

## **CONSULTANT USE AT THE COUNCIL**

### **Item OS 24/34 referred from Overview and Scrutiny Committee of 11 September 2024**

The report of the Chief Executive presented for Members' consideration the outcome of a review undertaken on the Council's use of consultants, with particular focus placed on the use of external expertise.

A summary of consultant use in Council services, where external expertise had been provided over the previous four financial years, was set out in Annex 2, where commendable practices and areas for further consideration by Members were highlighted. It was noted that some of the external support provided had resulted in cost savings and efficient project delivery, which would not have been possible without external experts.

During discussion, Members raised a number of questions over the use of consultants for certain projects, such as production of technical design for heat pump schemes at Larkfield Leisure Centre and Tonbridge Pool, reclaim of overpaid VAT in Leisure, treasury advice services, business support programme funded by UK Shared Prosperity Fund, waste consulting services, the development of a Borough Green Gardens brief and the project design and construction management of the eco café at Leybourne Lakes Country Park. Where possible responses were provided by Officer with further background information and positive outcomes achieved from these projects, whereas for questions that were unable to be responded to during the meeting, Members were advised to send in their questions for specific projects so that a follow up report could be prepared and presented to a future meeting of the Committee.

While recognising the difficulty and challenge in recruiting and retaining qualified and skilful staff in a number of service areas and supporting specialist resource sharing options to be explored with neighbouring local authorities, Members expressed their desire for a higher level of oversight on procurement process and post implementation value for money evaluation, and therefore proposed a threshold to be set on consultancy spend in order that any project in excess of a certain limit could be reported to the relevant committee or scrutiny select committee for consideration and approval. This proposal was supported by the Committee.

Having due regard to the financial and value for money considerations and the legal implications, Members acknowledged the benefits of engaging external expertise for certain project based works and sought further engagement in overseeing the Council's approach to future use of external experts while exploring collaboration opportunities with other local authorities and minimising the need for external consultancy going forward.

**RECOMMENDED\*:** That

- (1) the information provided in the summary of consultancy spend at Annex 2, be noted;

- (2) further detail about consultancy spend on specific projects be provided to a future meeting of the Committee, with questions to be provided in writing to Officers to enable responses to be prepared;
- (3) the Council be requested to continue to closely manage future use of external experts and an ongoing review of consultant use at the Council be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis;
- (4) officers be requested to continue to look for opportunities to collaborate with other councils;
- (5) the Council maintain its effectiveness at retaining specialist talent, to reduce the need for external experts going forward; and
- (6) any proposed consultancy spend in excess of £40,000 be reported to the relevant committee or scrutiny select committee for consideration and approval.

**\*Recommended to Cabinet**