

**People Scrutiny Committee, Place  
Scrutiny Committee, Policy and  
Resources Scrutiny Committee**

# **Joint In-Depth Scrutiny Project 2021/22**

## **‘Enabling Councillors to be Effective’**

**Final Report and Recommendations (May 2022)**



## **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Elected councillors give local government its essential legitimacy, accountability, strategic direction and community focus. The provision of support and assistance to all councillors regardless of which political party or group they belong to, whether they are Executive or 'back-bench members or whether they are part of an administration or in opposition, is essential for the purposes of enabling councillors to be effective.
- 1.2 The work of a councillor is complex and challenging and the political, legislative and local landscape in which we work is changing constantly. As more duties and responsibilities have been placed on local authorities, councillors have seen their workload increase significantly. Local residents and communities have high expectations of their elected representatives from the day of their election and throughout their period of office. Both new and experienced councillors therefore need appropriate support, guidance and personal and professional development to undertake their complex and evolving roles.
- 1.3 I would like to thank all councillors and officers for their contribution to the in-depth scrutiny project.

**Councillor James Moyies**  
**Chair of the In-Depth Scrutiny Project Team**

## **2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 Each of the Council's scrutiny committees (the People Scrutiny Committee, the Place Scrutiny Committee and the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee) has traditionally undertaken an in-depth scrutiny project each year. The in-depth projects are selected at the beginning of each municipal year and generally focus on the Council's corporate priorities or matters of local concern. Recent in-depth scrutiny projects have also been aligned with the ambition and outcomes arising from the Southend 2050 programme. The in-depth scrutiny projects lead to the development of reports and recommendations which advise the Executive and the Council on its policies, budget provision and service delivery. Participation in the in-depth projects enable councillors to be actively involved in a specific topic and to influence and shape proposals around service improvement that will result in improved outcomes.
- 2.2 In considering options for the approach to in-depth scrutiny activity for 2021/22, the scrutiny committees considered the benefits of undertaking a joint scrutiny project around the effectiveness of the current 'Councillor Queries' portal, which had generated a mixed experience for councillors since its implementation, particularly around the way that the councillor queries arrangements worked and enabled them to deliver their democratic mandate to local residents. The scrutiny committees considered that the nature of such scrutiny activity should be broadened to reflect the theme of 'Enabling Councillors to be Effective' and that the scoping of the project should incorporate other appropriate matters of importance to councillors within this theme, alongside the effectiveness of the 'Councillor Queries' portal.

## **3. FRAMEWORK OF THE IN-DEPTH SCRUTINY PROJECT**

- 3.1 At the cycle of meetings in July 2021, the People Scrutiny Committee, the Place Scrutiny Committee and the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee each agreed that a single in-depth scrutiny project be undertaken on behalf of the three committees during the 2021/22 municipal year on the theme of 'Enabling Councillors to be Effective', as part of the scrutiny work programme for the year.

- 3.2 There were a number of reasons for the identification of the in-depth scrutiny project. In addition to the concerns raised in regard to the effectiveness of the current 'Councillor Queries' arrangements for the handling of enquiries and questions that councillors raised with officers of the Council, other matters were agreed for inclusion as part of the in-depth scrutiny project, including problem reporting, requests for information, councillors' contact and engagement with the Council and residents and the effectiveness of the 'My Southend' platform.
- 3.3 In agreeing the nature of the in-depth scrutiny project for 201/22, the scrutiny committees acknowledged that a separate review of the Council's Constitution was taking place and that any recommendations arising from the project around constitutional matters could feed into that review process to avoid duplication. In considering the proposed scope of the in-depth scrutiny project, it was also recognised that design group was currently looking at councillor development as part of the leadership programme and that appropriate recommendations arising from the project could also contribute to that separate work activity.
- 3.4 The agreed scope of the in-depth scrutiny project was:
- (a) To identify and review current arrangements for the provision of support that councillors need to carry out their elected role, focusing on the "Councillor role" rather than the specific requirements of members of the Cabinet, the Shadow Cabinet or the chairs of committees.
  - (b) To identify any 'quick wins' in terms of aspects of the main areas of focus of the project and to understand other ongoing activity that relates to the aims of the project to ensure joined-up arrangements.
  - (c) Where relevant, to feed into the separate review to be undertaken of the Council's Constitution by the General Purposes Committee, to which all members of the Council will have a separate opportunity to contribute.
  - (d) To complement the work of the design group currently looking at councillor development as part of the leadership programme.
- 3.5 The review was set within the context of the Council's 2050 ambition and priorities and the Project Team was tasked with reviewing relevant issues and to report back to the Cabinet with appropriate findings and recommendations.
- 3.6 As a number of elements of the in-depth scrutiny project also covered issues that were considered as part of the scrutiny project undertaken by the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee for 2019-2021, we received a progress update on the implementation of each of the recommendations arising from that scrutiny project for 2020/21, to assist the consideration of aspects of the current in-depth scrutiny project and the formulation of appropriate recommendations arising from the project.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

- 4.1 The review was undertaken on behalf of the three scrutiny committees by a Project Team comprising the following members appointed by the Council on 15 July 2021:
- Councillors B Beggs, K Buck, T Cowdrey, K Evans, A Line, J Moyies, D Nelson, I Shead and A Thompson.
- 4.2 Councillor J Moyies was appointed Chair of the Project Team at its meeting on 19 August 2021.

