Overview and Scrutiny Committee

25 June 2026

Part 1 - Public

Matters for Information

Cabinet Member	Cllr Martin Coffin, Deputy Executive Leader; and Finance, Waste and Technical Services
Responsible Officer	Damian Roberts, Chief Executive
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External Specialist Support 2025/26

1 Summary and Purpose of Report

1.1 To provide information on the spend and use of external expertise by the Council during 2025/26. As a small authority, the Council must draw on external specialist support where appropriate, enabling access to expertise on demand while avoiding the cost of permanent in-house provision.

1.2 This report fulfils the recommendation agreed at Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 11th September 2024 that the Council continue to closely manage future use of external expertise, with a review reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis.

2 Corporate Strategy Priority Area

2.1 Efficient services for all our residents, maintaining an effective council.

2.2 Taking steps to monitor the use and spend on external experts, along with consideration of specialised skills, retaining talent and building in-house capacity contributes to ensuring value for public money and delivering excellent, efficient services for the borough.

2.3 Members are asked to consider the contents of this report and note the information provided in the summary of spend for 2025/26 at Annex 1 and Annex 2.

2.4 Information on the use of external specialist support and associated spend will continue to be reported to this Committee annually.

3 Introduction and Background

3.1 This is the third report taken to this Committee looking at the cost of external expertise across the council. This follows agreement in 2024 that this spend be considered on an annual basis.

3.2 The following was agreed in 2024: "*consultancy work which is providing knowledge, techniques and assets to improve performance that is outside of the Council's "business as usual". This would include the use of external third parties, providing expertise that is typically not available internally. Focusing on this aspect, would rule out the use of contractors who fill vacancies and are used for the day-to-day operational resources to maintain departmental function."*

3.3 This report and summary information provided in Annex 1 and Annex 2 covers the activity during the last financial year, 2025/26. Annex 1 looks specifically at operational support, providing specialist advice. Annex 2 is project based, highlighting activity that is linked to one off project delivery, where the Council would be unable to progress an initiative without this support.

4 Overview of 2025/26 spend

4.1 Much of the spend is utilising external funding for time limited projects, without which, the projects would not be feasible, and any external funding would potentially be lost.

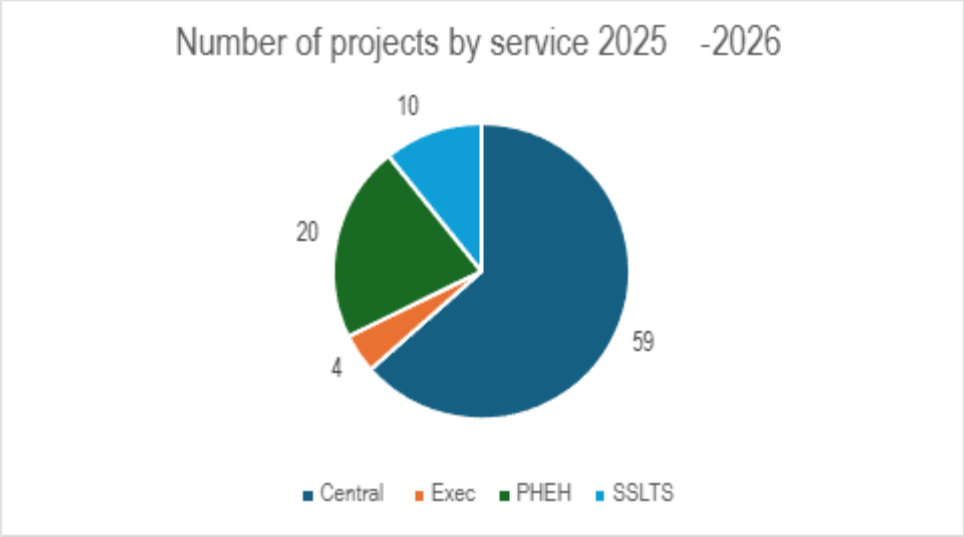
4.2 Where specialists have been necessary, they provide expertise that is not available in house. In these cases, recruitment of specialist staff with the relevant knowledge, is not financially viable as they would be under occupied for most of the year, due to the nature of the work. For example, the estimated annual salary for a senior/principal architect employed by a district council would typically have a salary range of £55,000 - £70,000+, giving total employer costs of £75,000 - £100,000+ per year. Similarly, a principal or Lead Ecologist employed by a district council would give total employer costs of £80,000 - £90,000 per year (figures are AI-generated estimates based on typical UK local government salary and employment cost data, for indicative purposes only).

