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OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION 25 NOVEMBER 2014

(19.15 - 21.30)

PRESENT: Councillor Peter Southgate (in the Chair),
Councillor Peter McCabe, Councillor Hamish Badenoch,
Councillor John Dehaney, Councillor Brenda Fraser,
Councillor Suzanne Grocott, Councillor Jeff Hanna,
Councillor Russell Makin, Councillor Oonagh Moulton and
Councillor Dennis Pearce.

Co-opted members Peter Connellan and Denis Popovs

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Mark Allison, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for
Finance
Councillor Stan Anderson

Caroline Holland (Director of Corporate Services), Julia Regan
(Head of Democracy Services), Chris Lee (Director of
Environment and Regeneration), Sophie Poole (Head of
Communications, CS), Yvette Stanley (Director, Children,
Schools & Families Department) and Simon Williams (Director,
Community & Housing Department)

1 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST - SEE NOTE OVERLEAF (Agenda Item 1)

None.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies were received from co-opted members Simon Bennett and Colin Powell.

3 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 7 OCTOBER 2014 (Agenda Item 3)

Agreed.

There were no matters arising.

4 MERTON'S WELFARE REFORM ACTION PLAN 2013/14 - PROGRESS UPDATE (Agenda Item 4)

Simon Williams, Director of Community and Housing, outlined the contents of the report. He emphasised that the council continues to work closely with partner organisations in delivering both the welfare reform action plan and the complementary financial resilience action plan to support residents facing financial pressures.

Simon Williams made a number of points in response to questions:

- housing options advisers visit families who, for whatever reason, face a gap between their income and expenditure due to the benefits cap or under occupancy rules. The aim is to help them to assess options to maintain their current tenancy. Options include finding work, letting the spare room, obtaining discretionary housing benefit if certain criteria are met, and finding suitable alternative accommodation.
- the criteria for accessing the social fund are set out on the council's website. The drop in applications and spend since this function was transferred to the council may be due to the experience that council officers have in assessing applications and cross checking against other sources of information to ensure that the applicant is in genuine need.
- The council is working closely with private sector landlords and is using a number of measures to try to prevent private sector tenants becoming homeless due to eviction and the ending of assured shorthold tenancy agreements.

Lyla Adwan-Kamara, CEO of Merton Centre for Independent Living (CIL) was invited to address the Commission. She explained that CIL is a user-led disabled people's organisation that provides specialist advice and advocacy services. She welcomed the work of Merton's Welfare Reform and Financial Resilience Group and said that CIL committed to working with the group to mitigate the impact on disabled people. She expressed some concern about the future of the independent living fund and was pleased to hear from Simon Williams that the Cabinet will be discussing this in January

Lyla Adwan-Kamara highlighted the impact that welfare reforms were having on disabled people and the difficulties that were being experienced in relation to the medical assessment process, in some instances leading to people becoming homeless as a result of the withdrawal of benefit. She suggested that the provision of face to face support before and during the assessment would be helpful as would advice to help GPs to address pertinent points in their letters in support of their patients.

In response, Simon Williams welcomed Lyla Adwan-Kamara's suggestions and said he would discuss these issues further with her and with health partners.

The Commission welcomed the work that is being undertaken by council officers and partner organisations to protect the most vulnerable people and RESOLVED:

- That the financial resilience action plan should be amended to include the role of the Credit Union in relation to objectives 3 and 4.
- That officers should consider the best way of adding a "traffic light" monitoring system to the action plans, including data to measure the use of food banks
- That the working group consider the best way to work with the voluntary sector to provide advocacy and other support for disabled people to help them with medical assessment interviews.

5 DOMESTIC VIOLENCE NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND WAY FORWARD (Agenda Item 5)

Yvette Stanley, Director of Children Schools and Families, gave a brief introduction to the report. Chris Lee, Director of Environment and Regeneration provided an update on the restructure proposals for Safer Merton (mentioned in paragraph 2.4). He said that although Safer Merton would remain within the Environment and Regeneration department, they would work closely with colleagues in Children Schools and Families on domestic violence issues so that specialist input could be provided as appropriate.

Members of the Commission welcomed the report and the proposals within it. Councillor Jeff Hanna, Chair of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel, said that the Panel had scrutinised a range of these issues in relation to children and young people and had highlighted the role of schools in reporting domestic violence and in supporting prevention via cultural change.

Yvette Stanley provided additional information in response to questions:

- the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy Group will bring together various partnerships that each have a different focus and will have governance arrangements to develop a clear outcome focused strategy and strong performance management arrangements
- the review by Cordis Bright was funded through the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC). They provided a robust and independent challenge and developed recommendations that have focussed the minds of all agencies involved
- the next steps are to update the Merton Safeguarding Children's Board and the Safer and Stronger Strategy Group

RESOLVED: that the Commission should receive an update on implementation progress in 6-9 months time.

6 MY MERTON DISTRIBUTION (Agenda Item 6)

In response to questions about the cost and distribution of My Merton, Sophie Poole, Head of Communications, said that the overall cost per issue was £15k, of which £4-5k is distribution cost. My Merton is distributed to around 81,000 households and 3000 copies are placed in council offices and libraries. The print run has been judged so that around 100 copies remain when the next edition is published.

