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SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 24 JUNE 2014

(19.15 - 20.45)

PRESENT Councillors Councillor Russell Makin (in the Chair),
Councillor Stan Anderson, Councillor Ross Garrod,
Councillor Janice Howard, Councillor John Sargeant and
Councillor Stephen Crowe

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Judy Saunders, Cabinet Member for Parking and
Environmental Cleanliness, Chris Lee, Director of Environment
and Regeneration, Simon Williams, Director of Community and
Housing, Rebecca Redman, Scrutiny Officer

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Agenda Item 1)

None.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies were received from Councillor David Dean, Councillor Abigail Jones, Councillor Imran Uddin and Councillor Nick Draper.

3 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 26 MARCH 2014 (Agenda Item 3)

Panel agreed the Minutes as a true record of the meeting.

4 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES (Agenda Item 4)

None.

5 DEPARTMENTAL PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT 4 YEARS (Agenda Item 5)

The Panel received a presentation from Simon Williams on the work of his department, Community and Housing, in relation to the remit of this Panel. The presentation covered the following service areas (including purpose, customers and Key Performance Indicators):

- Housing Needs and Strategy;
- Library and Heritage Service; and
- Merton Adult Education

Simon Williams explained that Merton was no longer a stock owning authority. Merton residents often have to go to the private rented sector as they do not meet housing needs criteria. This can have a negative impact on those who have housing needs due to inflated rental prices. Other issues concern disrepair in both the private and social sector where landlords and housing associations are not ensuring properties are up to standard.

The council is working with Circle Merton Priory Homes on their regeneration programme to ensure improvements to housing stock and proposals for new developments.

Councillor John Sargeant asked if there were any trends in the issues with housing supply and standard of properties. Simon Williams explained that the ability to meet housing need is getting more difficult. There is also an impact due to the impact of welfare reform and the changes to benefits received, particularly housing benefit.

Councillor Stan Anderson asked what the council was able to do to address these issues. Simon Williams explained that, with regard to houses in multiple occupation, the council has powers to regulate and ensure that properties are not going into disrepair. The council push for the quality standard for private rented housing but need to consider what is the best use of resources in how they tackle this. In some cases, resources are best spent on addressing housing need.

Councillor Stan Anderson asked what the council was able to do about empty homes. Simon Williams explained that there are incentives in place to bring unoccupied properties into use. Council tax benefits can often encourage owners of vacant properties to use them. There are some powers in place to address this but there are also links with the Environment and Regeneration Dept. with regard to regeneration in tackling this issue.

Chris Lee added that, if the property remains empty, then there are CPO powers to take the property back but that these are not often exercised.

Councillor Ross Garrod asked about the availability of housing and how the council was helping first time buyers get on the ladder.

Simon Williams explained that helping people secure housing was based on those who are identified as being in most need. The council are looking at supply based on land/site availability to support people on to the property ladder. Increasing density is one option but this isn't always popular. This is a strategic issue and there are links between housing and the Future Merton team within Environment and Regeneration to look at opportunities for regeneration and development in the borough. The council is working in partnership to look at developing the provision of affordable housing. The council also needs to encourage people to look at all solutions, such as shared equity with registered providers.

Councillor Janice Howard raised the YCube at the YMCA in Wimbledon which costs £30,000 per unit and how this could be rolled out further. Chris Lee explained that there was a pilot scheme in Mitcham for this and, as they are guaranteed for 60 years, properties can be relocated. There is planning consent for Mitcham and the council would like to see this initiative rolled out further where possible. This is being looked at as part of the CMPH regeneration proposals and the council are helping them to look at sites that might be used to kick start this.

Councillor David Chung expressed concerns about residents and the need to consider location/transport etc. Chris Lee explained that all planning applications consider transport matters. The council is aiming to move towards more car free developments where there is less demand for that space.

Simon Williams outlined the work of the libraries service and the efficiencies that have been made, as well as the innovative work Merton has undertaken which has resulted in awards for best practice, particularly in the use of self service and the use of volunteers.

Simon Williams informed the Panel that consultation had been undertaken regarding the Donald Hope and West Barnes sites on possible developments and extension of the provision of the library service.

Simon Williams also told the Panel that e-books were being rolled out further and life time membership for children was also in place. The council also has a Heritage Strategy which looks at working with the sector to make sure there is a good offer in Merton.

The Panel heard that the adult education service is primarily funded through central government. Most courses aim to support people to gain entry level employment. There is some funding from the council but this is minimal and that it is unlikely that there is scope for further savings. The council are now looking at more commercial opportunities through the local private sector to increase funding and at possible delivery models.

