

Scrutiny

ANNUAL REPORT 2021-2022



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Chair's Introduction



**Councillor Sean
Fitzsimons**
(Chair)

If 2020/21 was the annus horribilis for Croydon Council, 2021/22 municipal year saw the Council start on its transformation journey with the aim to deliver substantial savings, a balanced budget, and a change in its culture. Our approach to Scrutiny over the year was also shaped by the outcome of the review by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, which the O&S Committee had commissioned in 2020 following the completion of the Council's Governance review. The need to deliver a balanced budget by the end of 2021/22 was a key focus of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee and its sub-committees. Each committee

scrutinised the deliverability of the savings Council Departments were implementing. The committees' briefs included the holding of the executive to account on their actions, the need to check that each department developed a realistic savings package 2022/23 budget and that service users were being kept safe as savings were being made. In addition, the scrutiny committees also reviewed the impact on the Covid Pandemic on local services, and their post-pandemic recover plans. The scale of the challenge meant that a heavy workload for the four committees, with over 30 formal committee meetings, and numerous briefings and visits taking place to ensure the committee had the knowledge to question officers and Cabinet Members effectively.

Croydon Scrutiny Committees played an important role in ensuring the Council delivered a balance budget in 2021/22. On a cross-party basis, committee members, put in many hours of work behind the scenes, to ensure they understood proposals being put forward by officers and Cabinet Members, and to develop effective questioning strategies. The last year also saw an improvement in Scrutiny's rights to access information. Although Scrutiny members have a legal right to information that inform decision making, officers in the past, as seen in regards Fairfield Hall's refurbishment, have not forthcoming in providing information in a timely manner. This started to change in 2021 and a new stronger protocol was agreed as part of the update to the Constitution in 2022. Scrutiny In Croydon is only supported by 2 officers, and so we are reliant on councillors themselves to do much of the homework. This imbalance in resources compared to the Executive is something that needs to change going forward especially as the scale of challenge is unlikely to diminish going forward. Even with these challenges of limited resources the Council's auditors in its Report in the Public Interest on Fairfield Halls (Jan 2022) criticise the Council's decision-making processes but did find that "The Scrutiny and Overview Committee (the Committee) was active in attempting to scrutinize the project, its progress and related costs."

I would like to take the opportunity to thank all those who took part in scrutiny this last year, and the support we received from our scrutiny officers. Scrutiny is a cross-party endeavour, and although we try to be non-party political, we are shaped by our political beliefs. It is good sign of non-partisan nature of Croydon Scrutiny, that even in an election year, Scrutiny and its sub-committees didn't split along party lines. The credit to this belongs to all councillors involved, but special thanks are due to my fellow Chairs of Scrutiny. Cllr Robert Ward, and Cllr Leila Ben-Hassel, who both work hard as Scrutiny Chairs and for their commitment to holding the executive to account.

Scrutiny and Overview Committee

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee directs the performance of all overview and scrutiny functions at the Council, including the development of procedures governing the operation of both the Committee and its Sub-Committees. It also has responsibility for scrutinising crime and disorder matters and flood risk management within the borough. The Committee will consider any call-in of Cabinet decisions other than those relating to education matters, which are heard by the Children and Young People Scrutiny Sub-Committee.

You can view the agendas, reports and minutes of this committee by clicking on the link: www.croydon.gov.uk/meetings

Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee



**Cllr Sean
Fitzsimons
(C)**



**Cllr Robert
Ward (VC)**



**Cllr Leila
Ben Hassel
(DC)**



**Cllr Jade
Appleton**



**Cllr Mike
Bonello**



**Cllr Joy
Prince**

Scrutiny & Overview Committee – Work Programme 2021-22 and Scrutiny Improvement Programme

In March 2021 the Scrutiny and Overview Committee accepted the findings of a review of the scrutiny function at Croydon Council which had been delivered by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny. At its meeting on 7 September, the Committee agreed a plan for implementing the thirteen recommendations arising from the review which prioritised in the first instance ensuring scrutiny was playing an effective role in the recovery of the Council, evidence-based work programming, improved access to information for Scrutiny Councillors and training to support the above.

This work has led to a work programming group being established to set the work plan for the Scrutiny and Overview Committee and its three sub-committees, using available data such as performance monitoring reports and budget updates to identify areas in need of further scrutiny. The membership of this group is made up of the Chair and Vice-Chair of each Committee and Sub-Committee. The recommendation about the need to improve the availability of information to Scrutiny Councillors has led to the development of a new Access to Information Protocol which reconfirms the need for Councillors to be able to access information to perform scrutiny effectively.

As part of the Improvement Programme, the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny identified three work streams that should form the basis of the work programme for scrutiny. These three streams are: -

1. The Corporate Recovery – having oversight over the Council’s Improvement Plan and the delivery of the budget.
2. Ensuring that scrutiny understands and acts on the impact that strategic risks may have on the delivery of the Renewal Plan
3. Supporting local people and keeping them safe

The first two of these priorities were used to underpin the work programme for the Scrutiny and Overview Committee throughout 2021-22. This has meant the work of the Committee had been primarily focussed on the delivery of the Croydon Improvement Plan and both the delivery of 2021-22 budget and the development of the 2022-23 budget. Within this area of scrutiny there was a focus on ensuring that both the corporate and political leadership of the Council had ownership of the delivery of the Improvement Plan and the budget, along with an understanding of the key risks to delivery. The third work stream, supporting local people and keeping them safe, was used as the basis for the work programmes of the three Sub-Committees.

What follows below is a short summary of the highlights from the year, but for those who are interested to find out more, full sets of agendas and minutes for each meeting can be found on the Council’s website at the following link [Scrutiny & Overview Committee – Agendas & Minutes](#)

Budget Scrutiny

Although the Scrutiny & Overview Committee first considered a report on the setting of the 2022-23 budget at its meeting on 7 December, the Committee had prioritised monitoring the delivery of 2021-22 budget early in the year. The Finance Monitoring Reports prepared for Cabinet were also regularly scheduled for consideration at meetings of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee. This allowed the Committee to identify areas of risk that it may wish to scrutinise in greater detail and provided reassurance on the financial controls of the Council.

In advance of the first budget scrutiny meeting on 7 December, members of the Committee received two training sessions delivered by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny on best practice for budget scrutiny. On 23 November 2021, the Committee also received a briefing from the Council’s Section 151 Officer on the key budget principles and the approach to setting the budget.

At the Scrutiny & Overview Committee on 7 December consideration was given to the 2022-23 Budget and the Three Year Medium Term Financial Strategy report. From the discussion of the Committee, a number of areas were identified for further investigation such as the programme management capacity of the Council to manage the delivery of the budget and the Council’s financial monitoring systems. In order to gain assurance on these issues the Scrutiny Chairs met with officers

informally between meetings, reporting back their findings to the meeting on 20 January 2022.

From these informal meetings there was reassurance that the Council had experienced staff in both the Programme Management Office (PMO) and the Finance Service who were able to deliver the improvement required to ensure the financial sustainability of the Council. There remained a concern about whether there was sufficient capacity within the wider corporate services, given the scale of the challenge to be delivered. To investigate this further, the capacity within the corporate centre was reviewed at the Committee meeting on 20 January 2022. The three scrutiny Sub-Committees (Children & Young People, Health & Social Care and Streets, Environment & Homes) each had a briefing on the budget proposals for their areas of responsibility in the week of 29 November. From these meetings the Sub-Committee's identified key areas of risk to review at their meetings in January/February.

The Chairs of the Sub-Committees reported back the findings from the budget challenge items to the main Committee at the meeting on 1 March 2022. In the main, there had been a large amount of reassurance taken that both Cabinet Members and officers had a good understanding of the potential risks to their budgets. The savings proposed had been subject to robust testing through the Star Chamber process and as such there could be confidence that what was proposed was deliverable. However, it was agreed that the items identified would be monitored by the respective Sub-Committee's in the forthcoming year as these remained key risks in the delivery of the 2022-23 budget.

Taking account of the evidence heard by the Committee at its previous meetings and from the discussion at the meeting on 1 March 2020, it was agreed that significant weight could be given to the Section 25 report of the Section 151 Officer and the robust advice provided in the report was welcomed. The Committee was pleased to note that the preparation of the report had been coordinated between the previous and the new Section 151 Officers to agree the content.

The Committee welcomed confirmation that the 2021-22 budget was currently projecting a slight underspend at month 9, which could be seen as a reason for greater confidence in the Council's ability to deliver the £55m savings required in 2022-23 budget. However, there should be no underestimation of the scale of the challenge facing the Council in the forthcoming year, which was even greater than the one in 2021-22.

The Committee felt that the political and corporate management of the Council had a good understanding of the key risks to the 2022/23 budget, which are outlined within the report. It was agreed that the risk relating to the accounting treatment of Croydon Affordable Homes was significant and in the worst-case scenario could derail the Council's budget for 2022-23 and even result in the need for another Section 114 notice to be issued due to potential financial impact should there be a negative resolution. However, a level of reassurance could be taken from the Section 25 report that this risk could be managed if appropriate mitigation was put in place. Given the volatile world economy, the Committee highlighted that potential interest rate increases were likely and as such there was a risk that this would impact upon

the Council's short-term debt. It was agreed that this should be considered a risk to the delivery of the budget and the Committee requested that a hedging strategy is developed to manage this risk and minimise the cost of increased interest payments.

The Committee agreed that it was prudent for the Council to have budgeted 5% for the potential cost of inflation in the forthcoming year. However, there was also a realisation that inflation could rise even higher, with the impact of the war in Ukraine not known at this stage. As such it was agreed that managing the impact of inflation was likely to be one of the key risks to the delivery of the budget and requested to be kept informed of any changes to the risks identified in the Section 25 report. The Committee also recommended earlier engagement by the Council on the budget setting process, which should be a year round process, and would provide more opportunities for councillors and the public to engage in in the formation of future budgets, before choices are locked in.