- 4.3 The Project Team was supported by relevant officers including S Meah-Sims (Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance)), T Row (Principal Democratic Services Officer) and S Tautz (Principal Democratic Services Officer/Project Co-ordinator). Other officer support was provided in respect of specific elements of the in-depth scrutiny project:

J Astle (Digital Communications Advisor)  
C Foster (Head of IT Delivery)  
A Keating (Strategic Communications Manager)  
M Medina (Community Capacity Advisor)  
P Moyo (Internal Communications Officer)  
K Pachalko (Engagement and Participation Manager)  
J Painter (Service Manager (Customer Services))  
D Skinner (Intelligence Officer (Planning and Compliance))  
C Thomas (Director of Digital and ICT)

- 4.4 The Project Team met on six occasions between August 2021 and April 2022. Although the progress of the in-depth scrutiny project was delayed as a result of unfortunate local events that occurred in October 2021, efforts were made by the Project Team to ensure that the timescale for the delivery of the project was maintained and that the project was completed within the 2021/22 municipal year.

- 4.5 The project was undertaken using an evidence-based approach to the consideration of service options, through a mixture of experiences presented by councillors and informative presentations that supported the understanding of the current provision of services to support councillors. No witness sessions or site visits were held in respect of the project, although some examples of service provision in other local authorities were presented to the Project Team. The Project Team reviewed guidance published by the Local Government Association in relation to effective councillors and the handling of casework.

- 4.6 A project plan and work programme for the in-depth scrutiny project was agreed by the Project Team in September 2021 and by each of the scrutiny committees during the October 2021 cycle of meetings. The project plan and work programme set out the scope and framework for the project, alongside a programme of thematic evidence-gathering activities around the following specific areas identified as key to the desired outcomes for the project:

- First Contact (resident queries dealt with by councillors and the experience of residents when contacting the Council).
- Councillor Queries (review of improvements to arrangements for the handling of councillor queries).
- Officer/Councillor Engagement (practical arrangements and the operation of the Councillor/Officer Protocol).
- Councillor Casework and Support (the benefits of a casework system to improve the management of resident issues, other support for all councillors).
- Cross-Service, External Partners and Outsourced Services (ensuring that services provided by external organisations/agencies are handled seamlessly).
- Enabling Non-Aligned Councillors (ensuring that non-aligned councillors have the ability to be effective).

- 4.7 The following sources of evidence were considered as part of the in-depth scrutiny project:

- (a) Councillor 'case studies', experiences and feedback.
- (b) Specific examples of issues within the scope of the project where things have not gone well.

- (c) Relevant data etc. held by the Council or obtained from published sources or benchmarking arrangements.
- (d) Performance information on key issues (e.g., response times, call handling etc.).
- (e) Customer feedback (e.g., contact with the Council, contact with councillors, use of the website etc.).
- (f) Information/feedback from relevant officer teams (e.g., 'Councillor Queries')
- (g) Benchmarking information (e.g., around member support services and the use of casework systems at other local authorities).
- (h) The presentation/demonstration of relevant systems and processes.
- (i) A review of recommendations arising from the in-depth scrutiny project undertaken by the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee for 2019/20-2020/21.

## **5. FIRST CONTACT**

- 5.1 At the meeting of the Project Team in December 2021, we considered aspects of the work programme for the joint in-depth scrutiny project, around the 'First Contact' theme.

### **(a) 'My Southend'**

- 5.2 We received a presentation from the Director of Digital and ICT and the Head of IT Delivery, on current plans for the replacement of the 'My Southend' interactive self-service portal for residents.
- 5.3 Self-service facilities offer residents a convenient way of managing their Council services, reporting issues and contacting the authority with service requests or comments, without having to wait in a phone queue or navigate websites. The Council has introduced the 'My Southend' platform as its interactive self-service portal for residents.
- 5.4 The Project Team was advised that the 'My Southend' platform was five years old and had been designed as a replacement for paper-based forms. The Director of Digital and ICT advised us that the current platform was at end of life and that the supplier had no plans to replace or enhance the platform any further. The Director of Digital and ICT reported that ICT had been tasked with investigating options for a replacement system in July 2021, as this approach offered an opportunity to rethink the way online services were packaged and to transform service delivery, and that funding for investigation into the scope and business case for a replacement platform had been agreed by the Investment Board in September 2021, alongside the introduction of a new Revenues and Benefits portal to be integrated into the 'My Southend' platform. The Director of Digital and ICT reported that the replacement of 'My Southend' had the potential to improve the current customer engagement experience and that integration with waste management services was also planned to be introduced as part of the implementation of the new platform.
- 5.5 We understand that the business case agreed in September 2021 proposed the undertaking of discovery and consultation activity with councillors, officers and residents to inform the production of a full business case for the new platform. A service provider has been appointed and discovery and design is due to commence in July 2022, so that the full business case for the new platform can be submitted to the Investment Board in November 2022 and considered by the Cabinet in January 2023.
- 5.6 We were also advised of a number of challenges with the current 'My Southend' platform, including digital exclusion, the use of some complicated forms that did not cover all service areas, the inability to track the progress of service requests and reports, the lack of a casework management facility for councillors, a lack of ability to identify common areas of service request, and limited integration with other systems. The Director of Digital and ICT indicated that, subject to full compliance with relevant data protection legislation and the consideration of safeguards for personal data held in different service areas, it was

