

## Minutes of the Meeting of the STRATEGY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE held on 30 March 2021

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### PRESENT -

Councillor Eber Kington (Chairman); Councillor Clive Smitheram (Vice-Chairman); Councillors Arthur Abdulin, Steve Bridger, Kate Chinn, Nigel Collin, Hannah Dalton, David Gulland, Colin Keane and Barry Nash

In Attendance: Paul Cuttle (Director, Grant Thornton)

Officers present: Kathryn Beldon (Chief Executive), Lee Duffy (Chief Finance Officer), Viv Evans (Interim Head of Planning), Mark Shephard (Head of Property and Regeneration), Shona Mason (Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development), Brendan Bradley (Chief Accountant), Sarah Keeble (Democratic Services Officer) and Tim Richardson (Committee Administrator)

#### 76 QUESTION TIME

No questions were submitted or asked by members of the public.

#### 77 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made in relation to items of business to be discussed at the meeting.

#### 78 EXTERNAL AUDIT UPDATE

The Committee received a report presenting the external auditor's Annual Audit Letter for the year ended 31 March 2020; the Housing Benefit Certification Letter for 2019/20; and the External Audit Plan for 2020/21. In accordance with audit regulations, these items must be presented to Committee.

The Committee received a verbal introduction from the representative from the Council's External Auditor Grant Thornton.

The following matters were raised by the Committee:

- a) **VAT:** Following a question from a Member, the Officer confirmed that due to the complex nature of rules regarding VAT, it is common for HMRC to release clarification regarding how they interpret these rules. They may then ask organisations to renew their processes in line with this updated clarification. When HMRC asked all election authorities to review their VAT treatment on elections, it transpired that Epsom and Ewell had been

reclaiming VAT twice. Therefore, the Council now has to repay the over-claimed VAT to HMRC. It was noted that this would be picked up with the External Audit team at the final audit.

- b) **Delays due to Covid-19:** Members noted possible delays to the Audit as a result of Covid-19. The External Audit representative confirmed that although the pandemic had presented some challenges, the Grant Thornton team hold the resource and intent to complete this Audit without any major issues. It was noted that the Epsom and Ewell External Audit is one that would be looked at completing early in the cycle of prioritisation.
- c) **Housing benefit:** Members noted the net £490 overpayment of Housing Benefit. The Officer noted that although this sum is below the DWP threshold and therefore not recoverable from recipients, it will be claimed back direct from DWP.

Following consideration, it was resolved unanimously that the Committee:

- (1) **Received the Annual Audit Letter for 2019/20**
- (2) **Received the Housing Benefit Certification for 2019/20**
- (3) **Received the External Audit Plan for 2020/21**

**79 EPSON & EWELL BOROUGH COUNCIL'S DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION FRAMEWORK 2021-2024**

The Committee received a report providing details of the consultation undertaken on the Council's draft Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Framework and the final Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Framework 2021-2024 for approval.

The following matter was raised by the Committee:

- a) **Survey responses:** Members noted the number of survey responses received from the public. It was noted that this number (146) was typical of a consultation undertaken of this nature. Following a question from a Member, the Officer noted that work was being done to widen conversations within the community in order to broaden the range of local engagement with the Framework.

Following consideration, it was resolved unanimously that the Committee:

- (1) **Reviewed the findings of the consultation undertaken on the draft Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Framework 2020-2024.**
- (2) **Approved the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Framework 2021-2024.**

**80 VAT ON ELECTION EXPENSES**

The Committee received a report seeking authorisation to use £50,903 from the Council's VAT reserve to fund the repayment to HMRC of over recovered VAT on the cost of holding elections.

Following consideration, it was resolved unanimously that the Committee:

- (1) Agreed that £50,903 can be transferred from the VAT reserve to fund repayment to HMRC of over recovered VAT.**

**81 LOCAL PLAN RESOURCES**

The Committee received a report seeking approval for the additional resources required to have an up-to-date Local Plan in place by the Government deadline of December 2023.

The following matters were raised by the Committee:

- a) Recruitment:** Members noted the 3 x employment posts advertised. Following a question from a Member, the Officer noted that the positions were budgeted as 3-year fixed-term contracts. The Officer agreed to discuss with Human Resources whether this may be the most appropriate offer of contract, or if permanent positions or another alternative may be more suitable.
- b) New Homes Bonus Grant:** Members noted the proposed use of the New Homes Bonus Grant to mitigate the additional spend. The Officer confirmed that this allocation of money was deemed appropriate to fund the development of the New Local Plan, as these are unringfenced funds, which were originally awarded to the Borough due to its historic performance of granting planning permission for new homes.
- c) Budget:** Following a question from a Member, the Officer noted that the proposed budget was realistic in terms of delivering the Local Plan.

Following consideration, the Committee unanimously resolved:

- (1) To approve the increase in budget of £712,000, as set out in section 2.23.2 of this report, for additional activities identified in the preparation and adoption of a new Local Plan.**
- (2) To approve the reallocation of resources and additional funding of £29,583 to complete existing workstreams as set out in sections 2.23.1 and 2 of this report.**
- (3) To approve the use of New Homes Bonus Grant totalling £741,583 currently held in the Corporate Projects Reserve to fund the increased cost of delivering the Local Plan.**

**82 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Strategy and Resources Committee held on 16 March were agreed as a true record and the Committee authorised the Chairman to sign them.

**83 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

Under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the Committee passed a resolution to exclude the public from the meeting for Part Two of the Agenda on the grounds that the business involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act (as amended) and that pursuant to paragraph 10 of Part 2 of the said Schedule 12A the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

**84 REVIEW OF TOWN HALL ACCOMMODATION**

The decision for this item is recorded in a separate (not for publication) restricted Minute.

**85 RELEASE OF RESTRICTIVE COVENANT**

The decision for this item is recorded in a separate (not for publication) restricted Minute.

**86 POTENTIAL REGENERATION OPPORTUNITIES**

The decision for this item is recorded in a separate (not for publication) restricted Minute.

**87 24 SOUTH STREET**

The decision for this item is recorded in a separate (not for publication) restricted Minute.

*The meeting began at 7.00 pm and ended at 9.01 pm*

COUNCILLOR EBER KINGTON (CHAIRMAN)