The Committee welcomed the continued drive to increase the level of ear marked and general fund reserves held by the Council. It was agreed that this should continue to a priority in future budgets to ensure that the Council was in a strong position to manage any future, unforeseen risks.

Overall, the Committee concluded that there had been a robust process to set the budget and that the budget proposed reflected the two priorities identified by residents, which were adult and children's social care and prioritising services for the most vulnerable.

Brick by Brick and the Fairfield Halls Redevelopment

During the year the Committee had a number of opportunities to look at operation of the company set up by the Council to deliver new housing, Brick by Brick. This included the project to redevelop the Fairfield Halls venue by the company. The first report considered by the Committee was a call-in request at its meeting on 27 May 2021 concerning the accounting treatment of the cost for the redevelopment of Fairfield Halls and the proposal to treat the cost as a capital expenditure of the Council rather than a loan to Brick by Brick.

It was accepted that given the Council had received advice from both CIPFA and its external auditor, the accounting treatment proposed was the correct course of action. However, there was a concern about the risk of future cost to complete the work at Fairfield Halls that the Committee recommended was kept under close review. There was also concern about the historic management of the project and how its budget increased from £30m to £69m, but it was accepted that this was subject of a review by the Council's external auditor, Grant Thornton, which would report its findings in due course.

The next report considered by the Committee was at its meeting on 6 July concerning the future of Brick by Brick. This report was presented to the Committee for comment prior to a decision being taken on the recommendations by the Cabinet. The Committee was largely supportive of the proposal to wind down the company while completing any develops already underway to maximise the potential return to

the Council. It was agreed that the information produced quarterly for the Cabinet on the progress with managing the wind down, would also be shared with the members of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee to ensure there was continued scrutiny oversight of the process.

The Committee next had an opportunity to look at Brick by Brick at its meeting on 17 August 2021, when it considered a call-in request on the Cabinet decision to novate the building works and professional services contract from Brick by Brick for the redevelopment of Fairfield Halls back to the Council. The consideration of the call-in raised several concerns, particularly about the historic management of the redevelopment of Fairfield Halls by Brick by Brick, although it was concluded that this was not a material consideration for the call-in.

It was concluded that bringing the contracts back within the control of the Council would ultimately help to safeguard the risk to the public purse and allow the outstanding work to be completed on the venue. As such it was agreed that the Cabinet decision should be implemented as intended. The discussion of this item did raise renewed concern for the Committee about the availability of information to scrutiny to carry out its function effectively and has led to the development of the Access to Information Protocol.

At its meeting on 1 February 2022, the Committee had the opportunity to provide feedback on the action plan created in response to the Report in the Public Interest issued by the Council's external auditor, following its review of the redevelopment of the Fairfield Halls project. The Committee was generally supportive of the proposal set out in the action plan and recognised that it would need to be revisited in the coming year to ensure the delivery was progressing as expected.

Community Safety Strategy

At its meeting on 7 September 2021, the Committee had the opportunity to undertake pre-decision scrutiny of the new Community Safety Strategy. In the lead up to the meeting, the members of the Committee had held a series of meetings with the partners in the Community Safety Partnership to get an understanding of their role in the development of the strategy and to inform the Committee's scrutiny of the proposals.

From the work it had carried out on advance of the meeting and its discussion at the meeting itself, the Committee agreed that it was strongly supportive of the broad themes identified for the strategy. However, it was acknowledged that it would be a challenge to translate the strategy to an operational level that made a difference to the public in Croydon.

The Committee was satisfied that there was evidence to indicate there was strong partnership working amongst the partners in the Community Safety Partnership and was encouraged that there was an acknowledgment of the importance to the delivery of the strategy of having both measurable and achievable targets. It was agreed that the Committee would look to review the Community Safety Strategy after twelve

months to ensure that it was having the intended impact and that the targets were effective in managing delivery.

Call-In Requests

In addition to the two call-in requests already mention concerning Brick by Brick, the Committee also considered two other requests. The first was at the meeting held on 20 September 2022 and concerned the disposal of the former CALAT site in Coulsdon to the NHS.

Although the Committee concluded that the provision of a Medical Centre on the site by the NHS would be a benefit to the local community, and the decision should proceed as expected, there was concern raised about the asset disposal process in general. This led to a recommendation on the need to ensure Ward Councillors were kept informed of local asset disposals as this would help to manage the communication with the local community. The Committee also concluded that the process of asset disposals needed to be more transparent and recommended that future reports on disposals be expanded to include the business case, an assessment of the potential risks and an assessment of the impact on the local community.

The other call-in request considered by the Committee was at the meeting on 18 January and concerned the decision to introduce the Croydon Health Neighbourhoods scheme in the borough. From its consideration of this request, the Committee had concerns about the available capacity within the Council to administer the schemes proposed effectively but were reassured that this had been accounted for in budget.

The Committee also recognised there was a need to ensure that the benefits and outcomes from the schemes were properly communicated to the public in order to provide reassurance. Overall it was concluded that the proposed Healthy Neighbourhood Schemes were in keeping with the Council's wider policy objectives and as such it should proceed as intended.

Children and Young People Scrutiny Sub-Committee

The Children and Young People Scrutiny Sub-Committee scrutinises key issues affecting children and young people in the borough as well as the services provided by the Council and its partners. It has the power to scrutinise the functions of the Council as a Local Education Authority and examine the Dedicated Schools Grant on a yearly basis.

You can view the agendas, reports and minutes of this Sub-Committee by clicking on the link: www.croydon.gov.uk/meetings

Membership



Councillor Robert Ward
(Chair)



Councillor Sean Fitzsimons
(Vice-Chair)



Councillor Sue Bennett



Councillor Jerry Fitzpatrick



Councillor Bernadette Khan



Councillor Shafi Khan



Councillor Ola Kolade



Councillor Louisa Woodley

Josephine Copeland
Teacher Rep

Elaine Jones
Catholic
Diocesan Rep

Paul O'Donnell
Parent
Governor Rep

Chair of the Children & Young People Sub-Committee Councillor Robert Ward

The constraints imposed by the pandemic continued to hamper the activities of the committee in 2021-22, but the increased familiarisation with the technology reduced its impact to a minimum. The 2022-23 year will hopefully bring a permanent return to face-to-face meetings, and especially visits to schools and other facilities where services are delivered.

This, our annual report includes a short summary of the highlights of the year. For those who are interested to find out more, full sets of agendas and minutes for each meeting can be found on the Council's website.

Over the period we have become more efficient and effective as we became familiar with the dashboards, enabling us to prioritise areas to seek reassurance through more focussed questioning. Of particular mention is the final report of the task and finish group on managed moves. This is an important piece of work investigating a matter of concern impacting some of our most vulnerable children and young people.

I would like to thank all the members of the sub-committee and the officers who have supported us this past year. The elections in May 2022 brings the end of the four-year election cycle. Many councillors are standing down so there will be a new committee with new members.

There is much work still to be done. The challenges of increasing demand for services and constrained budgets will continue and new issues will emerge. I am sure the new committee will play its part in meeting those challenges. I wish them well in their endeavours.

Service Updates, Budget Impact and Early Help, Children's Social Care and Education Dashboards

The Sub-Committee considered a report at each meeting which provided an overview of service updates from Education and Early Help & children's social care, Budget updates, the Children's Continuous Improvement Plan 2021- 2024 and Early Help and Education Dashboards.

At the Committee meeting on the 14 September 2021, Members queried data presented on the social work team which was displayed as 'Green' in terms of cases per social worker but with little improvement in performance. It was explained that issues with meeting performance targets on visits was around organisation as in some instances visits could not take place due to difficulties making contact with families; referral numbers had increased in Croydon as well as nationally. Every rereferral case in the month of September 2021 was being reviewed to understand what the nature of new requests were and to check appropriateness of the rereferral, the similarities or differences to the initial referral, the time frame and what was offered to the parents/families initially. Assessment completion figures were below target and some of this was attributed to long term vacancies in the department, with issues around CIN visits being an organisational as well as capacity issue.

The Committee queried what work was being undertaken to address low numbers of referrals to MARAC, in particular as Domestic Violence was a presenting issue in some cases and Members were of the view that monitoring of referrals to departments for adults and children's services was important and beneficial to see if there was improvement overtime. The Committee learned that these issues were being picked up and the Family Justice Centre was part of a Practice week to

explore how referrals were being made as it was evident that there was under referring to the service.

Members examined the new model for children's centres and asked what would be done to minimise the impact due to the reduced opening days and times. The Committee learned that there would be some disruption due to the budget and the centre and spokes model. As a Council, clear performance indicators would be set detailing expectation, and this would be conveyed to whoever was successful in the tender and would be used to monitor performance and impact of the new model.

The Committee looked at direct payments care packages and asked what was being done to ensure that these were cost effective and heard that weekly meetings took place to review care packages and that it was important that families were able to exercise control as much as possible on decision making based on their needs. There had been a recent overhaul of the financial systems in place and development of a dynamic purchasing system was in place to ensure that families got the best value for money from provision. Every care package for every child had been reviewed to ensure the best service for all children and to broaden the reach of services that families were able to utilise their direct payments for.

Concern was raised about the percentage of cases closed due to families no longer requiring services, which had consistently been above the 10% target throughout the year. The Committee was advised that some families no longer required support from Early Help because they had engaged with alternative services themselves. The service was managing its waiting list through a duty system, with regular check-ins scheduled with families to ensure their needs were being met. Given it was a demand led service, the Sub-Committee acknowledged that there it could be difficult to achieve some of the targets within the social care system. Given the need to make significant savings within the Service, it was agreed that indicators on the financial performance of the directorate would be added to future iterations of the dashboard to provide the Sub-Committee with reassurance that budget were being appropriately managed.