intended that the functionality of the new 'My Southend' portal would also extend to the Council's partners that were involved in service delivery for residents, so that services were handled seamlessly.

- 5.7 The Director of Digital and ICT advised us that the replacement of the 'My Southend' platform was currently in the discovery phase and that work had already been undertaken to understand the digital abilities of residents and improve their system experience, to understand the current use of 'My Southend' through analysis of service requests and complaints, and to develop ward-level analysis of demographics and the use of 'My Southend' using data from the 2011 Census.
- 5.8 The Project Team was assured that full programme governance would be established around the replacement of the 'My Southend' portal and that councillors and service users would be fully involved in the development of the vision and functional specification for the new portal, which was not intended to move away from the continued provision of human contact for residents.
- 5.9 We were advised that it was also intended to secure some 'quick wins' from the replacement of 'My Southend', including improvements to the language used in some on-line forms, the investigation of options for validation to enable correct enquiries to be raised first time and to reduce the level of duplicate cases, and the use of analytics and customer feedback to review existing forms and user interfaces to improve customer experience and ease of completion.
- 5.10 We welcome the plans for the replacement of the 'My Southend' interactive self-service portal for residents and have requested that the Project Team be kept up to date with ongoing progress on the replacement of the portal.

#### **(b) Website**

- 5.11 The Council's website is a suite of related web pages used to store and provide service information to external users, located under the single domain [www.southend.gov.uk](http://www.southend.gov.uk). The Project Team received a presentation from the Digital Communications Advisor on current plans for the development of the website.
- 5.12 We were advised that the corporate website consisted of information relating to over 400 services, complemented by additional linked websites such as 'My Southend', the Planning Portal and the Modern.Gov democratic services facility. The Digital Communications Advisor reported that extensive work had been undertaken to improve the main website, including a full relaunch in May 2020 and that accessibility and user-journeys had been a major consideration for the re-development of the website.
- 5.13 The Project Team noted that the website had recently been completely overhauled to comply with accessibility law and featured drop-down menus in line with modern websites, whilst also working better on mobile devices and providing shorter user-journeys to key content.
- 5.14 The Digital Communications Advisor reported that the updated website had an in-built ability to show results even if search criteria were mis-typed and could route straight to relevant content rather than simply displaying a list of search results. The Project Team was advised that analytics indicated that people were now able to find content far quicker and having to visit fewer pages before they found the information they required and that comments related far less to finding content than with the previous website.
- 5.15 We were advised that the website had been subject to several accessibility ranking and audit evaluations and was currently rated 87/100 (excellent) for accessibility by

SiteImprove. The Digital Communications Advisor reported that the Government Digital Service had audited and passed the website in January 2021 and that the recommendations arising from a Shaw Trust accessibility audit undertaken by people with a range of disabilities and needs when accessing information online, were currently being implemented to further improve the website.

- 5.16 The Project Team was informed that the introduction of search functionality for the linked websites was also being investigated, alongside further data-driven improvements using analytics from the website and on-site searches, and future tools to improve usability and customer experience, such as a live chat function. We strongly consider that any introduction of live chat functionality for the website should only be on the basis of human interaction rather than being automated by any form of artificial intelligence.
- 5.17 We would encourage councillors to provide details of any specific search enquiries that had proved problematic in terms of identifying information on the Council's website, directly to the Corporate Communications Team.
- 5.18 We welcome the plans for the for the development of the Council's website.

### **(c) Resident Queries and Experience**

- 5.19 Although we did not consider the 'Councillor Queries' theme of the work programme for the in-depth scrutiny project at our meeting in December 2021, we discussed the increase in the number of resident queries being dealt with by councillors that had been perceived at the commencement of the in-depth scrutiny project, although it was currently generally felt that the level of such queries had since reduced for some members. We also received current call handling performance information.
- 5.20 We were advised that no 'Mystery Caller' type exercises around the provision of customer services have been previously commissioned but did not consider that this was necessary as part of the in-depth scrutiny project at the current time. However, we do believe that appropriate forms of 'mystery caller' or other review arrangement should be introduced wherever necessary to ensure that arrangements already put in place to ensure that the quality of the experience offered to residents when contacting the Council are being met.

