

ROYAL BOROUGH OF GREENWICH
ORGANISATION AND COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL
THURSDAY, 31 OCTOBER 2024 AT 6.30 PM
MINUTES

Present:

Councillors Councillor Ivis Williams (Chair), Jo van dan Broek, Cathy Dowse and Asli Mohammed

Officers:

Interim Director of Legal and Democratic Services, Head of Democratic Services and Legal Practice Management, Assistant Chief Executive (Change and Development) and Head of Human Resources

Item

No.

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Lakshan Saldin and Matt Hartley

2 Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

3 Declarations of Interest

Resolved –

That the list of Councillors' memberships as Council appointed representatives on outside bodies, joint committees and school governing bodies is noted.

4 Minutes

Resolved –

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Organisation and Communities Scrutiny Panel held on 18 July 2024 be agreed and signed as a true and accurate record.

5 Legal Services Performance Update

The Interim Director of Legal and Democratic Services and the Head of Democratic Services and Legal Practice Management presented an update on Legal Services, covering performance, staffing, and operational changes since the last meeting. The report focused on developments since April 2024, highlighting that Legal Services comprised 49 established posts, including lawyers and admin support. They highlighted that demand for legal services continued to rise, particularly in housing disrepair cases, which had led to recruitment challenges, especially for planning and contracts lawyers.

The Interim Director of Legal and Democratic Services stated that the service was exceeding its target of 40,000 chargeable hours by approximately 15% and detailed that In 2023/24, 2,700 new legal matters were opened; for 2024/25 to date, 2,031 matters have been opened. She added The service processed 653 committee reports in 2023/24; as of April 2024, 401 reports had been processed.

The Head of Democratic Services and Legal Practice Management provided details of the Operational Partnership Agreement (OPA), which was launched on 01 October 2024, and outlined services provided by Legal Services, performance standards, costs, and expectations from client departments. She highlighted the Key performance indicators (KPIs), which included:

- Billable hours targets for lawyers
- Completion of matters within 12 months (target: 60%)
- Advice provided within 10 working days
- Decision report comments within 5 working days
- Client satisfaction target of 90% or above in annual surveys.

There was a discussion on the three Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) Proposals for the service:

- Redesigning the Service Level Agreement with schools to generate approximately £50,000 per annum.

- Reducing reliance on external counsel for safeguarding children proceedings, projected to save £375,000 annually.
- Increasing the recharge rate for regeneration legal work from £175 to £220 per hour in line with full cost recovery.

In response to questions, The Interim Director of Legal and Democratic Services confirmed that staff morale was improving due to efforts to convert locum staff to fixed-term contracts and support from client departments. She explained that the department also had apprenticeships and secondment opportunities to develop in-house talent. She added that regular engagement with staff was encouraged to maintain a supportive culture.

In response to a question, the Interim Director of Legal and Democratic Services confirmed that the directorate worked closely with HR on employment matters and tribunal cases, with established procedures for roles and responsibilities. She advised that regular debriefs were held to identify lessons learned from tribunal outcomes.

In terms of outsourcing, the Interim Director of Legal and Democratic Services advised that it was necessary due to expertise shortages in-house; however, the in-house team remained involved in monitoring outsourced work. She stated that decisions regarding whether to defend cases were made after thorough review of evidence and risks.

Members requested a breakdown of the client survey responses once the re-launched survey was completed.

Action: Interim Director of Legal and Democratic Services

Members suggested that the wording in the OPA regarding technology use be amended to "effective and appropriate use of technology." Officers agreed to make the amendment.

Action: Interim Director of Legal and Democratic Services

The Panel thanked the Legal Services team for their comprehensive update.

Resolved -

That the update on Legal Services Performance be noted.

6 HR update report

The Head of HR presented an update on HR performance for 2023/24. She provided details of the Key Performance Metrics and highlighted that the report followed a new format aligned with the council's draft Workforce Strategy and its ambitions. She highlighted that the Workforce Strategy was in its final consultation stages, with principles already being embedded across directorates. The report was structured around five pillars: attracting talent, strengthening diversity and inclusion, supporting staff development, promoting wellbeing, and leading change.

In response to a question on agency use, The Head of HR confirmed that the areas with high agency staff usage include Adult Social Care, Children's Services, and DRES, due to difficulties in recruiting and retaining skilled professionals. She stated that the overall agency worker headcount had slightly decreased, but costs had increased due to higher-skilled roles being filled. She added that a strategic resourcing review is underway to address skills shortages and explore options like "grow your own" talent programs.

Sickness Absence and Wellbeing

In response to questions, The Head of HR highlighted that stress, depression, and mental health issues were the leading causes of sickness absence. She confirmed that a staff health and wellbeing strategy is being developed to address these issues. She advised that DSE assessments and training have been updated to include remote working considerations.

Members noted that detailed EDI dashboards breaking down workforce metrics by ethnicity are available but had not included in this report. The Head of HR agreed to provide more comprehensive EDI data, including information on disciplinary and grievance cases, in future reports.

In response to a question, the Head of HR confirmed that the number of employment tribunal cases remains consistent, but there was a need to understand underlying causes. She highlighted the close partnership with Legal Services which helped assess the merits and value for money of tribunal cases. She stated that efforts were being made to improve internal processes and upskill managers in handling employee relations issues.

In response to questions, The Head of HR responded that DSE assessments have been reviewed, with mandatory training rolled out and that guidance for remote working is provided to ensure staff have appropriate equipment. She highlighted the draft health and well-being strategy which aimed to address concerns workload and job satisfaction. She added that a review of the flexible

working policy had been completed and that plans were in place to incorporate flexibility into recruitment procedures.

The Panel requested that future reports include:

- Continued monitoring of agency staff usage and spend.
- More detailed EDI data, especially on disciplinary and grievance cases.
- A comprehensive breakdown of employment tribunal cases.
- Information on culture change initiatives.
- Details on promoting flexible working in recruitment strategies.

Action: Head of HR

The Panel noted the progress on workforce development initiatives and emphasised the importance of addressing recruitment challenges and promoting staff wellbeing.

Resolved -

That the report Human Resources Update 2023/24 be noted.

7 Commissioning of Future Reports

The report was presented by the Chair.

Resolved -

That the work items that are scheduled to be presented to the meeting of the Organisation and Communities Scrutiny Panel taking place on 15th January 2025 be noted

The meeting closed at 20.03.

Chair