Costs are partly offset by income of around £5k per issue, raised from advertising. She said that printed newspapers, including the Wimbledon Guardian were finding the current financial climate challenging to sell advertising space. In response to a question about alternatives to publishing council notices in the Wimbledon Guardian, Sophie Poole said that rates had been significantly reduced over the last few years

and that it was important to support the local paper as it plays an important part in the community and in holding the council to account. Caroline Holland, Director of Corporate Services, added we have a statutory obligation to publish certain council notices in a weekly local publication.

Councillor Mark Allison, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, said that costs had been reduced by reducing the number of issues and that My Merton is well regarded by the public as indicated by the Annual Residents Survey.

In response to suggestions made by members of the Commission, Sophie Poole said that she would explore the cost effectiveness of increasing income through offering businesses the option to include inserts. She will also continue to monitor residents perceptions around readership via the Annual Residents Survey. The figures for 2014 will be available in the new year.

The Chair thanked Sophie Poole and said that the Commission agreed that My Merton is a quality publication that is well received by the residents.

7 BUSINESS PLAN UPDATE 2015/19 (Agenda Item 7)

Commission members agreed to take agenda item 8 “comments and recommendations from the overview and scrutiny panels” with this agenda item.

Caroline Holland, Director of Corporate Services, outlined the contents of the report and drew attention to the changed approach to savings targets, revisions to the provisional government funding estimates, the increase in the proportion of council tax collection as well as the overall number of households, the updated capital programme and information on movement within the capital programme.

Caroline Holland provided additional information in response to questions:

- the timetable of the government’s comprehensive spending review will depend on the outcome of the general election. Grant changes could impact as soon as June 2015.
- funding for a new secondary school is included in the capital programme so that these funds will be available if needed in order to meet the council’s statutory obligation to provide school places. If alternative providers can make places available in time then the capital programme would be adjusted accordingly.
- although the rate of increase in the growth of the primary school population has fallen, actual numbers are still increasing and it is therefore not anticipated that primary schools will have empty places
- the service plans will be updated to provided the most recent information and these will be included in the report to the Scrutiny Panel and Commission in January. An explanation for how the risk levels are calculated will be included.

Caroline Holland undertook to provide Commission members with a diagram illustrating how the level of savings required to meet the estimated budget gap had

changed since the 2014/15 budget was set by Council. ACTION: Director of Corporate Services.

Councillor Mark Allison, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, said that he had attended the Commission's meeting primarily to listen to views expressed by members of the Commission. In response to a question he said that the council faced huge financial challenges and that the Administration would seek to protect its priority services but it wouldn't be possible to guarantee an exemption from savings.

The Commission noted the comments made by the Overview and Scrutiny Panels at their meetings (set out in agenda item 8). Councillor Jeff Hanna, Chair of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel, asked what progress had been made on expediting savings on SEN Transport. Caroline Holland described some of the savings that had already been identified, with an emphasis on identifying alternatives on a case by case basis. She stressed that the overall context was an overspend for the service.

The Commission discussed its feedback to Cabinet and:

RESOLVED to make the following comments and recommendations to Cabinet:

- the Commission noted with concern the increase in the budget gap over the period of the Medium Term Financial Strategy from £15.2m when the 2014/15 budget was set to £32m now, but could discern no change in approach in the draft Business Plan to address the doubled deficit
- the Commission registered its disappointment at the lack of savings proposals presented for scrutiny at this stage in the budget setting process. This meant that there was very little on which the Panels and the Commission could comment. The Commission looks forward to receiving savings proposals in the next round of scrutiny, designed to achieve a balanced budget over the term of the Medium Term Financial Strategy
- the Commission noted the predicted overspend for 2014/15 and the difficulties being experienced in meeting the savings targets this year. It agreed that the planned use of £4m from the reserves to close this gap was appropriate in the short term but that this approach would not be sustainable in the longer term.
- the Commission noted that the impact of the capital programme on the revenue budget is predicted to rise over the next 4-5 years. It therefore recommended that Cabinet ensure that the capital programme continues to be challenged vigorously and items removed if they are not going to be used.

8 SCRUTINY OF THE BUSINESS PLAN 2015-19: COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANELS (Agenda Item 8)

This item was discussed as part of agenda item 7.

The Commission RESOLVED to forward to Cabinet the comments and recommendations made by the Overview and Scrutiny Panels as set out in Appendix 1.

9 MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE FINANCIAL MONITORING TASK GROUP, 5 NOVEMBER 2014 (Agenda Item 9)

Agreed, subject to Julia Regan, Head of Democracy Services confirming question of accuracy raised by Councillor Suzanne Grocott. The minutes will be amended accordingly should there be a factual inaccuracy regarding the building and development control item. ACTION: Head of Democracy Services

10 PROPOSAL FOR THE RECRUITMENT OF NEW CO-OPTED MEMBERS TO THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION (Agenda Item 10)

RESOLVED:

- 1) that the Head of Democracy Services should take action to recruit a maximum of two non-voting co-opted members to the Commission
- 2) that the Commission would particularly welcome applications from people who have a particular interest or experience of crime and community safety issues or financial expertise.

ACTION: Head of Democracy Services

11 WORK PROGRAMME 2014/15 (Agenda Item 11)

RESOLVED: to agree the work programme, with the addition of an update on the work of the Violence Against Women and Girls Board during 2015/16