Officers estimated the total Capitalisation Directive required for 2025/26 to be just under £70m. While this was an improvement on the worst case scenario figure of £88m, it was still in excess of the Council's combined revenue from Council Tax and grants. It was clarified that the actuals from the budget process as well as savings progress were included in the Cabinet report, as budget monitoring reports became available.

Capital receipts could be used to offset revenue expenses but these had also been used to finance the 2023/24 Capitalisation Direction. The 2024/25 Capitalisation Direction had not been borrowed as yet as internal borrowing was being used instead. Borrowing would be needed once liquidity ran short. The 2024/25 accounts were on track to be signed off in February 2026.

The Board agreed the following recommendations and action points:

- Numbers of redeployed library staff to be confirmed
- Clarity to be provided on whether the number of people supported to claim benefits etc has gone down since the library closures
- Other ways in which benefit claim support is provided to be detailed

13 IMPROVEMENT AND TRANSFORMATION PLAN PROGRESS UPDATE AND CIPFA FM REVIEW

As part of the Capitalisation Direction arrangements, the Council was required to submit an Improvement and Transformation Plan to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. The report gave a progress update on a number of key projects.

It was clarified that no assumption had been made about achieving planning permission for the data centre. This would be a decision for Strategic Planning Committee. It was therefore agreed that the report should be amended to reflect this. A timeline for the completion of items would also be added. Officers had requested a meeting with the Government Minister to discuss retention of business rates for the Data Centre. Efforts were ongoing to seek the retention of business rates for other new sites.

Information on savings achieved in gas and electricity costs could be obtained and a graphical representation of the direction of travel could be added to the report. It was suggested that more information on how home to

school transport was working would be useful and that the safety of the service could be referred to the People Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Committee.

The priorities of the Mercury Land Holdings Business Plan were to deliver good quality private rented sector accommodation. The Monitoring Officer added that a report on the governance of Mercury Land Holdings would shortly be presented to Governance Committee. This could be taken to Audit Committee at the same time. This had been prompted by the motion agreed at the July Cabinet meeting.

It was emphasised that the Council did not wish to use temporary accommodation. Housing demand needed to be met and a role had been identified for Mercury Land Holdings in the private rental sector. This would also inform the next version of the Council's Local Plan.

Children's welfare had undergone a recent Ofsted inspection. This area had been given a high risk rating by Cipfa assessors but work was in progress with NHS partners to address this. The direction of travel re support given to care leavers could be confirmed. Data could be obtained on the numbers of children hospitalised with mental health issues who had not previously received Council intervention.

Services that achieved full cost recovery included the crematorium and the registration service at Langtons. Price points were kept under review but there was a wish to avoid any overcharging for Council services. Charges for e.g. leaseholders and caretaking services were also reviewed in consultation with tenants and leaseholders.

The Council's debt recovery board had been running since January 2025 and focussed on improving the collection process. It was accepted that the Council had to recover debt in a certain way and Council bailiffs had won an award for being a compassionate service. The Council would look to offer support to people who had missed payments of Council Tax etc.

The Board agreed the following action points and recommendations:

- The section of the Improvement and Transformation Plan re the data centre to say 'consideration by Strategic Planning Committee' rather than 'consent expected'
- A timeline for the completion of items to be added
- Savings on the cost of gas/electricity to be shown
- The direction of travel for the projects to be shown in the report by use of graphs etc
- Safety of school transport to be referred to People OSSC for further scrutiny
- The direction of travel to be included in the care leavers section
- More detail requested on children in hospital with mental health issues, particularly those admitted direct at stage 4, without prior intervention.

14 CABINET RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS - HAVERING VOLUNTEER CENTRE AND SCRUTINY PROCESS

The Statutory Scrutiny Officer advised that the Constitution was silent around the issues of Cabinet responses to scrutiny coming back to the Board. Of seven recommendations made re the scrutiny process itself, two had not been agreed by Cabinet. These related to Cabinet Member attendance at scrutiny (if requested) which was already in the Constitution and the Board receiving scrutiny reports ten days in advance of a meeting. Cabinet felt this timescale was not realistic and there was in any case a five working days statutory deadline for reports.

Recommendations made by the Board re Havering Volunteer Centre were to be considered as part of forthcoming strategy days. While there was currently no requirement for Cabinet responses to come back formally to the Board, this could perhaps be included within a scrutiny protocol. A draft of this would be considered in due course by the Constitution Working Party and Governance Committee.

It was confirmed that officer discussions with Havering Volunteer Centre were ongoing and that alternatives to their current premises had been offered. Officers were confident a new tenant could be found for the Centre's current premises. It would not be possible to offer a lower than market rate rent at this stage although officers would clarify this. Members felt that it was important that the future of the Volunteer Centre was resolved as soon as possible.

The Board agreed:

That clarification should be given over whether any discount from the market rental rate can be offered to the Havering Volunteer Centre.

Chairman