Covid Response - Emotional Well Being and Children's Mental Health

At its meeting on 22 June 2021, the Committee received a presentation on Croydon's Covid response and its offer to support the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people. The Committee learnt that face to face contact had been suspended during lockdown, although following reconfiguration, many aspects of these services had been able to continue using online means of access, but that services were slowly increasing the amount of face-to-face contact. It had emerged that some young people preferred online contact and this was still being offered and the advantage of other means of contact such as telephone was that therapists were able to engage with parents or carers which may not have been the case previously.

The Committee queried the wait times for detailed intervention and assessment for young people from mental health services and learned that, following initial assessment, there was a wait time of between seven to ten weeks for ongoing regular counselling and that during the wait period contact was maintained and there was an offer of short-term intervention where necessary. The Committee challenged the length of wait times in a number of areas of service and asked how the budget would impact on post pandemic recovery. Members heard that the majority of funding for CAMHS and mental health was from the Clinical Commissioning Group with some joint contracts which resulted in some funding from the Council, but that there were no mass cuts planned as parts of the Councils reconfiguration. There were several streams that contributed to the situation of the service such as poor pathways, workforce issues and the level of complex needs. Members of the Committee asserted that if substantial reconfiguration of the service was being undertaken, this would require further Scrutiny by the Health and Social Care Sub-Committee.

The Committee commended the support provided to families by schools and the voluntary service and highlighted the importance of services exploring ways to capture and monitor issues that manifested over time, especially those where issues may be manifesting differently due to the unique challenges of the pandemic. It was evident that there was now increased need for services and understanding and that monitoring of need was essential.

Refreshed Children's Improvement Plan

A presentation on the refreshed Children's Improvement Plan was received by the Committee and it was explained that this was a refresh of the Continuous Improvement Plan that brought together the savings and growth planned over 2021/2024 and the practice improvement priority for Early Help and Children's Social Care, as per the ILACS recommendations from 2020. The plan covered three years with an annual review process through the Children's Improvement Board with a proposal for quarterly reports to the Children's Scrutiny Sub-Committee to look at the progress against the savings as well as the practice improvement priorities.

The Committee challenged how equalities outcomes were ensured and captured for children and families and learned that this was a point also made by the staff representative improvement board; a meeting would be convened by officers to discuss this point and how to positively promote equality as part of the work being done.

The Sub-Committee welcomed the proposals on a quarterly progress report being included in its work programme but felt that it was clear that further work needed to be done on governance assurance and in strengthening of interface with the Sub-Committee.

Addressing Cost, Care and Support for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

The Committee received a detailed presentation addressing cost, care and support for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) that had been referred to Scrutiny by Cabinet. It was clear that Croydon wanted to take care of all children in need despite the current climate and that some progress had been made in trying to get other Local Authorities to share responsibility for UASC through the Pan London Agreement. Members were unanimous in their belief that funding from central government was not adequate, in particular for the 18–25-year-old group.

The Committee considered the need to reduce the number of UASC children in Croydon and the funding gap. Solutions were being sought for both issues and a decision would have to be taken to reduce the pressure on Croydon as the issues presented a number of complexities.

Members welcomed additional funding from government but were of the view that revisions to the National Transfer Scheme would need to be judged on whether it was effective in addressing the issues facing Croydon. There were still serious concerns regarding the level of funding received from government which was not enough to support and provide services for UASC and, mainly, the resulting disproportionate number of Looked After Children in Croydon due to the large number of former UASC.

Antenatal and Health Visiting Visits

At its meeting on 2 November 2021, the Committee received a presentation and update on Antenatal and Health Visiting Visits. Members heard that in order to provide reassurance despite the backdrop of challenges, that the action plan for 2021/22 was deliverable, a development plan was in place that was being monitored on a monthly basis. If it was identified that the service was not where it needed to be, the plan would be reviewed with further actions put in place where necessary. The importance of the issue was not underestimated and if changes needed to be made, they would be where appropriate. The Committee learned that the main challenge was in workforce availability which was essential in the ability to drive forward change and meet targets and that the service was now back to conducting face to face visits and no longer doing video consultations which were put in as a measure during the height of the pandemic.

There had been instances where visits had not taken place as whilst the service always strived to offer and undertake visits, parents were able to exercise the choice to not have one despite it being mandated. Some families chose not to engage and unless there were safeguarding issues, which would trigger separate protocols, they could not be made to accept a visit. In order to maintain oversight over performance,

the associate directors would have monthly meetings with commissioners and quarterly with directors. There would be a clear expectation for through discussions on data, improvement and what needed to be done if not achieving as expected.

The Committee noted that staff had been working tirelessly under extremely challenging conditions brought on by the pandemic; their health and well-being was recognised and remained a priority and access to a wealth of support and services including regular supervision with their line manager was provided.

Task and Finish Group Final Report: Exclusions and Off-rolling in Croydon Schools

On 27 November 2018, the Scrutiny and Overview Children and Young People Sub Committee set up a Task and Finish Group (TFG) to investigate and collate data on children coming off the school roll and the mechanisms involved, with a view to reporting back at the Sub Committee meeting on 19 March 2019. The Part One report (“Managed Moves in the London Borough of Croydon”) was received and approved by the Children and Young People Scrutiny Sub-Committee on 2 November 2021 and again in slightly amended form on 18 January 2022. The report came before the Cabinet of Croydon Council on 7 February 2022 where it was discussed and approved.

The Group had identified that there was a huge number of competing demands on school leaders, including the need to be inclusive and keep children in schools. Conversely, market demand required the delivery of good exam results to ensure the high placing of a school’s position in league tables, pulling demand in the other direction. Ofsted had previously highlighted concern nationally that some schools may be gaming the system through off-rolling pupils that may lower scores. It was understood that there may have been instances of this in some Croydon schools. The review undertaken by the Task and Finish Group had identified [nine key findings](#) and these included that there was an increased number of children attending schools with significant additional need. There was a piecemeal system of schools across the borough which had been exacerbated by academisation, which made it more challenging for schools to cooperate. The key to ensuring inclusion was to get to the root of the problem, which required early diagnosis with additional support required to help manage the transition process between schools at the earliest possible stage.

It could be challenging for parents who wanted to have their autistic child educated in mainstream education as a proportion of schools were not equipped or able to provide for the needs of these pupils. The Group had found examples of schools refusing unannounced visits from the Council, which raised questions about what was happening in these schools. Elective home education was an area of concern for the Group, with it questioned whether the Council had sufficient policy to deliver it. There was also a huge backlog in reviewing home education provision which

needed to be addressed. The need to have an increased focus on elective home education had increased following the Government's announcement of local authorities needing to maintain a log of home schools and to ensure these pupils were being suitably educated. The Group commended the excellent team of officers in the borough who were committed to inclusion and who would be tasked with implementing the new guidance.

The final report of the Task and Finish Group was delivered to the Committee on 9 March 2022. Members queried how far back a school could be expected to investigate behavioural issues and whether this would also include the child's parents; it was acknowledged that it could be difficult to identify the root cause of behavioural issues but that there were examples of good practice in some secondary schools in the borough, however, it was important that both primary and secondary schools were able to implement these processes at the right time. There was also a disproportionality in the ethnicity of children being excluded, which needed to be addressed, including revisiting the curriculum to ensure it was relevant for all pupils.

The Committee noted that quiet rooms were being retained and it was agreed that the use of quiet rooms should only be viewed as one of a range of options that could be used by schools and needed to be used in conjunction with other support; a benefit of quiet rooms was the space they provided for the child to reflect, which was part of the road to self-regulation. Members questioned what the Council could do to encourage the sharing of best practice and to support schools with training. It was agreed that there were schools delivering inspiring work that needed to be shared and that it may be beneficial to encourage schools with similar challenges to work in partnership. There also needed to be a system in place to help children and their parents to navigate the system as this could be a significant barrier to the delivery of support.

The Committee commended the quality of the report provided by the Task and Finish Group and acknowledged that navigating the education system could be challenging for parents and as such any assistance that could be provided to help them understand what was available and how it could be accessed was to be encouraged.

Children, Young People & Education Budget Scrutiny Challenge

At its meeting on the 22 March 2022, the Sub-Committee considered a report which provided a response to the three areas within the Children, Young People and Education budget targeted by the Sub-Committee for in-depth scrutiny. The three areas selected were:

1. The review of care packages for children with disabilities aged 0-17.
2. The impact of the reduction in spend on the adolescent service.
3. The funding gap for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

The Sub-Committee was asked to consider whether the savings identified were deliverable, sustainable and did not present an unacceptable risk. Consideration was also given to whether the potential impact upon service users and the wider community from the savings was understood by the senior management of the service and the Cabinet Member, and that all reasonable alternative options had been explored with no better options available. The conclusions agreed by the Sub-Committee were reported to the Scrutiny & Overview Committee at its meeting on 15 February 2022.

It was acknowledged by the Sub-Committee that the budget position of the Council required difficult decisions to be made and reassurance was sought that reassessments would not lead to an adverse impact upon children or their families. It was confirmed that care packages were continually reviewed and reassessed to ensure the best outcomes for the child were being achieved with efficiency savings required achieved through reviewing service providers, rather than the level of care provided. It was highlighted that many families were opting for the direct payment model, which delivered a saving to the Council. This led to a concern being raised by the Sub-Committee that the direct payment system allowing families to buy their own agency support may not have the same level of quality or consistency required as opposed to the higher quality support acquired using local authority input.

The Committee raised concerns about ensuring that commissioned services met the needs of the community and was reassured that the Service understood the importance of reviewing the provision of commissioned services and had been improving its monitoring processes over several years, which had been reflected in the recent SEND inspection. Additional concerns were raised by the Sub-Committee about the history of overspending within the service, which were acknowledged by officers with it confirmed that financial control had been prioritised over the past year, which had resulted in a much more robust and visible indication of costs being available.