Councillor Stephen Crowe asked what the council had established about how demand for MAE services may develop over the next few years. Simon Williams explained that the service is funded quite significantly by the Skills Funding Agency. This relates primarily to employability courses and community learning. This fund will decrease in the future. There may be an increase in demand for those who can't afford tuition fees for university which could create opportunities for extending provision.

Councillor Janice Howard asked what alternative teaching solutions had been explored, for example, e-based learning. Simon Williams explained that this was already in place with Moodle. A virtual learning environment has also been piloted and a proof of concept has been undertaken. MAE is now looking at the possibility of taking this forward.

The Panel heard from Chris Lee on the departmental priorities for Environment and Regeneration which were in the following service areas:

- Economic Growth;
- A clean, green, sustainable borough;
- Efficient and reliable services that meet customers needs;
- Sustainable transport and fair parking policies; and
- Leisure and culture

Chris Lee explained that the council was committed to growth in jobs and housing. The Future Merton team works in this area to drive growth and investment in the borough. Merton is densely populated but there are opportunities for housing growth. The council are working closely with Circle Merton Priory Homes to ensure their regeneration plans fit with the councils planning policies and development programme, consistent with the needs of the borough. The council is actively looking at how to generate more housing supply. Council land can also be used as a catalyst for development.

The Panel heard that cleaner streets and waste collection is a big indicator of resident satisfaction. The council is actively working to increase recycling, reduce waste to landfill and to reduce carbon emissions. An energy from waste facility is due to open in 2017/18 to generate power, heat and energy. The council is also part of the South West London Waste Partnership.

Councillor Ross Garrod commented that he was pleased to hear that the council were toughening up on people dropping litter. He also asked why recycling levels were stagnating and how we could encourage more recycling.

Chris Lee informed the Panel that this was a pan London issue and that recycling rates remain at 39%. One reason for this could be recycling fatigue amongst the public. The volume of waste to landfill is actually increasing which is costly to the council at £108 per tonne. There are higher rates of recycling when there are receptacles for all types of waste.

Chris Lee highlighted that for every percentage point that recycling is increased; the council saves c£700k. A Mega Recycle scheme which involves educating people about recycling is underway in Merton and is funded by the DCLG. For some residents the issue is all about getting into the mind set of thinking about recycling and about education and making it easy for residents to do so.

Councillor Stan Anderson asked if we pay the costs of going to court when those who litter and are fined do not pay. Chris Lee confirmed that this was the case, however, should the council be successful then the court costs are recovered along with the fine.

Councillor Tobin Byers enquired about shared services and the possibility of a shared planning service with other boroughs. Chris Lee explained that this is something the council is looking into but that there has not been a lot of interest from neighbouring boroughs to do so. However, Merton recently started talks with Wandsworth and a feasibility study will be undertaken to look at the options for working together.

Councillor John Sargeant commented that the borough has a very good reputation with regard to the planning service and that the Panel had recently expressed their concerns about any changes having a negative impact on the reputation of the council and the planning team.

Chris Lee informed the Panel that the council would spend £10 million over the next 4 years on tarmac and footways. In addition, several million would be spent on cycling infrastructure and traffic schemes. There is a focused ward/neighbourhood scheme underway mapping plans, against the investment that will be received for other schemes, on parking provision. Chris Lee added that the results of the research commissioned into 20mph zones would be available in autumn and this could be brought back to the Panel.

David Chung added that residents don't often see the good work that the council does with regard to waste collection and fly tipping and that it should share plans and proposals with the public to correct the perception people have of the issues in the borough. Chris Lee agreed that more could be done to publicise what the council do but often residents don't want to hear about it, they just want to be confident that it is being dealt with. Councillor Judy Saunders added that a useful campaign would be to publicise how much things cost the council to address, to raise awareness amongst residents.

Councillor John Sargeant asked what progress had been made on rolling out 20 minutes of free parking which was a commitment in the budget. Chris Lee confirmed that this is being rolled out, in a phased approach, at shopping parades across the borough. A report can be brought to the Panel to outline this programme.

Councillor Stephen Crowe enquired about Morden Park Pool and when this development will happen. Chris Lee confirmed that this is expected to be delivered and open by the end of 2017.

RESOLVED: Panel noted the report.

6 AGREEING THE WORK PROGRAMME 2014/15 (Agenda Item 6)

Councillor Russell Makin outlined the process that had been taken to arrive at the draft work programme and asked Panel for any additions/amendments.

Councillor John Sargeant noted that the September agenda was particularly full. Rebecca Redman proposed that the Panel consider holding a special meeting of the Panel to meet with CMPH to discuss the housing items listed.

RESOLVED:

- Panel agreed their 2014/15 work programme;
- Panel agreed to hold a special meeting in late September/early October to meet with CMPH