

Runnymede Borough Council

Service Area Plan 25/26

Law & Governance

FINAL COMMITTEE APPROVED

Approvals

Approved by CLT: 04/12/24

Approved by Corporate Management Cttee: 20/03/2025



Service Area Plan for Financial Year 2025/26

Service Area: Law & Governance

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Version: FINAL

The priority and focus for service areas for 2025/26 must be demonstration of ongoing continuous improvement, delivery of savings or income generation opportunities and realisation of benefits to align with the MTFS and address the Council's budget gap. This is alongside delivery of core activity.

Initiatives that are agreed to come forward from the Savings and Efficiency programme and the rolling programme of Service Reviews will be prioritised in relevant service area plans and progress monitored during the year.

Mission statement

The Business Unit comprises seven teams which undertake a diverse range of functions. Some of the teams discharge a statutory function such as Electoral Services, Local Land Charges and Data Protection. Some support the overall work of the Council such as Democratic Services, Legal Services, Office Services, and Information Governance. The Office Services team provides a complete suite of administrative support.

There are situations when a team will carry out dual functions such as supporting the overall work of the Council and discharging a statutory function e.g. Democratic Services, which in addition to the provision of support for the democratic process also deals with matters such as licensing of charitable collections and street closure orders.

The various teams contribute to the delivery of the Corporate Business Plan and five strategies that underpin it in a number of ways. Democratic Services facilitate decision making by the Council, which allows for the delivery of the five strategies. Legal Services provide high quality legal advice to ensure that the Council complies with its various legal obligations and discharges its regulatory functions for the benefit of the inhabitants of the Borough.

The Electoral Services Team supports the exercise of the democratic process by enabling people to register to vote and by organising various elections. They will be delivering changes introduced by the Elections Act 2022 over the next twelve months. These changes will create greater confidence in the integrity of the electoral process.

The Local Land Charges Team deal with providing information in response to Local Land Charges searches, which are part of the suite of information required by people when purchasing property.

The Council collects a vast range of personal data in order to deliver the various services it provides to its residents and businesses. The Information Governance Team and Data Protection Officer provide extensive advice and assistance to departments to ensure that they comply with the various legal obligations which exist in respect of Data Protection.

There are a number of challenges which the various teams in the Business Unit will face over the next twelve months. As has already been highlighted the Electoral Services Team will have to implement the various changes which have been introduced by the Elections Act 2022. They will also have to deliver elections in May 2025 for Surrey County Council.

The Democratic Services Team will have to deal with encouraging Members to move to paperless documentation for meetings. This is seen as an important initiative by Members and is viewed as addressing an element of the Green agenda the Council has adopted.

The Legal Services Team will face the challenge of providing legal advice in an environment where the recruitment of staff is proving difficult. This is not a problem which is unique to the Council or Legal Services.

There is a greater awareness amongst the public of the issue of Data Protection. Personal data has a value and valid concerns exist when any organisation collects personal data. Due to the types of services the Council provides it has to collect and use personal data. The Information Governance Team and the Data Protection Officer provide advice to the Council to ensure it meets its legal obligations and thereby provides reassurance to the public that their personal data is safe in the hands of the Council.

Service Information

Service Area: Law & Governance

Service Area 1:	Electoral Services
Service Area 2:	Legal Services
Service Area 3:	Democratic Services
Service Area 4:	Office Services
Service Area 5:	Information Governance
Service Area 6:	Data Protection
Service Area 7:	Local Land Charges

Description of Service (1) Electoral Services

Main Purpose: Responsible for overseeing the infrastructure of the electoral process, including electoral registration and conduct of elections. The team discharges the Council's legal obligation to provide support to the Chief Executive in his capacity as Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer, which are positions he is appointed to by the Council and carry with them personal responsibility for those functions. The team administers on an annual basis the compilation of the register of electors and will organise the conduct of a wide range of elections on a regular basis. They also assist with reviewing and implementing local and parliamentary boundary changes. A further function of the team is conducting the periodic review of polling places and polling stations. In recent years, the team has dealt with the challenges presented by the introduction of Individual Elector Registration (IER). The team has three staff, supplemented by casual staff at critical times such as annual canvass and elections.