## **6. COUNCILLOR QUERIES**

- 6.1 At the meeting of the Project Team in January 2022, we considered aspects of the work programme for the joint in-depth scrutiny project around the 'Councillor Queries' theme.
- 6.2 We received a presentation from the Service Manager (Customer Services)) on the current performance of the 'Councillor Queries' portal for members and ongoing plans for the development of the portal.
- 6.3 The Project Team was advised that the 'Councillor Queries' portal had originally been established at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, as a means of providing responses and information to councillors in respect of service enquiries around the Council's ongoing response to the impact of the pandemic. In August 2021, a team of seven officers from various service areas across the Council was established as an interim arrangement to manage the Councillor Queries arrangements, to address the lack of consistent service being experienced by councillors when submitting enquiries. The aim of the officer team was to take responsibility for the provision of responses to enquiries, whilst ensuring that responses were also consistent with a more personal approach.
- 6.4 We were advised that some aspects of 'Councillor Queries' were now considered to be working well, including the ability of the officer team to direct enquiries to the correct service



area, acting as a single point of contact for progress chasing and liaison with service areas on behalf of councillors. However, we understand that efforts will continue to be made to improve the service further, including engagement with councillors to ensure that all enquiries are directed to the dedicated 'Councillor Queries' inbox rather than directly to officers, to ensure a consistent approach. The Project Team was also advised that improved engagement with all of the political groups around the operation of the 'Councillor Queries' portal was to be developed, as only limited attendance had so far been seen at events to promote the use of the portal, and that the councillor queries team occasionally encountered difficulties in obtaining responses to enquiries from some service areas but were working with the relevant Executive Directors to improve this issue. The Service Manager (Customer Services) advised us that efforts also continued to be made to provide responses to enquiries submitted through the 'Councillor Queries' portal, within the five-day service level agreement.

- 6.5 We reviewed data on the level of enquiries submitted through the 'Councillor Queries' portal between August and December 2021, which indicated that the main areas of enquiry related to highways, parks, waste management, regulatory services and licensing. During that period, 1427 enquiries had been received through the 'Councillor Queries' portal, with smaller numbers of queries submitted by councillors through 'My Southend' (131) and Velocity (the corporate portal for the reporting of ICT related issues) (17). It was reported that the level of queries submitted through the 'Councillor Queries' portal had shown a decrease over this period, although it was likely that councillors might be raising queries directly with relevant officers, or through alternative means of contact, in some situations.
- 6.6 The Project Team considered that it was important that appropriate guidelines were in place so that councillors were clear on the best approach to use when raising enquiries, particularly when these often contained personal or sensitive information, or might concern safeguarding matters, and that members needed to exercise judgement on the best means of contact given the circumstances of specific enquiries. The Service Manager (Customer Services) advised the Project Team that the Customer Care Team also exercised judgement in terms of the 'urgency' allocated to specific enquiries received from councillors.
- 6.7 The Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) indicated that member support arrangements (including the 'Councillor Queries' portal) was part of the ongoing corporate review of business support functions, which would also consider the need for the provision of dedicated support for councillors and options to support member casework through the procurement or in-house development of appropriate casework management arrangements.
- 6.8 The Project Team suggested that arrangements for the improvement of existing reporting arrangements of local incidents by councillors over weekends, bank holidays and at times of other significant national or local events should be investigated, and that details of the 'Gold' command arrangements for response to an emergency or major incident available to councillors, needed to be updated. We consider that it is essential that appropriate officers of the Council and representatives of key service areas are always available given the nature of Southend as a 'weekend' destination. We consider that this information could usefully be available on the area of the new intranet proposed to be dedicated to the provision of information for councillors.
- 6.9 We support the continued use of the 'Councillor Queries' portal and consider that the Council should continue to pursue the introduction of appropriate enhancements to the portal.

## **7. OFFICER/COUNCILLOR ENGAGEMENT**

- 7.1 We recognise that councillors and officers are indispensable to one another and mutual respect and communication between both is essential for good local government. Together, councillors and officers bring the critical skills, experience and knowledge required to manage an effective public sector organisation.
- 7.2 Although elements of the work programme for the in-depth scrutiny project contained proposed activity relating to officer/councillor engagement, we have requested the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) to ensure that these aspects of the project instead be aligned with the separate work being undertaken with all councillors to implement the actions arising from the review of the Member/Officer Protocol in 2021, to avoid duplication of effort in the completion of the project by the Project Team.
- 7.3 We have therefore made no specific recommendations on this aspect of the work programme for the in-depth scrutiny project.

