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MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD Council Chamber - Town Hall 17 March 2026 (7.00 - 9.30 pm)

Present:

COUNCILLORS

Conservative Group	Dilip Patel and David Taylor
Havering Residents' Group	Philippa Crowder, Laurance Garrard (Chairman), Bryan Vincent 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.

24 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Councillors David Godwin and Phil Ruck.

25 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interest.

26 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 February 2026 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

27 CORPORATE HR METRICS

Officers reported that there had been a continued improvement in staff absence levels with overall sickness levels continuing a downward trend from 10.8 to 10.2 days per employee per year. Mental health issues were the main cause of sickness absence and it was accepted that long term sickness remained a pressure point.

There had been an increase in demand for wellbeing support and the new provider of Occupational Health and Employee Assistance services was

now fully in operation. It was accepted that budget constraints would limit expansion but it was hoped to expand the Mental Health First Aider network.

Managers were now increasingly aware of the Occupational Health referral process and how this could reduce sickness absence levels and help staff to return to work. It was noted that a reduction in referral numbers was expected in 2026 due to the six week handover period to the new provider.

Detail could be given on how one day sickness absences were treated and it was clarified that staff could take up to 5 days carers leave per year. It was suggested that future HR reports to the Board could include comparative data with other boroughs but officers felt it was best not to identify other geographical areas specifically in the data. Comparisons could also be provided with sickness absence in the private sector.

Trends in absence around musculo-skeletal issues could be looked at and work had been undertaken with a local chiropractic clinic although this was limited by budgetary constraints. Those staff who had attended had provided positive feedback and it was hoped managers would encourage more colleagues to attend the sessions.

A Member felt that patterns of sickness absence should be managed and the effect of working from home should be investigated. Officers emphasised that support was available to managers when dealing with sickness trends etc. Sickness certificates were required to be produced after 5 days absence. Further details of the full cost to the Council of sickness absence could be provided in future reports. Staff received full pay for their first six months of sickness absence with half pay for the following six months. Phased returns and reasonable adjustments were offered to assist with returns to work.

Working from home was not specifically mentioned in the sickness statistics as some staff did also come into the office. Carers leave etc was recorded separately. It was felt that it was not cost effective to seek external accreditation for sickness management given current resources. Learning was shared with other Local Authorities via networks.

The following recommendations were **AGREED**:

- 1. That it be recognised that an improvement in sickness absence rates had been achieved under very difficult financial circumstances.**
- 2. That ways in which other comparable Local Authorities deal with sickness absence be investigated.**
- 3. That an update on sickness absence due to musculo-skeletal issues be given to a future meeting of the Board.**

4. That messaging on ways to prevent short term illness be provided to staff.
5. That officers work towards 100% completion by staff of training on musculo-skeletal and stress issues.

28 CORPORATE METRICS - AGENCY WORKERS

Officers accepted that some staff were retained on long term agency contracts in e.g. catering as this could be better financially for the Council. The position on long term agency staff in higher graded posts was discussed with the individuals concerned. It was noted however that it was not necessarily always a cheaper option to convert from temporary to permanent staff. Agency staff were sometimes hired in the short term to cover restructures and further detail could be provided on this. The percentage fee paid to the employment agency for staff supplied could be given to the Board as an exempt item.

Senior agency staff were recruited, where necessary, via consideration of their CV and mindset demonstrated rather than where they lived. It was hoped to reduce the percentage of agency staff in the Council's workforce to around 12%. The use of the Adecco agency was part of a London-wide agreement although other agencies could be used within this, where necessary. Information could be provided on agency staff who had been in post for more than three years.

Officers emphasised that efforts were being made to control costs with other agencies being transferred into the Adecco supply chain where possible. Work was needed with HR to understand the lack of applications for permanent positions and hence the need to retain more agency workers. There were 67 project workers employed as agency staff and further detail could be provided. Efforts were also made to recruit permanently into the in-house Project Management Office. The possibility of training existing staff to undertake project management work would need to be discussed with hiring managers.

A Member felt it should be investigated whether an in-house employment agency could be developed as seen in for example Haringey. A Member also asked if a breakdown could be produced of the type of agency contracts used in Havering e.g. fixed term, open ended etc.

The Board agreed the comments and action points as recorded above.

29 COMMERCIAL STRATEGY UPDATE

The Assistant Director of Education – Starting Well explained that the Council wished to make its services more commercially-minded and for all Council officers to think more commercially. This would include training for

staff and the setting of appropriate targets as part of the performance review process. A commercial awareness resource bank had recently been launched for staff.

It was not possible at this stage to report specifically on the impact of traded services although the Havering Schools Income Generation Framework was available. It was hoped that more detailed reporting would be available in the future.

The possibility of a staff incentive scheme to generate savings had been raised but there were no definite plans at this stage. The 'Big Idea' campaign had been run successfully amongst staff. It was suggested by Members that more detail on the Commercial Strategy should be brought to a future meeting of the Board along with more indicators of progress. Officers responded that this was shown in the action plan for the Commercial Strategy. This information was commercially sensitive but could perhaps be brought to the Board as an exempt item.

There was strict legislation around how generated income could be used and this was required to be ring-fenced to the service. Information on income derived from fees and charges could not be shown specifically at present.

The Board agreed the comments and recommendations as shown above.

30 RESPONSE OF CABINET TO CALL-IN OF EXECUTIVE DECISION - FUTURE PROPOSALS FOR FORMER LIBRARY SITES

At its meeting on 14 January 2026, Cabinet had responded to the comments of the Board following the upholding of a requisition of a Cabinet decision concerning future proposals for former library premises.

The Board recommended that Cabinet be asked to give a specific response to recommendations 5 and 6 concerning Hornchurch library. The Board agreed this could be taken direct to the relevant Cabinet Member and Head of Service.

31 SELF-EVALUATION OF BOARD'S WORK 2025/26

The Statutory Scrutiny Officer detailed some options for future arrangements for scrutiny in Havering. This included potentially having longer tenures for scrutiny Chairs with a minimum of two years. It was noted that, in addition to scrutiny Members, training on these areas had been provided to Cabinet Members and the Executive Leadership Team. A working protocol between Cabinet and scrutiny was in the process of being developed.

A Member felt that there was inadequate support given to scrutiny and this was demonstrated by the low number of task and finish groups and the

number of delayed reports. They felt this should be addressed in the new Council term.

Officers stated that scrutiny was a statutory function and more engagement could be undertaken with the public and with other partners. Better tracking of recommendations implemented could be undertaken. A Member suggested this could also apply to responses to questions raised at meetings.

It was felt it would be useful, where this was possible, to receive scrutiny reports at an earlier stage. A work plan for the full year could be circulated to assist Members and officers. AI could also be used to provide a summary of key lines of enquiry etc to be used at meetings. Perhaps how to use the relevant software could be included as part of the Member induction programme. It would also be important for terms of reference for scrutiny reviews to be as clear as possible.

The Board agreed the above points and suggestions as recommendations to go to Cabinet for response.

Chairman

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