It was acknowledged that the support for vulnerable adolescents presented significant challenges, particularly around higher risk children. These challenges were under constant review, using a multi-disciplinary approach which required careful coordination and continual refinement to ensure that the adolescents needs were being addressed. It was highlighted that the recruitment and retention of staff was an ongoing issue that was mirrored across most local authorities in the country. The decline in the supply of temporary workers was flagged as a potential issue by Members, but officers reassured the Sub-Committee that they were aware of this trend and were working with other authorities to address it. Members questioned how the risk presented by the limited supply of staff was being managed going forward and it was confirmed that the salaries offered by the Council were competitive and transformational change was needed to ensure local staff were being retained; the latest offer had been reviewed to make it more attractive for staff to ensure that expertise were retained.

The Committee asked, that given the actual cost of providing support to UASC had repeatedly exceeded the budgeted amount over a long period of time, whether there

was a reserve had been earmarked to manage this risk. It was confirmed that the additional support required for UASC in 2022-23 was estimated to be £2.9m, which had not been accounted for. Although the Government had provided one-off funding in 2021-22, the continued funding shortfall would continue to be raised as a significant challenge to the Council's budget.

Members were of the view that a significant degree of confidence could be taken from the responses given by officers to the questions raised by the Sub-Committee. The three areas remained significant areas of risk to Council budgets and would need to be revisited throughout the year by the Sub-Committee to ensure they remained on track.

Education Estates Strategy

The Sub-Committee considered a report which provided an overview of the Education Estates Strategy for its feedback, before consideration by the Cabinet. The report was introduced by the Council's Director of Education during which comparisons on persistent absences and the work focussed on analysing data were highlighted. Members were advised that it was important to focus on contributing factors, which were being reviewed in greater depth. It was acknowledged that the impact of pandemic had affected the availability of data, however it was noted that schools should be highlighting attendance where persistent absence was an issue. The work focused on addressing surplus school places was highlighted, including an in-depth review of shared resources and exploring opportunities for schools to generate additional income.

The Committee questioned whether there had been any formal discussion with head teachers from both primary and secondary schools about the estates strategy and whether feedback from this had been included in the evaluation. It was confirmed that there had been discussions with the Schools Forum, Schools Block Working Group and Secondary Head Teachers Meeting. The Sub-Committee welcomed confirmation of the unified approach deployed and it was agreed that a briefing summarising these meeting would be shared with the Sub-Committee.

In response to a question about the support available for schools in danger of not managing their places, it was confirmed that support was provided to individual schools as well as wider conversations on a borough wide level. Members were of the view that the decline in numbers at some schools was a significant risk and questioned whether there were any radical ideas that could be used to support schools whose excess spaces were above the 5% target. It agreed that there needed to be a greater level clarity around the risks to the Council of schools going into deficit. The Committee learnt that there was a focus on early intervention with schools and reassurance was given that it should not have an impact on the Council's budget. Members supported a study on excess places within the Borough.

Croydon Safeguarding Children Board - Annual Report 2020-21

The Sub-Committee considered the Annual Report for 2020-21 from the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board and were asked to review the report and provide feedback ahead of its consideration by the Cabinet.

Members agreed that it was essential for the Partnership to ensure it was working effectively together in order to avoid duplication but were of the view that further consideration was needed to identify a means of providing evidence in future annual reports to demonstrate the Partnership worked efficiently and effectively together. Reassurance was provided to the Sub-Committee about the commitment of the partners, which had contributed greatly to the ability of the Partnership to plan its work.

The Sub-Committee agreed that the key for next year was to look at how to identify the quality of work that had taken place, and to focus on outcomes rather than just the tasks completed.

Health & Social Care Scrutiny Sub-Committee

The Health and Social Care Scrutiny Sub-Committee scrutinises the work of local healthcare organisations and social care services provided to adult residents of the borough. It also, in conjunction with neighbouring local authorities, investigates and responds to emerging health and social care issues and changes affecting more than one borough.

You can view the agendas, reports and minutes of this Sub-Committee by clicking on the link: www.croydon.gov.uk/meetings

Membership



Councillor Sean Fitzsimons
(Chair)



Councillor Richard Chatterjee
(Vice-Chair)



Councillor Alison Butler



Councillor Steve Hollands



Councillor Toni Letts



Councillor Andrew Pelling

Gordon Kay
Healthwatch Croydon
(Non-Voting)

Yusuf Osman
Croydon Adult Social
Services User Panel
(Non-Voting)

Chair of the Health & Social Care Scrutiny Sub-Committee Councillor Sean Fitzsimons

The focus of the Health & Adult Social Care Sub-Committee this last year has been Post-Pandemic receiver of health services in Croydon, the safe delivery of the 2021-22 budget savings, and effective challenge of the 2022-23 saving proposals. In the last year we welcomed Yusuf Osman, a member of Croydon Adult Social Services User Panel, on to our committee as a non-voting member, with the aim to provide better insight into the needs of service users. Gordon Kay represents Croydon Healthwatch on the committee, and their reports have given us valuable insight into the experience of users of different health services across Croydon.

During the last year, the committee has reviewed the Council's progress on its savings programme for 21/22 and its proposals for 2022/23 budget. The budget for Adult Social Care is the largest in the Council and the successful delivery of its budget is essential in ensuring the Council's financial sustainability. In September 2021, the committee undertook a deep dive of the transition service, as the budget was massively overspent following its transfer from Children Services. This exercise re-assured the committee that officers were aware of this budget threat and had taken the appropriate actions to turn the budget around before the financial year end, which was achieved. This showed that timely access to information about the budget, and a willingness from the department to be held to account, shows that Scrutiny can hold the council to account and help ensure the delivery of the 2021/22 budget.

I would like to put on record the work of my fellow councillors and in particular my Vice-Chair, Richard Chatterjee. The hard work done by scrutiny officers to deliver the work programme. I would also like to thank the support from the people we were holding to account. Both Croydon NHS and Croydon's Adult Social Care Departments actively engaged with scrutiny and so I would like to thank Rachel Flowers, Annette McPartland, Matthew Kershaw, Hilary Williams and Doctor Agnelo Fernandes for their active engagement with health scrutiny.

Covid-19 Vaccination Uptake - Residents in Care Homes and Care Staff in all settings

At its meeting on 11 May 2021, the Sub-Committee considered an update provided by representatives from health and social care on the response to the Covid-19 pandemic in the borough. This item was included on the agenda for the Sub-Committee to seek reassurance that the pandemic response was being appropriately managed and covered the Elective Recovery Programme; Diagnostic Recovery; improving access to cancer services; primary care; an update on the vaccine programme; Croydon Vaccination Equity Task and Finish Group.

Members were informed that Croydon had been below the London average for Dose 1 of the vaccine and that a report was being prepared to look at reasons for the lower take up amongst care home staff in Croydon. The Sub-Committee queried the disparity in the take up of the vaccine and noted that many of the vaccination issues could be seen as a reflection of the health inequality in the borough. Although the vaccination rate for care home residents was high, there was concern raised about the comparatively high level of staff who had not been vaccinated. It was questioned what the Council could do to encourage the take up of the vaccine amongst care home staff and Members were advised that it was the duty of care home providers to encourage their staff to receive the vaccine.

The Sub-Committee queried whether lessons had been learnt from other authorities who had higher rates of vaccinations take up amongst care home staff and it was

confirmed that learning from other boroughs was being used to inform the Council's approach, including through Croydon's involvement with the Strategic Care Group. Concern was raised about domiciliary care workers without the vaccine who were visiting people in the homes. It was advised that the use of PPE had been and continued to be a priority in domiciliary care. There had been a lot of work with domiciliary care providers to ensure workers were using PPE correctly and supplies were available as needed.

Overview of the 2021-22 Adults Budget

The Sub-Committee considered a report on the 2021-22 budget for Adult Social Care. The information was provided to allow the Sub-Committee to form an opinion on the deliverability of the savings proposed and to reassure itself that there was sufficient oversight and control of the budget.

Members asked whether the Council's IT systems were sufficient to allow effective budget monitoring and heard that there was a new monthly monitoring process in place, along with a new system, which made budget monitoring more effective. The new system was still being embedded within the service, but so far it appeared to be more user friendly. The Sub-Committee raised queries regarding direct payments and learnt that working group had been set up to manage the direct payment process, including ensuring the availability of clear information and advice as well as tracking it through the system.

The Sub-Committee noted the recent history of overspends on the budget and questioned whether there was sufficient capacity in the Adults budget for 2021-22 which could be used as a contingency for unforeseen circumstances. It was confirmed that movement had been built into the budget, which alongside stringent budget monitoring processes, allowed unforeseen spikes in demand to be identified at an early stage and resources allocated accordingly. Members stated that that the budget would continue to be an area of scrutiny throughout the year and officers needed to give further consideration to how best to demonstrate they were managing their budgets effectively.

The Sub-Committee asked the Cabinet Member for Families, Health & Social Care how they were monitoring the budget personally and were informed that she met with the Executive Director on a weekly basis to review progress and that she also attended regular meetings with the finance team to discuss the budget. The Cabinet Member had attended staff briefings and highlighted the importance for staff that councillors were visible and took the time to engage. Members asked the Cabinet Member how service users were being engaged and heard that the council worked with the Croydon Adult Social Services User Panel (CASSUP), the Learning Disability Partnership Group and other forums to engage with the views of service users.

The Sub-Committee agreed that the evidence provided about the deliverability of the budget was encouraging, but that it would need repeated scrutiny throughout the year to ensure this remained the case.