4.3 The Council uses the procurement partnership in place with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council to help secure value for money, test the market and procurement options, and ensure that the most appropriate approach is taken in each case.

4.4 Some specialist legal advice is procured through a direct approach, reflecting the exemption for Legal services within the procurement procedure rules and the need to secure rapid expert support where required. This also applies in areas where the council does not hold the necessary specialist capacity in house, for example Trowers & Hamlins LLP are used for housing law, where the council does not employ a dedicated housing solicitor.

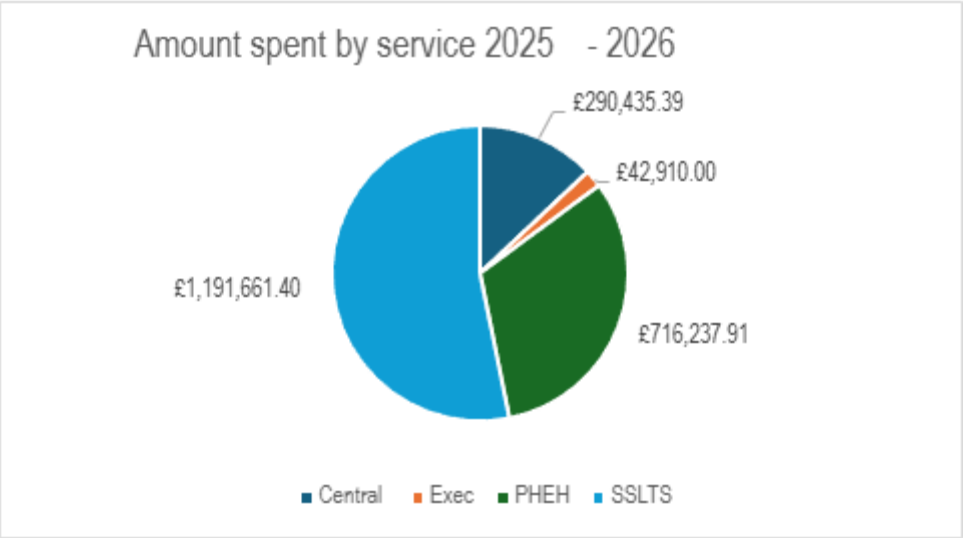
4.5 In 2024/25 the council spent £986,732. During 2025/26 the council spent £234,540.32 on specialist advice (as highlighted in Annex 1) and £2,006,704.38 for one off project delivery (Annex 2). However, the yearly variation is not comparable due to the nature of significant one-off projects in 2025/26. For example, Alliance Leisure Ltd accounted for £1,167,674.40 of the total spend, reflecting the scale and specialist expertise required to develop detailed plans and costings for the proposed replacement Angel Centre. This has included the commissioning of architects, designers, quantity surveyors and marketing support to progress the proposal, without which the project could not be delivered.