## **8. COUNCILLOR CASEWORK & SUPPORT**

### **(a) Casework Management**

- 8.1 At the meeting of the Project Team in March 2022, we received a presentation from the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) with regard to current and future member casework management arrangements.
- 8.2 Dealing with enquiries from local residents is a key part of a councillor's democratic role and a significant large part of Members' time is spent responding to enquiries from the public. We considered that being able to deal with residents and understand the issues and concerns they faced, whilst being equipped with the skills, confidence and ability to take action in response to their queries, was an important and valued role of councillors. The issues that local people raise with councillors are often referred to as 'casework' and usually deal with the resolution of an individual problem.
- 8.3 The Project Team considered examples of the types of contact with councillors that could be regarded as 'casework', which can arise from a variety of sources:
- Letters, phone calls, email and social media.
  - Councillor surgeries, advice sessions and doorstep calls.
  - Campaigning and other political activity
- 8.4 Dealing with casework requires councillors to develop and maintain their own arrangements for managing information and tracking progress. The amount of casework that a councillor receives depends on the nature of the area they represent, although research suggests that the higher the level of deprivation in an area, the more casework there is likely to be. We consider that the Council currently only provides very limited casework support facilities for councillors and that there is room for improvement in current arrangements for handling casework.
- 8.5 We believe that it is important to be able to define what 'casework' means to the Council, but that this could include any query made to a councillor or any query that a councillor might have but might also include helping people to help themselves to avoid members taking on too much personal responsibility in seeking to resolve matters for constituents. We received a copy of guidance published by the Local Government Association in 2017 in relation to effective councillors and the handling of casework, which we found to be helpful.
- 8.6 We received initial details of two commercial casework management systems that were currently in use by other local authorities. Members considered that it was important to

ensure that, whilst any adopted casework management system enabled councillors to securely track and manage constituent casework efficiently and effectively, it was essential that any such system was compatible with the Council's existing ICT infrastructure and could integrate fully with other relevant systems in use across the authority. The Project Team was advised of the general findings of discussions in respect of casework management systems that Councillor Cowdrey had undertaken with other councillors across the country and suggested that it would be beneficial for access to specific cases within any adopted system, to be able to be shared between ward members. Councillors also highlighted the need for any adopted casework management system to be fully compliant with data protection legislation.

- 8.7 In terms of the resource implications of the procurement and implementation of a casework management system for councillors, the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) indicated that it would be important to consider whether the development of an appropriate facility could be managed in-house or alongside existing member support arrangements and that it would also be necessary to identify capacity within the ICT Section to implement any adopted system, as well as efficiencies that could be generated through the adoption of a casework management system and its delivery as part of the ongoing review of existing business support arrangements across the Council.
- 8.8 We strongly believe that the implementation of a casework management system would significantly improve the effectiveness of councillors through the provision of a more efficient service to residents and would make casework easier to deal with for both councillors and officers. The introduction of such a system would also supplement the Council's ability to identify patterns and themes around issues of service provision or performance.
- 8.9 If an appropriate casework management system is introduced, we consider that it will be necessary to encourage all councillors to fully utilise the facility. Additional training may be required for members and for those officers across the Council who will be required to support the roll-out and operation of the system. The introduction of a casework management system arising from the recommendations of the Project Team will, if endorsed by the scrutiny committees and agreed by the Cabinet, lead to significant investment and commitment to strengthening the quality of service and experience for councillors. The success of this work will be partly dependent upon all councillors using the proposed casework management arrangements.
- 8.10 We suggest that it might be appropriate for any adopted system to be rolled-out on a phased basis. We also consider that it is important that a range of accessible channels are always made available to facilitate contact with councillors, including support for members of the public and constituents that might not be able to utilise electronic or web-based methods of contact.
- 8.11 The Project Team considered that it would be beneficial to councillors in terms of supporting them in the effective handling of constituency casework, for a regular survey (or similar) exercise to be undertaken to assess current casework levels and the type and nature of resident queries received by councillors. We also supported a suggestion that a comprehensive 'library' of frequently asked questions (FAQs) could be developed for councillors, as a means of supporting members to deal with common types of issue raised by the public and constituents, and that such facility could also provide for the development of 'model' responses/answers to frequently raised issues.
- 8.12 The Project Team considers that the Council should therefore pursue the introduction of an appropriate web-based system to facilitate effective casework management arrangements, through the development of a fully costed business case for the adoption of the eCasework casework management system.

## **(b) Member Support Arrangements**

- 8.13 The Project Team also reviewed options presented by the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) for the future provision of member support arrangements, arising from opportunities and efficiencies identified by the corporate review of business support arrangements.
- 8.14 We believe that the Council should seek to improve the effectiveness of councillors through the development of enhanced member support arrangements to provide administrative assistance to all councillors to enable them to be effective within their roles. We consider that the establishment of any new resource for councillors should provide support for all members of the Council, alongside specific support services for the Leader and Cabinet, across areas such as casework activity, learning and development, communications and service signposting etc.
- 8.15 The Project Team expressed support for an option presented by the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) for the establishment of a member support team utilising resources identified by the review of business support arrangements, based on a Member Support Office structure. In supporting this approach, we requested that any such member support team should be located in the existing members area of the Civic Suite once established and have a 'visible' on-site presence at all times, whilst also accepting the ongoing principle of remote working arrangements. The Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) advised that appropriate training would need to be provided for officers of the member support team in order that it could function effectively in support of all councillors.
- 8.16 We also considered whether the establishment of a new support resource for councillors should include any form of political assistant service. Whilst we recognise the potential value of political assistants to undertake research activities for the main political groups within a local authority and allow the separation of professional officer and political roles to enable the provision of advice to councillors that officers are prevented from providing as a result of political restriction, we do not consider that this approach would be appropriate or necessary for the Council at the current time.
- 8.17 We consider that the introduction of a dedicated member support team would also help to improve the effectiveness of councillors and that the Council should pursue the introduction of the proposed member support arrangements for all members of the Council.

