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5th December 2023

Dear Commissioners,

I am writing to you with the second of my three-month updates regarding Woking Borough Council's progress against the Government Directions (announced on 25 May 2023), to ensure that the Council can comply with its best value duty under Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1999.

My update consists of the following documents:

- My position statement to Council, which provides an overview of progress since August and key next steps.
- A detailed progress report regarding the Improvement and Recovery Plan (IRP), which includes specific updates against each of the Government's Directions.

The full papers can be found [online via this link](#).

Feedback from Council

The progress report was considered by Council at a meeting on 30 November 2023. The Council approved the progress reported on within the report.

Additional update

As we have progressed actions to deliver our IRP, we have found that some issues are more significant, urgent, or complex than we had originally identified. An example of this can be found within Housing. We knew that there was significant improvement work to do in this service.

Officers had self-referred to the Regulator for Social Housing in July 2023, as we knew we that we needed to make improvement to housing in order to meet the required standards, to ensure that our housing stock is fire safety compliant. This may result in the Council being issued a Housing Regulatory Notice. We had already initiated work to address these issues but will now review this programme. This presents us with a challenge, given the significant programme of change that is happening at the Council and strain this is placing on our limited resources.

To ensure that we give housing improvement the strategic focus that it needs, we are proposing to add housing improvement as a theme within the IRP. This programme of work will address all aspects of housing management and incorporate the work needed to create a 30-year HRA business plan. We discussed this addition to the IRP at the Improvement and Recovery Board (IRB) on 4 December and it will now go to the Executive on 14 December for formal approval. We have also recruited a Programme Manager to drive and co-ordinate this work.

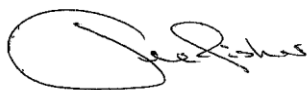
In my update report, I highlighted issues around finance capacity and the impact this was having on delivery of the Finance Recovery Theme and the wider IRP. These resource restraints have become even more pronounced since the publication of my progress report to Council and now pose a real risk to the preparation of the Council's budget. We are addressing these risks as a priority and Eugene Walker (Director of Finance) is working closely with Carol Culley (Finance Commissioner) to identify additional staffing resources as quickly as possible.

We are, however, continuing to make significant progress on the development of detailed options appraisals to support budget decisions in February. I am confident that these options appraisals will enable Members to take informed and robust decisions, providing the good governance that has historically sometimes been missing at the Council. However, in some instances, these detailed options appraisals are highlighting that it may not be possible to make the level of savings originally identified in the budget for certain services. This means we have further work to do to in order to reach our savings targets and some difficult decisions to work through in the coming weeks.

We experienced a significant challenge on Thursday 23 November when we received a structural appraisal report regarding the condition of the Eastgate building. Following an appraisal of this information by our Building Control and Environmental Health officers, we quickly issued an Emergency Prohibition Order and supported Southern Housing to move residents out of the property and into temporary accommodation. My team handled this emergency situation quickly and professionally; however, it has highlighted the impact that external influences can have on the delivery of our improvement plan, with a number of senior officers needing to temporarily re-focus their attention on handling this emergency situation. We will review our emergency contingency planning arrangements in the light of this experience.

Alongside outlining these challenges, I also want to recognise where progress is being made. On 22 November, we launched Phase Two of our staff consultation. It has been a huge undertaking to get to this stage in a timeframe that will enable us to realise these staff savings as part of the 2024/2025 budget, whilst also ensuring that the process is legal, fair, and transparent. I want to again recognise the professionalism of staff at the Council throughout this process, in both managing the restructure and continuing to deliver effective services to residents during this challenging time. I have also appreciated your support in recognising the pressure that officers are under and continuing to work with us collaboratively.

Kind Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julie Fisher', written in a cursive style.

Julie Fisher
Chief Executive, Woking Borough Council

For further information please contact Louise Usher on 01483 743051 (Direct Line) or Email louise.usher@woking.gov.uk