4.6 A breakdown of the use of external spend by number of projects for each service is shown in the following pie chart:

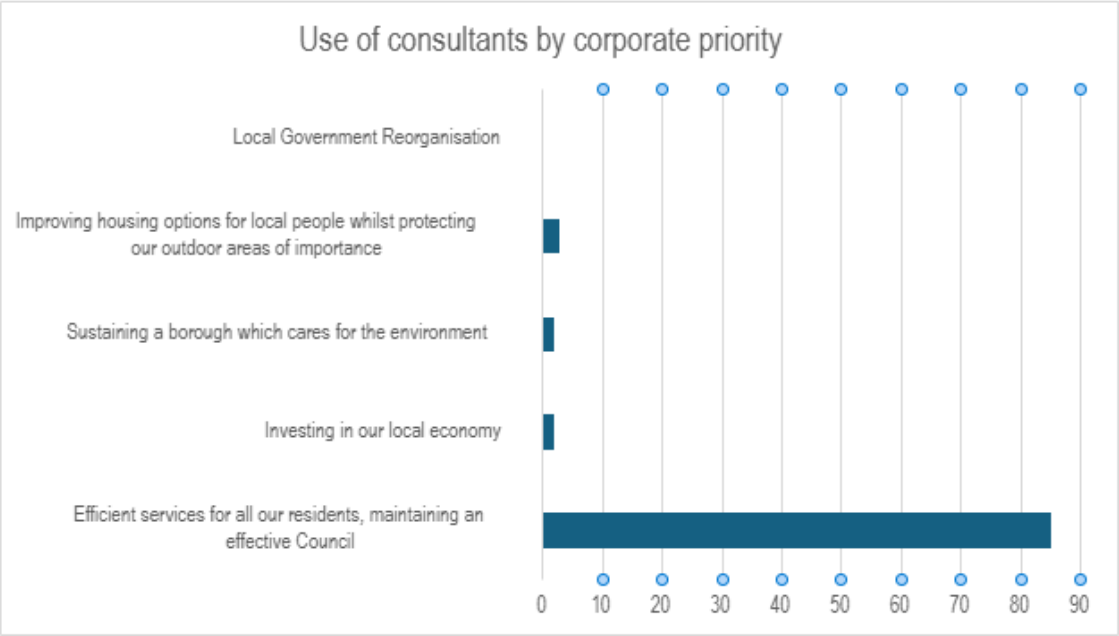


4.7 Services that made the greatest use of external expertise were Central Services which included technical advice for building/renovation projects, legal advice for court matters and planning appeals along with IT related projects where specialists were necessary. In Planning Housing and Environmental Health, services were required to support the development of the Local Plan and for Street Scene Leisure and Technical Services (SSLTS), expertise was required to develop plans in relation to the replacement Angel Centre.

4.8 When looking at total spend by each service, SSLTS has the highest overall, as seen in the chart below.



4.9 The breakdown of spend in relation to corporate priorities is shown below, with most use in support of "Efficient services for all our residents"



5 Other Options

5.1 There are no other options as Members requested the annual report on the costs of external expertise.

6 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

6.1 Detailed information regarding the costs is attached at Annex 1 and Annex 2. In terms of spending, over half of all projects (58%) spent £5,000 or less in 2025/26. For those services that have incurred higher spend, these are mostly in relation to significant one-off projects that require specialist skills or projects relating to the emerging Local Plan.

6.2 Using external experts offers time efficient and practical knowledge that is not available internally for a time limited piece of work. It would not be financially viable for a small borough council to employ these specialists directly. This approach ensures value for money and enables significant key projects to be delivered.

7 Risk Assessment

7.1 The risks associated with not using external expertise have been highlighted against each project in Annex 1 and Annex 2.

8 Legal Implications

8.1 Procurement is undertaken in accordance with financial regulations and council procurement frameworks. The use of a Waiver is undertaken in certain circumstances.

9 Consultation and Communications

9.1 There are no further communications plans for this report.

10 Implementation

10.1 External spend will continue to be monitored, with 2026/27 expenditure collated and reported to this Committee during the next financial year.

11 Cross Cutting Issues

11.1 Climate Change and Biodiversity

11.1.1 Limited or low impact on emissions and environment.

11.1.2 Climate change advice has not been sought in the preparation of the options and recommendations in this report.

11.2 Equalities and Diversity

11.2.1 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

11.3 Other If Relevant

- Procurement
- Business Continuity / Resilience

Background Papers	None

Annexes	Annex 1 – Operational support providing specialist advice 2025/26 Annex 2 – Activity linked to one-off project delivery 2025/26