## **9. CROSS-SERVICE, EXTERNAL PARTNERS AND OUTSOURCED SERVICES**

- 9.1 At our meeting in March 2022, we also considered the aspect of the work programme theme around 'Cross Service, External Partners and Outsourced Services'.
- 9.2 We were keen to ensure that appropriate arrangements were in place to ensure that enquiries received from local residents that concerned services provided by partner organisations or other external agencies, are always passed on seamlessly rather than being referred back as not the responsibility of the Council.
- 9.3 The Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) advised us that it was intended that the establishment of the dedicated member support resource supported by the Project Team as part of our consideration of the future provision of member support arrangements, would help to deliver the aspiration of the in-depth scrutiny project that queries concerning services provided by other organisations were effectively handled through a 'right first time' approach. The Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) indicated that it was equally important for officers of the Council to be aware

of how queries concerning services provided by external organisations should be handled and that appropriate training would therefore need to be provided around the establishment of the new member support resource to ensure that officers had ready access to appropriate information on service provision by the Council and other organisations.

- 9.4 Whilst we recognised that the establishment of the dedicated member support resource would help to ensure that queries concerning services provided by other organisations were dealt with on a 'right first time' approach, we consider that going forward, efforts should also be made to continue to improve customer engagement experiences through the integration of relevant systems with those of the Council and its service providers, as part of the procurement or replacement of relevant systems.
- 9.5 We considered that it was important that the Council was able to respond flexibly to queries that involved external organisations and that responses were coordinated with other organisations involved in a particular issue, where appropriate. We suggested that the proposed development of a library of frequently asked questions and model responses proposed as part of our discussions around the introduction of a casework management system for councillors, would also help to support members to deal with issues that involved services provided by external organisations.

## **10. ENABLING NON-ALIGNED COUNCILLORS**

- 10.1 The work programme for the in-depth scrutiny project made provision for the project to ensure that non-aligned councillors had the ability to be effective and to identify any barriers that restricted the ability of non-aligned councillors to represent residents effectively, through discussion with non-aligned councillors.
- 10.2 As a result of the delay caused to the progress of the in-depth scrutiny project as a result of the unfortunate local events of October 2021, it was not possible for us to complete this aspect of the work programme before the end of the municipal year. However, representation on the Project Team by a non-aligned councillor was maintained throughout the delivery of the in-depth scrutiny project and no specific issues in this regard were brought to the attention of the Project Team for consideration.
- 10.3 We are aware that the allocation of seats on the Council's committees etc. is undertaken in accordance with Sections 15 and 17 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, whereby the authority is required to allocate seats to 'political groups' and that non-aligned councillors are not therefore included in the calculation for the allocation of seats on committees.
- 10.4 Our recommendations later in this report in respect of councillor casework and member support, recognise the need for effective support services to be provided for all councillors.
- 10.5 The provision of support and assistance to all councillors applies equally to those members that are not aligned to a political (or other) group on the Council. We consider that the identification of barriers that restricted the ability of non-aligned councillors to represent residents effectively could therefore be raised as part of the separate ongoing review currently being undertaken of the Council's Constitution, to which all members have an opportunity to contribute.

## **11. OTHER ISSUES**

- 11.1 At the meeting of the Project Team in April 2022, we considered several matters that arose from previous consideration of aspects of the work programme for the joint in-depth scrutiny project:

**(a) Intranet**

- 11.2 The intranet is the private internal network used by the Council to store information and to help collaboration. We received a presentation from the Strategic Communications Manager and the Internal Communications Officer with regard to current plans for the development of the Council's new intranet, which went live in early May 2022.
- 11.3 The Project Team recognised that the previous intranet was not now fit for purpose, as it didn't serve multiple audiences in an intuitive way and, with particular relevance to the in-depth scrutiny project, did not have a dedicated section for the provision of information for councillors. We were advised that the current intranet facility could not be accessed 'on the move' and that the existing platform was old, unsupported by Microsoft, and had significant limitations. We had also received concerns from councillors that the internal telephone directory facilities within the current intranet were not fit for purpose.
- 11.4 We were advised that action to ensure that the contact telephone numbers and email addresses of all officers of the Council were available in the internal telephone directory had been addressed as part of the development of the new intranet, which would also act as a repository for the Council's policy documents in order to increase the availability of such policies to members.
- 11.5 The new intranet has been designed to fully support officers and councillors to carry out their roles effectively and incorporates a dedicated and exclusive area for councillors alongside an improved 'active directory' to enable councillors to search for contact details for officers and service areas, together with a range of quick links to enable councillors to find and access information easily. We have been advised that the new cloud-based intranet will be fully integrated with Microsoft 365, Microsoft Teams and other systems, so that officers and councillors will be able to access it on any device where they are logged in and 'on the move.'
- 11.6 We were advised that there were tangible benefits to be achieved from the new intranet, in that it aimed to be much more intuitive and simpler to navigate, particularly around contact details for individual officers and team structures and finding documents and links to specific information. We consider however, that it is important for the new intranet to have an effective search function, to enable the identification of relevant strategies and policies. In this respect, we consider that it is necessary for all strategies and policies to be able to be searched using tags appended to each individual document, and which also contains details of relevant publication/review dates and responsible officers.
- 11.7 The Project Team considers that it would be helpful for the dedicated councillor's area of the intranet to also reflect links to national policy information and contain frequently asked questions with regard to individual service areas. We have also suggested that the intranet should additionally include an expanded 'Councillors' section to provide details of Cabinet membership and portfolio responsibilities, appropriate links to ward profile data and access to the Pentana corporate performance management system.
- 11.8 The Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) has advised us that part of the rationale for the new intranet is that it will become a useful tool to help officers and councillors in delivering services effectively and we welcome the opportunity for councillors to work with officers to develop the new intranet further and to champion its use as a tool for councillors.
- 11.9 We welcome the plans for the replacement of the Council's intranet, including the provision of a dedicated area for councillors. We understand that the new intranet will continue to be developed and would encourage all councillors to use the intranet and to identify whether

the dedicated area for councillors covers everything that members need and whether the addition of further links to specific information should be considered.

**(b) 'Your Say Southend'**

- 11.10 We received a joint presentation from the Engagement and Participation Manager, the Community Capacity Advisor and the Intelligence Officer (Planning and Compliance), with regard to the 'Your Say Southend' engagement and consultation platform.
- 11.11 The 'Your Say Southend' platform was launched in November 2020 to provide residents with an opportunity to participate in engagement and consultation across Southend-on-Sea. The platform offers residents a way to provide feedback, share ideas and influence decisions that matter to them and to facilitate engagement with individuals that might otherwise be hard to reach. The platform is used to complement, but not replace, traditional face-to-face methods of engagement and consultation activity and is designed to support the outcomes of engagement and consultation based on the following objectives:
- Informing decisions, providing opportunities for the community to contribute to decision-making processes.
  - Building capacity, educating the community on a specific theme or issue to increase knowledge or change behaviours.
  - Strengthening relationships, building new relationships and/or improving relationships with the community.
- 11.12 The 'Your Say Southend' platform can be used to facilitate any form of local engagement, not just formal types of consultation exercise, through the use of tools to gather ideas, create forums and mapping and also helps the Council to establish and share good practice, use resources effectively, maximise the use of consultation findings and to co-ordinate effort and avoid duplication.
- 11.13 We have asked the Engagement and Participation Manager to explore the links between 'Your Say Southend', the Council's Petitions Scheme and the 'My Southend' platform, to improve the journey of local residents through the various portals. We consider that the petition scheme should be signposted within the 'Your Say Southend' platform.
- 11.14 The Project Team understands that, at the time of the development of 'Your Say Southend', it was not possible for the portal to be facilitated as part of an existing platform or via a joint procurement arrangement with the development of 'My Southend.' We have also asked the Engagement and Participation Manager to work with the Director of ICT to review this approach going forward when the contract for 'Your Say Southend' is next due for renewal, to enable consideration to be given to the integration of 'Your Say Southend' and 'My Southend' and the possible development of a joint gateway to these systems.
- 11.15 We have been advised that the sharing of results of consultation and engagement activity will also now be available on the Council's new intranet as well as through the 'Your Say Southend' platform. The Project Team additionally considered that it would be helpful for appropriate benchmarking information to be prepared around the effectiveness of 'Your Say Southend' and for a simple profile of registered users of the platform to be prepared, to support its continued development. We have also suggested that promotion of the opportunities for involvement presented by 'Your Say Southend' should be included within the information booklet produced for inclusion with the annual Council Tax bills.
- 11.16 The Project Team was pleased to be advised by the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) that the Local Government Information Unit had expressed interest in working with the Council to promote the success of the 'Your Say Southend' platform.

- 11.17 We welcome and support the continued development of the 'Your Say Southend' platform alongside traditional forms of engagement and consultation and would encourage all councillors to consider how best they can use the platform to support local engagement and consultation activity. Relevant officers have indicated that they would be able to provide a one-to-one demonstration of the uses of the platform to any councillor that would appreciate this.

## **12. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 12.1 We consider that the review was undertaken within the context of the Council's 2050 ambition and priorities and that, whilst allowing for the impact of the local circumstances that arose in October 2021, the proposed outcomes for the project have been achieved.
- 12.2 We have identified some 'quick wins' in terms of aspects of the work programme for the in-depth scrutiny project as set out in this report, alongside other substantive recommendations to improve the effectiveness of councillors. We therefore recommend as follows:

### **'My Southend'**

- (1) That the current plans for the replacement and improvement of the 'My Southend' interactive self-service portal for residents be welcomed.
- (2) That the Director of Digital and ICT and the Head of IT Delivery progress the holding of appropriate engagement and evidence gathering sessions for councillors to inform the development of the specification for the replacement of the 'My Southend' portal.
- (3) That the Director of Digital and ICT and the Head of IT Delivery investigate the possible rebranding of the 'My Southend' portal to complement appropriate opportunities for corporate rebranding as part of the award of city status to Southend-on-Sea.