Overview of the 2021-22 Adult Social Care Financial Performance

At its meeting on 29 June 2021, the Sub-Committee considered a report and an accompanying presentation providing an overview of the financial performance of Adult Social Care. Members heard that the spend for Adult Social Care was larger than any other Council service, equating to 31% of the total Council budget. Although the service experienced many of the same pressures as other local authorities delivering social care across the country, it was recognised that the cost base was too high locally; all areas of the Adult Social Care budget were being reviewed to bring the service within the available resources, which would mean changing how services were delivered with the aim to reduce the Council activity and expenditure on adult social care to the London average or below by March 2024.

A detailed savings programme had been developed to ensure the savings of £10.7m would be delivered; progress to date had been good, with transformational funding used to provide capacity adding pace to the programme. A robust tracking system had been introduced to ensure that progress on the savings programme could be closely monitored and areas of concern identified at an early stage. The priority area for savings was reviewing care packages to identify spend reduction.

The Sub-Committee queried whether budget holders had a firm grasp of their budgets and were advised that service and team managers met with their respective accountants on a monthly basis to review their budget and forecasting for the remainder of the year, but that Adult Social Care was not a static service and managing the budget required service demand to be managed. There was concern about how the drive to deliver savings would impact upon the care packages provided, with it questioned whether staff would feel comfortable requesting an increase in package needs, should these be identified. It was highlighted that the Council had a duty of care to its service users and staff were empowered to advocate on their behalf. The Cabinet Member advised Members that she met with the team on a monthly basis to review progress made with delivering the budget; the Cabinet Member also met regularly with Council Safeguarding Leads to discuss any issues.

The Sub-Committee were reasonably reassured by the progress made with delivering the Adult Social Care budget for 2021-22 but agreed that continued monitoring would be needed to ensure this remained the case.

Transitions Service

The Sub-Committee received a report on the new arrangements for the Transitions Service and was asked to consider whether it was reassured that these had been embedded to allow budget savings to be delivered and potential risks to be appropriately managed. The role of the Transitions Service was to work with young people in care as they reached adulthood; responsibility for the service had passed to Adult Social Care from April 2021 and it was projected that the savings targets would be achieved. Members asked how the budget was being managed and heard that budget forecasting took place monthly with the Children's Service to look ahead at potential spend. This allowed the early identification of children with expensive educational arrangements, allowing the service to engage with them to identify alternative options. Monthly budget monitoring sessions took place with accountants who verified that updates were included on the social care system, enabling them to be tracked. Any efficiencies identified would not be entered into the budget monitoring system until they had been verified by the accountants.

Members queried whether parents and carers understood the process and were informed that the service worked with each family on an individual basis to ensure they received good advice and information to guide their decision making. The Committee heard that it was important to listen to the young person and understand their ambitions for their education. The Transitions teams worked with both CASSUP and Parents in Partnership to inform the support provided. One of the key actions for the process was to ensure that link workers were involved with families from an early stage to ensure they were not surprised by the process.

It was agreed that the Sub-Committee had received sufficient information about the new arrangements and the budget for the service, to be reassured they were being effectively managed.

Community Diagnostic Hubs

The Sub-Committee considered a presentation which provided an overview of the plans for Community Diagnostic Hubs in the borough. Community Diagnostic Hubs were part of a national programme providing additional funding to local areas to expand diagnostic services. The main aim of the programme was to reduce waiting times following the pandemic and to make services more available; Croydon had a single site supported by mobile satellite services. Members heard that the process to identify the best option for Croydon was still ongoing, but that it was possible there would be a second site identified through the process. It had been proposed that the existing diagnostic services at both Queen Mary's Hospital and St Hellier Hospital would be enhanced. The Croydon site had not yet been confirmed, but it could go to one of the existing sites such as Croydon University Hospital or Purley War Memorial Hospital or another, to be identified site.

Members asked how mobile services would be delivered and were informed that mobile services were already being provided and with modern technology there was a wide range of diagnostic services that could be provided. As an alternative, services could be offered at static satellite sites, but only on certain days, with staff moving across different sites in the borough. The Sub-Committee raised the issue of health inequalities in the borough and the fact that certain communities were less likely to access health services; it was asked whether there would be a project to target these groups as part of the work around Community Diagnostic Hubs. Members learnt that engaging with communities was an important issue for the NHS and was larger than the Community Diagnostic Hub programme. There was ongoing work to raise awareness of services and to engage with those community groups who were less likely to access health services, with a whole programme on prevention and early intervention.

Health & Care Plan Refresh

The Sub-Committee considered an update on the process to refresh the Health and Care Plan and it was highlighted that the original plan had been the product of good collaborative working between health and social care partners in Croydon. The Government had requested that the plans be refreshed following the pandemic to aid the recovery of services and to reduce health inequalities. The Health and Care Plan was a strategic document that enabled the One Croydon Alliance to bring forward system specific plans and to test these as a partnership to ensure that they were both affordable and deliverable.

Members raised concerns about the relative lack of engagement in the refresh and questioned whether the priorities would be informed by engagement going forward. The Sub-Committee were advised that as the Plan was implemented, programme boards would be created to guide implementation, including ensuring the Plan met the needs of residents.

The Sub-Committee questioned how health and social care could respond and adapt to address the changing needs of the population and heard that there was a variety of services within health and social care working with under-served communities. An important part of this work was to build contacts with community, faith and youth leaders and engage with them to identify new ways of working.

The Sub-Committee welcomed the refresh of the Health and Care Plan and agreed it was an opportunity to rethink how health and social care worked together to address health inequality in the borough.

Croydon Safeguarding Adult Board Annual Report 2020-2021

At its meeting on 9 November 2021, the Sub-Committee considered the Annual Report for 2020-21 from the Croydon Safeguarding Adults Board. Members questioned how the Board could reassure itself about the performance of unregulated services operating in the borough and heard that these were a concern, but some degree of assurance could be gained through processes which meant care packages were regularly reviewed. The Sub-Committee queried how 'the voice of the people' had been incorporated into the report and were informed that progress had been made in engaging with senior representatives in BAME communities and that Croydon was recognised as being at the forefront of engagement work in London, which included the involvement of representatives from three underrepresented groups and ensuring the experience of people using safeguarding services was captured.

Croydon Together - Winter Challenges

The Sub-Committee considered a report which provided an overview of the work of health and social care partners to ensure the increased pressure on services brought about by the winter and the covid-19 pandemic could be effectively managed. Members asked a number of questions about vaccinations and heard that Croydon Health Services were focussed on persuading staff who had not yet been vaccinated to do so and that communication around increased hand washing would continue to be put out to residents. The Sub-Committee were informed of work done with care homes to encourage the take up of the vaccination and that the council had worked with providers where there were concerns about the vaccine, but there were no homes with a large cohort of unvaccinated staff.

Members queried how Croydon Health Service NHS Trust (CHS) was managing the capacity in its Accident and Emergency (A&E) department at the Croydon University Hospital and learnt that the pandemic made managing capacity more difficult. Capacity issues were also a key reason for ambulance handover delays, although Croydon had been performing better than others in this regard.

The Sub-Committee acknowledged that the health care system was under a lot of pressure and questioned whether this needed to be communicated with the public to manage expectation on waiting times. It was stated that any such message would need to be delivered on a national level and could risk dissuading people from seeking treatment when anyone with a problem should be encouraged to contact the NHS.

Members agreed that there was significant evidence of a high level of coordination between partners in preparation for the winter, but that there were still likely significant challenges. The Sub-Committee were reassured that there had been work

with the voluntary sector to prepare for an increase in mental health need as a result of the pandemic.

At its meeting on the 25 January 2022, the Sub-Committee asked if there was any evidence to indicate that people were more hesitant to seek treatment as a result of the pandemic; it was confirmed to Members that the pandemic had seen a level of hesitancy in people presenting but that the level of referrals had remained consistent and the waiting times for both operations and diagnostic services in Croydon were better than other areas in South West London. Members learnt that the number of patients presenting with mental health related issues had increased during the pandemic, which had placed pressure on mental health services.

Members acknowledged that the number of people accessing health care through the 111 service had dramatically increased and questioned if this service was performing as expected. It was advised that the channel shift to accessing healthcare through the 111 service was helping to ensure that people were directed to the right place for their needs. Concern was raised about the number of staff who may be lost from the health and social care system as a result of the vaccine mandate and Members heard that it was still too early this stage to definitively state the potential impact upon services as staff were still making their decisions on whether to take up the vaccination or not. Work continued with staff to understand their reasons for vaccine hesitancy and to provide support to enable them to make an informed decision; not all staff would fall within the scope of the mandate and a panel had been set up to determine which roles were in scope, if this was disputed.

The Sub-Committee agreed that there was significant reassurance provided that the health and social care system had worked effectively together throughout the pandemic, which was reflected in Croydon being seen as a model of partnership working.

Scrutiny Budget Challenge: Adult Social Care & Health Directorate

The Sub-Committee considered a report which provided a response to the budget challenge set by the Sub-Committee concerning the ongoing management of care packages and managing demand in Adult Social Care. Included within the report was the Adult Social Care Strategy which set out the principles for transforming the service and highlighted that Adult Social Care was on track to meet 100% of its savings targets for 2021- 22.

Members questioned how service users would be involved going forward and how they could provide feedback if they were unhappy about a service. The Sub-Committee were informed that people were at the heart of the commissioning process, and that it was seen as essential to feed in the voice of service users, with this principle being a key driver in the commissioning model the Adult Social Care service was working towards; the service also worked with user groups such as the

Autism Board and the Croydon Adult Social Services User Panel (CASSUP) to consider how services were commissioned.

The Sub-Committee queried the resiliency of the savings planned and heard that Adult Social Care was a demand led service and as such it was crucial to manage this demand through early intervention in order to support carers. Growth had been built into the budget to account for increased demand and demand management system would be established to ensure there was a realistic picture of the potential cost alongside reviews of historically commissioned services. The budget for Adult Social Care was reviewed within the service on a weekly basis and by the Section 151 Officer and the Chief Executive on a monthly basis.