Process annual canvass of Electors which involves reviewing over 63,000 voters, organising Borough elections for fourteen wards and County Council elections for the six Electoral Divisions situated in the borough and assisting in elections for the Police and Crime Commissioner and General Elections for the Runnymede & Weybridge constituency taking on approximately a further 16,500 electors from Elmbridge Borough Council. Postal vote refresh exercise dealing with approximately 500 voters.

Description of Service (2) Legal Services

Main Purpose: Performs the various functions of advising the Council and its Committees: - providing legal advice across the Council remit, advice on governance matters and undertaking legal casework for various Business Units. The team carries out the full range of activities that is expected of an in-house legal function, ranging from the drafting of contracts, the conduct of civil and criminal litigation, the sale and purchase of land and Council properties, regeneration and managing a commercial property portfolio, advising on housing matters, regulatory and licensing functions, employment, and planning matters. Members of the team attend meetings of the various committees and working groups of the Council to provide legal and procedural advice. The team also provides advice to the Council regarding its statutory obligations under equalities legislation. The team has eight staff.

Deal with a variety of complex legal matters, processing on average 400 new instructions (volume varies from year to year) which involve attending Court (from Magistrates', County and Crown Court level up to the High Court and Court of Appeal). Attending and advising 110 Council meetings supporting colleagues in Democratic Services.

Description of Service (3) Democratic Services

Main Purpose: Responsible for the provision of an efficient committee administration service to the Council, its committees, Member Working Parties, the provision of support to Councillors and supporting effective and lawful decision making.

The team also deals with miscellaneous administrative tasks such as some aspects of licensing, appointments to external bodies, some grant aid, some road closure/car parking orders, street trading consents, review of Constitution and maintenance of committee webpages. The team also prepares the Complaints/Compliments reports for Councillors and Officers. A further function of the team is to co-ordinate the Council's response to investigations by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

The team provides support to individual Councillors by acting as a source of information and advice, undertaking research, and maintaining the records of Member interests and service records. The team oversees the induction of newly elected members and providing support to the Independent Remuneration Panel when it undertakes its periodic reviews of Member allowances. The team's principal responsibility is to ensure that all the necessary legal and constitutional requirements are complied with to guarantee that the various meetings of the Council are properly convened, and decisions are made lawfully. The team also provides senior support during the various elections organised by the Council. The team has five staff.

Produce Agendas for approximately 110 meetings annually convened by the Council and produces the Minutes of those meetings. Provides support to all forty-one members of the Council. The team deals with 20 road closure orders per annum. Each year 40 applications for charitable collections are also processed. Each year 20 – 30 grant aid applications are processed, and it administers approximately 75 appointments to outside bodies.

Description of Service (4) Office Services

Main Purpose: A small team that provides support to the Business Centre through the provision of specialist documentation production, records management, some financial management, general administrative duties, and support. During election periods the team also assists its colleagues in the Electoral Services Team. The team has two staff.

Manages approximately 4000 paper files and 1000 deeds, agreements, contracts, departmental and corporate records. Various document production e.g. contracts, leases, and documents for court cases. Producing Committee agendas and minutes and web related material in respect of the democratic process. Provides financial services to the department, and occasionally to other departments. In addition, supporting colleagues around the organisation with Land Registry searches, investigation for HMO's etc.

Description of Service (5) Information Governance

Main Purpose: A small team that provides advice to the Council and staff in relation to Information Governance matters. The team will also undertake a review of the Council's existing Information Governance Strategy and review the way in which the Council manages its diverse information databases (to ensure all new compliance measures are demonstrated).

The function also deals with Freedom of Information requests received by the Council. In respect of Freedom of Information requests the officer concerned acts as a central point of contact for such requests, disseminates requests to colleagues for completion, co-ordinates responses to requests that span a number of service areas and provides advice and assistance to colleagues in respect of dealing with Freedom of Information requests. There is one full time member of staff discharging the function.

The function deals with over 500 - 600 Freedom of Information requests per annum.