### **Website**

- (4) That progress to date and current plans for the further development of the Council's website be welcomed.
- (5) That the Strategic Communications Manager investigate appropriate opportunities for the provision of user feedback as part of the updated website experience. To inform the further improvement of the website
- (6) That the Strategic Communications Manager consider whether the presentation received by the Project Team should be made to the wider cohort of councillors and, if appropriate, to newly elected members of the Council as part of the member induction process.

### **Resident Queries and Experience**

- (7) That the suite of the Council's policy documents be published on the website and/or intranet and that arrangements be made for specific policy documents to be provided to councillors on request.
- (8) That the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) investigate appropriate opportunities for the holding of a regular member survey to assess casework levels and the type and nature of resident queries received by councillors.



## **Councillor Queries**

- (9) That the current performance of the 'Councillor Queries' arrangements for members be noted and that the plans for the development of the portal as part of the proposed introduction of a casework management system for councillors, be supported.
- (10) That the Service Manager (Customer Services) consider options for the possible development of a 'template' form for enquiries submitted through the current 'Councillor Queries' portal, for use until a casework management system for councillors has been implemented.
- (11) That the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) progress the proposed improvements to the 'Councillor Queries' arrangements, that we have outlined in this report.
- (12) That the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) and the Service Manager (Customer Services) consider options for improved reporting arrangements of local incidents by councillors, over weekend and bank holiday periods and the inclusion of appropriate contact information on the proposed councillor's area of the new intranet.

## **Casework Management**

- (13) That options for the development of a comprehensive library of frequently asked questions and 'model' responses/answers to support members to deal with common types of issues, be investigated.
- (14) That the implantation of a casework management system for councillors be progressed and that the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) undertake the development of a fully costed business case for the adoption of the eCasework casework management system.
- (15) That the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) progress the areas of functionality for the implementation of a casework management system that we have outlined in this report, as part of the development of the business case for the eCasework casework management system
- (16) That the Director of ICT and Digital consider options for the possible in-house development of an appropriate casework management system and the integration of such in-house or externally procured system with the Council's ICT infrastructure and relevant systems already in use by the Council to support councillor casework.

## **Member Support Arrangements**

- (17) That the proposed establishment of a new support resource for all councillors and the suggested support offer based on a Member Support Office structure, be endorsed.
- (18) That the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) progress the development of a business case for the new support resource for councillors as part of the corporate review of business support arrangements.
- (19) That the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) include the preferences expressed by the Project Team for the location of the new support resource for councillors, within the development of the appropriate business case.

- (20) That the proposed new support resource for councillors should not include any form of political assistant service.

### **Cross Service, External Partners and Outsourced Services**

- (21) That the establishment of the proposed member support resource supported by the Project Team at Recommendation (17) above, be utilised to deliver the aspiration of the in-depth scrutiny project that enquiries concerning services provided by the Council and relevant external organisations are handled seamlessly.
- (22) That, wherever possible, customer engagement experiences be improved through the integration of relevant systems with those of the Council and its service providers, as part of the procurement or replacement of relevant systems.

### **Enabling Non-Aligned Councillors**

- (23) That the identification of barriers that restrict the ability of non-aligned councillors to represent residents effectively, be considered as part of the review currently being undertaken of the Council's Constitution.

### **Intranet**

- (24) That progress to date and current plans for continued development of the new intranet, including provision for the incorporation of a dedicated area for councillors, be welcomed.
- (25) That the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) progress the proposed additional areas of functionality for the new intranet, including matters for inclusion within the dedicated area for councillors, that we have outlined in this report.
- (26) That all councillors be requested to consider whether the dedicated councillor area of the new intranet covers everything that members need and whether the addition of further links or access to specific documents should be implemented.

### **'Your Say Southend'**

- (27) That progress to date and current plans for the continued development of the 'Your Say Southend' engagement and consultation platform, be supported.
- (28) That the Interim Executive Director (Strategy, Change and Governance) progress the proposed additional areas of functionality for the platform, that we have outlined in this report.
- (29) That all councillors be encouraged to promote the use of 'Your Say Southend' as an opportunity for residents to participate in ongoing engagement and consultation activity.

12.3 Although the scope of the in-depth scrutiny project provided an opportunity for it to feed into the review of the Constitution where relevant, we have made no specific recommendations on constitutional matters as part of our work.

12.4 We have similarly made no recommendations around councillor development, which is currently being considered as part of the leadership programme, although some of the recommendations that we have made will have implications for ongoing training and

development requirements for councillors, particularly in terms of induction arrangements for new members.