Members sought reassurance that the correct software packages and financial controls were in place and learnt that two new systems had been introduced and were improving month on month. Another software system was being used as a placement negotiation tool and had already delivered £170,000 of savings from reviewing a minimal number of cases; this would be rolled out to the Children with Disabilities team in future.

It was noted that the Sub-Committee had previously received updates on the need for reassessing the support for learning disabled and as such it was questioned how the Strategy encompassed this work and also tied into other strategies such as the Autism Strategy. Members heard that the Strategy covered all adults and that the Strategy would be able to evolve in order to take account of future changes within the system. The Service was doing a lot of engagement on learning disability services and had ensured the inclusion of learning disability and the transforming care cohort in the Health and Care Plan.

The Sub-Committee concluded that the budget being proposed for Adult Social Care was both sustainable and deliverable, with a commendable focus on working with individuals to ensure their needs were being met and Members broadly supported the implementation of the Adult Social Care Strategy.

Service Recovery and Response During Covid-19 Pandemic & Winter Pressures

At its meeting on 8 March 2022, the Sub-Committee considered presentations which provided an update on the recovery of services and the ongoing response to the Covid-19 Pandemic and winter pressures. These presentations had been provided to allow the Sub-Committee to understand the current risks to service provision and to seek reassurance that these risks were being managed.

Members commented that the early stages of the pandemic saw an increased loss of life in care home settings, but in subsequent waves Croydon had performed well in this area; it was questioned what lessons had been learnt to achieve this and the Sub-Committee were informed that safeguards were introduced alongside ensuring

vaccination rates were as high as possible and this had played a key role in improving resilience to the impact of covid-19. The Sub-Committee discussed the rising cost of living and asked what plans were in place to ensure services could meet increased demands. Members heard that rising cost of inflation had been built into the Adult Social Care budget but that it was not yet known whether this amount would be sufficient. It was likely that people would be coming to social care for the first time and as such it would be important to ensure that good advice and guidance was available at the 'front door'.

The Sub-Committee agreed that areas such as mental health provision and the impact from rising inflation would need to be closely monitored in the forthcoming year. It was also agreed that the Adult Social Care Budget and the impact from delivering the identified savings upon service delivery would also continue to be a priority for Scrutiny going forward.

Mental Health Provision in the Borough

The Sub-Committee considered a report which provided an overview of mental health services in the borough. The report was introduced by representatives from the various service providers in the borough, including the South West London Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), South London & Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (SLaM), Child and Adolescent mental Health Service (CAMS) and the Council's Adult Social Care team.

Members noted that the waiting times for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) seemed to be high in Croydon and it was questioned whether there was a similar issue in other SLaM localities. It was highlighted to the Sub-Committee that Croydon was the only borough with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) pathway and it was this pathway that had a significant waiting time but that work was underway to address the backlog. The Sub-Committee accepted that the backlog was being addressed but agreed that further scrutiny was needed at a later date to be reassured that the plans being developed were being effective.

The Sub-Committee identified staffing as an issue for mental health services and the partners were asked for their assessment of their key strengths and weaknesses. Partnership working was highlighted as a strength with recognition that no one service could address all the mental health need in the borough. It was recognised that the crisis pathway was an area for development and Members acknowledged that it could be challenging to move complex cases on from the Accident and Emergency department to other services.

Members heard that the Public Health team had commissioned a new provider of drug and alcohol services and questioned whether there would be sufficient outreach work to provide support to the street homeless in the borough, including those from Eastern Europe who may not have access to services. It was advised that there

would be an expectation on a recourse to public funds approach, which was a challenge in Croydon given it was a location for the Home Office. The resource available for outreach work had doubled since 2019 and was already on the way to meeting national guidance.

The Sub-Committee were of the view that the work of the partners involved in delivering mental health services in the borough was encouraging, although to make a more definitive judgement on the level of support available would require the provision of comparative data with other areas.

Streets, Environment and Homes Scrutiny Sub-Committee

The Streets, Environment and Homes Scrutiny Sub-Committee has a broad remit. It investigates services and issues relating to housing, public and private transport, Croydon's highways, waste management and environmental issues. In all its work, the Sub-Committee seeks to promote sustainability and to promote the health and wellbeing of Croydon's residents.

You can view the agendas, reports and minutes of this Sub-Committee by clicking on the link: www.croydon.gov.uk/meetings

Membership



**Councillor
Leila Ben-
Hassel (Chair)**



**Councillor Jeet
Bains (Vice-
Chair)**



**Councillor
Kola Agboola**



**Councillor
Jade Appleton**



**Councillor
Louis
Carserides**



**Councillor
Luke Clancy**



**Councillor
Caragh
Skipper**

Chair of the Streets, Environment and Homes Scrutiny Sub-Committee Councillor Leila Ben-Hassel

As chair of Streets Homes and Environment Scrutiny Sub-Committee, 2021/2022 work built on the scrutiny work undertaken following the previous year's governance and financial crisis. The Sub-Committee focused primarily on the new Sustainable Communities, Regeneration & Economic Recovery Directorate's in-year budget monitoring and 2022 financial year budget setting as well as the housing improvement journey following the crisis at Regina Road.

Following crisis mode blanket and arbitrary departmental 15% savings target, the budget setting process drastically improved in 2021-2022, including a greater focus on the robustness of identified savings' deliverability including associated operational risks and mitigations.

This department has a track record of delivering savings targets and the Sub-Committee's assessment is that its current budget monitoring going forward will be even more crucial being dependent on developing new ways of working that are embedded and deliver efficiencies while in a context of uncontrolled inflationary pressures. The deep-dive budget-setting session focused on Independent Travel, Grounds Maintenance and Temporary Accommodation.

With regards to housing, the Sub-Committee focused on scrutinising the development of the Improvement Plan, particularly on the following work streams: development of a new performance monitoring framework for the new housing service; responsive repairs contract management improvements; and the development of a new HRA business plan.

The Sub-Committee regularly expressed its concern at the lack of pace mostly due to workforce challenges (inability to recruit permanent posts) and highlighted the missed opportunities to change the service more radically and to bring external sources to drive specific work packages which it believed would have helped protected internal limited officer capacity. The sub-committee was further frustrated by the lack of ownership of some of the recommendations in the housing area which were not implemented and echoed by the Independent Housing Board.

The Sub-Committee covered other topics including the local plan review, South London Waste Partnership performance, grounds maintenance and conducted a number of offline briefings and meetings to maximise the Sub-Committee's scrutiny capacity considering the work programme was dominated by two substantive areas – budget and housing.

The Sub-Committee endeavoured to be more outward facing and engaged external parties as much as possible. The lack of resourcing particularly of the community engagement side impeded this endeavour and we are hopeful that this is changing in the new municipal year.

We also saw an improvement in Scrutiny's rights to access information despite Democratic Services being extremely stretched due to vacancies in the service.

I would like to thank all officers, in particular Scrutiny officers, who have supported the work of the committee in a challenging context of added pressure mostly due to periods with numerous vacant posts. I would also like to thank the contributions and support from all members and reserves.

Investigation into conditions at 1-87 Regina Road and South Norwood

At its meeting on 18 May 2021, the Sub-Committee received a detailed report outlining an investigation into conditions at 1-87 Regina Road, South Norwood and the Housing Service Improvement Plan. Members questioned how long the issues with disrepair at Regina Road had occurred for and were advised that it was one of the first questions that had been asked in trying to uncover what had led to the failings. A resident had advised that issues started in 2017 but that these were not to the extent that had been witnessed more recently with the worst of the disrepair occurring in the winter of 2020; there had also been reports of water leakage through the electrics of the properties in February 2021. In response to a question on why only a limited conditions survey was carried out in 2017 given the age and nature of the building, officers acknowledged that a more detailed survey should have taken place. Reports on conditions of assets were now being undertaken and would inform future asset management plans.

Concerns were raised on the number of emails that were sent by Councillors highlighting issues that were not acted on. Officers acknowledged that upon investigation, there had indeed been repeated attempts by residents and third parties to communicate their concerns and some of the responses they received were unprofessional. It was evident that there had been a distinct breakdown of relationship between tenants and the staff of Axis as well as the Council and this was being addressed by senior staff. Members asked how performance management of the housing department was being undertaken and were informed that there was now an Executive Director in place who would have oversight on performance.

Members questioned current voids and how this was related to people in temporary accommodation and the Committee were advised that 1.8% of stock were voids, with only half of these ready and available to let with a focus to get all the properties back in use to alleviate the number of people in temporary accommodation. The Committee asked what the challenges were with reletting of properties and learnt that when properties were handed over from the voids team as ready, the properties were placed on the website and advertised for bidding. Following bidding, the person was invited to view the property, they then sign the contract.

The Committee highlighted that the ARK report raised issues in every area of the service and officers acknowledged that it was rare for failings to have occurred in all areas. Members heard that the priority was to address culture, which was one of the key areas that required attention, and included ensuring line of visibility at senior level. Members heard that the Cabinet member had been committed to conducting Estate Walks, with Action Plans having been developed through the information gathered from going out and meeting with residents; however, it was noted that that despite the Estate Walks, these issues would not necessarily have come to light.

Members challenged that at the February 2020 Sub-Committee meeting, it was highlighted that there was already a backlog of repairs and members had been

presented with a plan on how this would be cleared. The Sub-Committee had been presented data which reflected that contractually the backlogs were being dealt with but in practice this had not been the case. This was a major impact and disruption on residents and their families' lives with minor and major repairs not being managed well resulting in a severe impact on the wellbeing of residents.

It was highlighted that there were serious concerns regarding monitoring of calls whilst staff were working from home. Calls were not being recorded and this was listed as an issue in the ARK report; officers agreed that one of the actions that had to be taken was to ensure recording of all calls, monitoring of calls through spot checks and mystery shopping exercises using residents as well as independent people.