Description of Service (6) Data Protection

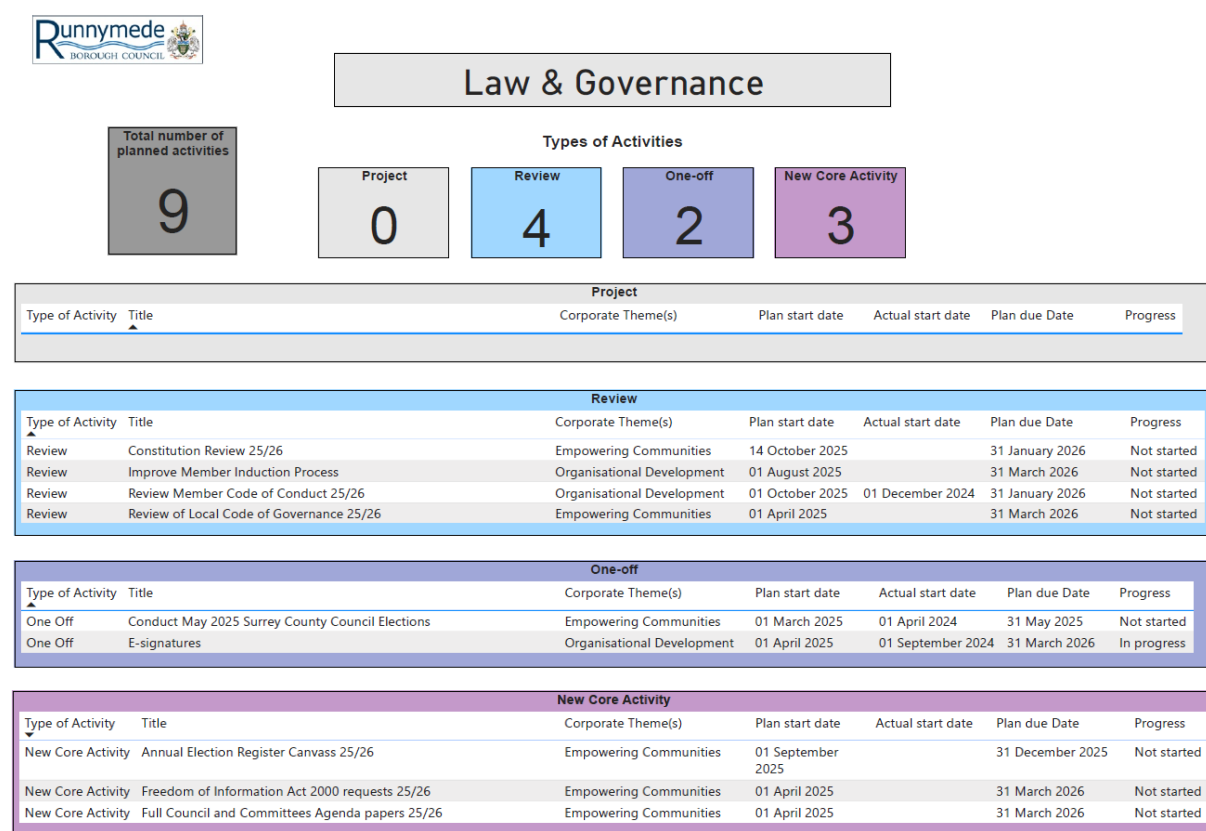
Main Purpose: The Data Protection Officer (DPO) has to ensure that the data protection rules are respected in cooperation with the data protection authority (for the Council this is the Information Commissioners' Office (ICO)). In the Council the DPO must ensure that controllers and data subjects are informed about their data protection rights, obligations and responsibilities and raise awareness about them. Give advice and recommendations to the Council about the interpretation or application of the data protection rules. Ensure data protection compliance within the Council and help the Council to be accountable in this

respect. Handle queries or complaints. Cooperate with the ICO (responding to requests about investigations, complaint handling, inspections conducted by the ICO). Draw the Council's attention to any failure to comply with the applicable data protection rules. There is one part- time member of staff discharging the function.

Description of Service (7) Local Land Charges

Main Purpose: A small team which discharges the Council's statutory function to process and respond to searches of the Local Land Charges Register maintained by the Council. The team generate income for the Council and interacts with a number of other departments of the Council to ensure that the Local Land Charges Register is kept up to date. The team is highly reliant on the use of modern technology to ensure that information is accurate. The team has three staff (two part-time).

The Team holds and maintains the Register of Local Land Charges processing approximately 1,100 Local Land Charges searches and 500 Register data amendments per annum.



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