Members highlighted the fundamental issues of limited investments on planned maintenance of older stock for a long period of time. The expenditure on homes had reduced in real terms over the last seven years when it should have increased in line with inflation and taken into consideration that the stock was older. A realignment of investment for the Council should come out of the surveys that were being conducted and the Council would need to spend a lot more money on planned maintenance or regeneration. The Committee highlighted that the Council needed to seriously look at the conditions of some of its stock which had been built with a maximum 50-year life span which had now exceeded that time frame.

The Committee asked what immediate actions following the ARK report would be taken to address the culture to improve care, respect and empathy for residents which had been highlighted as a fundamental issue. Members heard that an Action Plan had been put in place and that residents would be listened to, and their responses would form the basis of the Plan; to change culture, unacceptable behaviour would be challenged, working alongside officers with training provided on expected responses. The Interim Chief Executive and the Interim Executive of Housing had met with staff to outline their expectations and the Executive Leadership team was committed to changing culture by challenging behaviour and setting expectations.

Housing Improvement Plan and Board

The Committee received a report which set out the further progress made in improving housing conditions in council blocks at Regina Road and rebuilding the housing service and increasing resident engagement. The report also presented the Terms of Reference for a Housing Improvement Board and provided an update on the development of a Housing Improvement Plan. Members heard that Housing Improvement Board was an independently Chaired Board with its own Terms of Reference with the Membership of the Board being looked at to ensure appropriate reflection of representation of equality and diversity. A number of other blocks had been identified as having damp problems, with two of them being classed a priority

and a number of meetings had taken place with residents to talk through issues alongside an analysis of historic allocations.

In assessing what had gone wrong it was acknowledged that there had been serious failings in the system. There were serious lessons that had been learnt and were taken forward as part of the redevelopment of the strategy. The new Housing Improvement Board would hold all aspects of the Council to account, and it would be vital to ensure that all work streams worked in tandem and to identify interdependencies. To address the areas of concerns with the Axis contract as highlighted by the Ark report, several joint workshops with council and contractor staff at operational level had taken place with discussions on all aspects of the contract, with the ideas captured developed into an action plan that would be fundamental to the Improvement Plan.

Members heard that there were issues with current levels of vacancies as a result of the competitive market across London for experienced Council and Housing Association officers. Contractors had also experienced issues with recruitment as a result of Brexit however were resourced at the level they should be based on the amount of work expected. A Roadshow had commenced that would run till September 2021, starting at high rise blocks with lower levels of engagement in an attempt to create more line of visibility through a targeted knocking exercise to introduce/reintroduce officers to tenants. Members were of the view that there was a lot of work to be done on communication to residents and that the information that had been gathered from them was going into a planned process of work with further work needed around the complaints process.

The Committee heard that through the Housing Strategy, officers had been exploring avenues to identify available resources to drive forward change. A number of Directors from London Councils, housing associations and several other organisations had come forward to feed into the strategy. The Housing Improvement Board would act as a representative tool for tenants and be a positive forum acting as an advisory group to the Council.

The Sub-Committee welcomed the update provided on the emerging housing improvement plan and was assured that this was on the right track and recognised the value of using the work of the Tenants and Leaseholder Panel to feed into the improvement agenda. One of the main areas of concern identified by the Sub-Committee was around communication and engagement and it was felt that more work was needed to ensure both residents and their elected representatives were given suitable notice of any events.

At its meeting on the 15 March 2022, the Sub-Committee noted that the draft Plan had been reviewed by the Housing Improvement Board who had been of the view that it needed to be more accessible and more focussed. The Plan had since been re-drafted to define a number of key outcomes and milestones with metrics in place for monitoring progress. The Plan would focus on five key areas and would be a live

document which would have increased input from the Housing Improvement Board. The Sub-Committee were informed that evidence of resident engagement and mapping would be included under one document at a future date and feedback from the Housing Improvement Board had also included a requirement for resident engagement to be captured into the Plan. The Cabinet Member for Homes informed the Committee that a series of task and finish groups and engagement groups were coming together to report to the Housing Improvement Board.

The Sub-Committee raised concerns about trust levels and mechanisms that would allow the Council to foresee future issues; it was noted that the introduction of an IT system which could provide a better understanding of trust issues was being considered but was still at an early stage. The Sub-Committee heard that individuals not only needed to be heard but also assured that their decisions were delivered and that budgets needed to be devolved further to benefit tenants, with mechanisms bolstered to ensure delivery was as promised. The Sub-Committee felt that culturally there was still a way to go and were of the view that resources and information were key to improvement and needed to be a priority. Members discussed the importance of resident engagement and Members raised concerns about lack of capacity and the chances of this leading to the council being unable to respond to requests. Members heard that capacity was the biggest challenge and were informed of work being done around recruitment.

Members were of the view that officer visibility was important and that resident contact was a key issue; it was agreed that this is one of the milestones and it was noted that face-to-face contact and the structure of frontline managing systems were being looked at. Members asked how Housing Improvement Plan could guarantee that issues raised around Regina Road would not happen again and how escalations could be captured and issues around complaints made clearer for residents. The Committee were informed of the ways in which the council was responding by providing solutions via improved management of repairs, provision of contracts and dealing with complaints.

The Sub-Committee recognised that a lot of work had gone into delivering the improvement plan and improving housing conditions, though this had not happened as quickly as desired. This meant that a number of key milestones in the plan were scheduled for later than the Sub-Committee would have liked to have seen. The Sub-Committee recognised that this was at least in part due to the need to create capacity within the service and Members were reassured that the corporate Programme Office was now playing a full role in helping to manage delivery of the plan.

Review of Temporary Accommodation

At its meeting on the 13 July 2021, the Committee received a report outlining the current temporary accommodation situation in Croydon with an overview including

current accommodation costs, related costs and the current budget pressures. The report set the current risks and issues and presented ideas for future actions. Members heard that there were five schemes available, and that fire inspections and fire drills took place on each scheme to ensure that fire safety standards were met.

The Committee noted that there were approximately 2096 families in temporary accommodation and that this figure was similar to neighbouring boroughs. Members acknowledged that there was a threat that with the end of Furlough, there could be a rise in people presenting as requiring Council assistance due to not being able to pay their rents and mortgages. The cost of temporary accommodation had increased by 10% in 2021/21 and more work needed to be done on improvements to engagement and communication with residents as well as ensuring a robust complaints system.

Place Department

Members received a presentation providing an update on the Place departments Budget, Staff and Service Impact. The Committee learnt that growth on income had been built into the budget in relation to ANPR cameras and that income for enforcement would be a significant increase on previous years. The Committee heard that once motorists started to comply with restrictions, there may be a reduction in projected revenue from penalty charges in areas where ANPRs operated but that this had been built into the model. After the deduction of the cost of running the service, all surplus funds went into the Freedom Pass scheme, and once the surplus exceeded the cost of the Freedom Pass, the Council was required to put the funds into other road schemes.

The council had shifted from a reactive service on maintenance of highways with the budget to deal with reactive maintenance amended to allow for growth to allow for the repairs to be made; the majority of money for Croydon works initially came from the growth fund. The end of furlough and reversal of uplift to universal credit raised concerns for Members and there were a number of strategies that had been put in place by the Council to mitigate this, such as additional funding which had been secured from the DWP to keep Croydon Works operational.

The Committee heard that the development of the Community Safety Strategy would address and target resources to correct areas in the antisocial behaviour teams. Work had been undertaken to ensure that queries were being routed to the right departments to make sure queries were dealt with more quickly and efficiently.

Members concluded that the Place department always achieved savings as required but raised concerns about the impact this was having on the department such as the increase in complaints in some of its service areas and the impact of non-compliance with planning conditions as well as issues with the planning enforcement team resource.

South London Waste Partnership Contract

At its meeting on 28 September 2021, the Committee received a report on the performance of the Council's waste collection and street cleansing contract, identifying areas of service improvement and management of known and emerging risks to the service. A legislative backdrop was also provided to inform the Committee of future challenges and opportunities.

The Committee heard from the Cabinet Member for Sustainable and were advised that the contract was entered into in 2018 for waste collection as well as street cleaning. Veolia conducted 1.8million household waste collections per month, and 2703 miles of streets were cleansed monthly. Recycling rates had improved significantly over the years, and this was attributed to implementing different ways to encourage residents to take ownership and recycle more. A service improvement plan had been put into place following the pandemic to address issues and improve on service delivery. This plan had been impacted by the National HGV shortage issue and growth increase due a growing number of households and increased waste remained a challenge.

The Committee were of the view that a breakdown on street cleansing by borough with similar information on bin collection by borough and missed by ward would be useful. Members raised concerns about reports of poor crew behaviour that had been reported by residents and were informed that there were cameras on vehicles to capture any issues; the Committee welcomed this and felt that it should be publicised. Officers were exploring ways to update the cameras to enable direct feed to the office or live feedback as this was currently not possible.

The Committee raised queries about the shortage of HGV drivers and learnt that agency providers did not have the staff available to provide in this current climate from a backdrop of an already struggling industry. Veolia had been exploring several ways to address the issue such as overhauling recruitment processes and upskilling current staff through a bespoke programme to assist them in obtaining the appropriate licensing. A retention bonus had been provided but prices had to be increased for commercial partners to be able to fund the additional money that was going into recruitment and retention of staff.

Members were informed that there had not been electrical dustcarts available at the time the fleet had been purchased; whilst there were reliable and environmentally friendly fleets coming onto the market, these were extremely expensive. The Committee were encouraged that the current fleet was Euro 6 compliant and heard that whilst technology was changing quickly there was a substantial capital outlay to change the entire fleet and this could only be done every 8 years.

Improvements to the Housing Directorate and progress towards a Housing Strategy and review of the Housing Revenue Account

The Sub-Committee received a report on improvements to the Housing directorate, progress towards a housing strategy, and the review of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The report included information on the redesign of the Housing directorate, the directorate's new key performance indicators, the Council's increased focus on resident engagement and progress towards a housing strategy. The report also included an update on the review of the HRA, and improvements to governance.

Members heard that communication with the residents at Regina Road had increased with information now more readily available such as residents being informed of who their caretaker was. Meetings had been held with the Residents Support Group and performance around following-up repairs and communicating with residents on the status of their repairs had improved. The Housing Improvement Plan was being created and included recognition that cultural change was necessary.

It was confirmed that the Housing Improvement Board would review its draft terms of reference at its meeting on 7 December 2021, with the final version presented to the Cabinet for sign-off on 21 March 2022. It was agreed that the terms of reference would be shared with the Sub-Committee.

The Committee raised concerns around the responses to the residents' survey and it was agreed that a detailed breakdown of responses would be circulated; there was a concern that more recent engagement may indicate that the number of people dissatisfied with the service had increased further. It was confirmed that the main points arising from the survey concerned responsive repairs and communication. Work was underway to address these concerns with the Council's contractor for repairs, Axis, who had been issued with an improvement notice. There was a particular concern amongst the Sub-Committee about response times for urgent repairs and it was confirmed that surveys would be undertaken regularly in order to provide qualitative data with which to inform the Improvement programme and to highlight any new areas of concern promptly. Members found that data collection had demonstrated that further recording was required to identify patterns and learned that a new IT system was due to be launched in May 2021 which would provide a database to enable trends to be identified.

There were a number of concerns raised by the Sub-Committee about specific areas, including issues with heating, lack of hot water and expensive bills. It was confirmed that the contractors were working to ensure that these issues were addressed as a priority. Heat efficiency continued to be a problem and would be fed into the Council's asset management strategy work. In response to questions from Members it was ascertained that capacity was a clear barrier to delivering improvement within the Housing Service, but that this was being addressed as a priority. The Sub-Committee agreed there was a need for investment to improve the

condition of the Council's housing stock and where the condition of housing fell below the expected standard, action should be taken to resolve the issues as a matter of urgency.

Questions were raised about the redesign of the housing service and how engagement with residents would be improved. It was confirmed to Members that reorganisation of the Service would be key for delivering improvement and engagement was still ongoing to inform the new structure. Members raised further concerns about vacant Head of Service Posts and were informed of interim processes in place including acting up opportunities for existing staff with permanent recruitment to these vacancies ongoing. Although Members accepted the interim arrangements, there was concern about how this would impact upon the workload of staff and whether this was manageable given the urgent need to improve the service. It was requested that future reports include comparative data to indicate how the Council was performing in comparison with other local authorities.

The Sub-Committee examined an overview of the proposed approach to creating the business plan and commented that lobbying for 100% right to buy receipts should be taken forward and on the importance of meeting the deadline for the HRA business plan being brought to Cabinet in March 2022.

Budget Scrutiny Challenge

At its meeting on 1 February 2022, the Sub-Committee considered a report which provided information on three specific budget areas identified for scrutiny as part of the budget setting process; these were:

1. Independent Travel Service
2. Grounds Maintenance
3. Emergency & Temporary Accommodation

Members heard about the current pressures on the Independent Travel Service, in particular, the increased demand for the service of special education needs travel. There was a statutory requirement for the Council to provide appropriate travel for students with special needs, the cost of which was increasing due to inflationary pressures and the individual pressure around high-cost routes due to the needs of students also needed to be managed. The Sub-Committee queried whether work had been carried out to explore the possibility of forming sub-regional partnerships for SEND transport and it was confirmed that these type of arrangements were in place and other options for optimised efficiencies were being explored.

In response to a question about whether taxis were used for multiple drops, the Committee were advised that consideration was given to a variety of different ways of providing transport to ensure the service was optimised to deliver the best efficiency. It was advised that the cost of using the Council's in-house provision

equated to approximately £3,000 per pupil per year; the cost for external providers was higher, equating to approximately £10,000 per pupil per year. The Committee raised questions about travel trainers and heard that there was no plan to increase the current number of travel trainers and those in post were working towards clearing the backlog. The Sub-Committee discussed the potential risks to the independent travel budget and noted that there was not currently an earmarked reserve in place. Members were of the view that consideration needed to be given to possible demographic or other pressures in order to manage these risks.

The Sub-Committee heard that the growth proposal for Grounds Maintenance would reintroduce some of the funding that had been removed in the previous year's budget, and that this would allow the ground maintenance service to return to a more sustainable and manageable level; it was highlighted that the previous budget reduction had impacted upon service delivery. Members questioned whether officers were confident that skilled seasonal workers could be recruited and were informed that this should be possible with reassurance given that the procurement of new equipment was underway and available as required. It was advised that the investment in the service would provide direct benefits for residents but it was questioned whether the proposals were as ambitious as they could be. It was highlighted to Members that for the purpose of the growth bid was to reinstate funding to allow more frequent cutting and enable the Service to meet its required service levels. It was confirmed that there was a priority for the Service to remain self-sufficient and that this would include working with partners to drive innovation and the commercialisation of existing assets, such as parks.

On Emergency & Temporary Accommodation, Members were informed that a growth bid of £2m had been made to address increased demand within the service. At the same time 15 work-streams had been identified to deliver a net target of £2.5m savings. Members queried risks to the delivery of the budget and were informed that a new IT system was being procured for the service which would assist with the mitigation of risk. Concern was raised about the number tenants recorded as being in temporary accommodation for more than 12 months and the Sub-Committee noted that there would be work to improve performance on the turnaround of void accommodation, which would help to address demand. It was agreed that early engagement and improved processes would be key to helping residents in temporary accommodation move into the private rented sector and that it was essential that staff vacancies within the service be addressed as soon as possible to alleviate capacity concerns.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Rent Setting and Draft Budget 2022/23

The Sub-Committee considered report which provided information on the Housing Revenue Account Rent Setting and draft Budget for 2022-23. The decisions set out in the report were considered by the Cabinet on 7 February 2022 and feedback from the Sub-Committee was reported to this meeting. It was confirmed that the

proposed 4.1% rent increase was within Government guidelines and similar to the vast majority of other London Boroughs

The Sub-Committee highlighted that it was a risk for the Cabinet to agree the HRA budget without having agreed the HRA Business Plan, as without this it would not be possible to make a judgement on whether the budget was sufficient to deliver the plan. It was acknowledged that it would have been preferable to have the Business Plan in place before the budget, but as it was in the process of being developed, this work had informed the budget. Members stated that other risks that need to be monitored included the introduction of the new IT system in the service and available staffing capacity to deliver the level of change required.

There was widespread concern across the Sub-Committee about the potential impact the rent increase may have upon residents, and it was highlighted that rents in Croydon were comparatively low to other local authorities and had not increased in the past four years. Members heard that there was a backlog of repairs which needed to be addressed and funding from the increase was needed to provide these services and deliver a balanced budget. Two potential mechanisms for acknowledging the views of tenants were identified by the Sub-Committee. Firstly, it was agreed that the possibility of deferring the rent increase, if only for a short period, needed further exploration to establish whether it would be viable; there needed to be a greater level of engagement with residents to explain why the increase was needed. The Sub-Committee agreed that work needed to be undertaken prior to the Cabinet's consideration of the rent increase to establish whether any deferral of the increase would be viable from both a regulatory and financial perspective.

The Sub-Committee welcomed confirmation that staffing resources within the Service would be reviewed in the forthcoming year, as well as confirmation that there would be an ongoing drive to move towards a more customer focussed culture within the Service. It was agreed that both of these measures, alongside delivering improvement in process efficiency, would help to provide an improved and more efficient service for residents. The Sub-Committee endorsed the move within the Housing Service towards taking a more robust, proactive approach to managing its contracts and was encouraged that there was an intention to move to a similar, proactive approach for repairs.

Housing Revenue Account Business Plan

The Sub-Committee considered a report which provided an early draft version of a report due to be considered by the Cabinet on 21 March 2022, on the 30 Year Business Plan for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The Business Plan set out the council's finances over the next 30 years based upon assumptions such as rent levels, and Members were of the view that data held on stock condition showed a substantive backlog of work was required and capital spending could only be increased over a number of years to bring stock up to standard.

Members raised concerns around increased management costs and were informed that the operating service per unit was higher in Croydon than the national average, but that debt per unit was higher. The Sub-Committee requested detail of how these metrics worked and were of the view that it would be interesting to see how this compared to other outer London authorities. The Sub-Committee noted that HRA debt had increased since 2013 and were informed that this was mostly due to acquisitions rather than investment in the existing stock. Members asked if Croydon had the structure and staff in place to ensure that the information was correct and heard that the review of the HRA budget was done without the Business Plan, which would now address the Asset Strategy; the Sub-Committee were informed that information on capital spending would be going to Full Council in January 2023. Members were of the view that capacity remained an issue and that there was a reluctance to use consultants to undertake the work to alleviate the pressure on staff. It was agreed that capacity had been raised formally and was an operational issue which was being looked into and put forward for expertise to help with the workload. The Sub-Committee heard about proposals to look at how consultants could add value, but that there were certain areas where ownership from within the organisation was vital.

The Sub-Committee discussed issues around delivery of carbon neutrality and costs related to debt and the availability of extra capital funding. Members were of the view that the council's approach to debt was not clear and needed to be included in the report; Members stated that it was important to review the strategic choices that the council had taken and whether poverty, state of repairs and improvement of system stock was considered. Members felt that the stock condition was poor and agreed that more spending would likely be needed in the future.

The Sub-Committee was positive that there was a clear financial model in place and felt that this was a positive outcome of the different services related to housing being brought back together under one directorate but lacked confidence that the service had the required staffing capacity to deliver the works detailed in the plan and was concerned that lack of capacity and necessary skills would impede its delivery.