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## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

5 APRIL 2016

(7.15 pm - 9.30 pm)

PRESENT: Councillor Peter Southgate (in the Chair),  
Councillor Peter McCabe, Councillor Stan Anderson,  
Councillor Hamish Badenoch, Councillor Brenda Fraser,  
Councillor Suzanne Grocott, Councillor Jeff Hanna,  
Councillor Abigail Jones, Councillor Oonagh Moulton,  
Councillor Katy Neep, Denis Popovs and Geoffrey Newman

ALSO PRESENT: Sophie Ellis (Assistant Director of Business Improvement),  
Nathan Rogers (Programme Director at General Dynamics), Jim  
Marsh (Programme Manager), Caroline Holland (Director of  
Corporate Services), Julia Regan (Head of Democracy  
Services), Yvette Stanley (Director, Children, Schools & Families  
Department) and Evereth Willis (Equality and Community  
Cohesion Officer)

### 1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies were received from co-opted member Colin Powell.

### 2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

None.

### 3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

Agreed as an accurate record of the meeting. There were no matters arising.

### 4 CUSTOMER CONTACT PROGRAMME UPDATE (Agenda Item 4)

Sophie Ellis, Assistant Director of Business Improvement, introduced her colleagues working on the customer contact programme - Nathan Rogers, Programme Director at General Dynamics, and Jim Marsh, Programme Manager for LB Merton.

Sophie Ellis drew the Commission's attention to the delay with the new contact management system and said that it is currently about three weeks behind schedule. The reasons for the delays in the programme are set out in the report and include difficulty experienced by General Dynamics in getting suitably high calibre staff as well as unanticipated technical obstacles. The council had been fortunate in being able largely to recruit the staff it needed for its work on the programme. In summary, Sophie Ellis emphasised that there are three variables in any project or programme: price, time and quality. The price on this programme is fixed, so the only possible movement will be around time and quality; the programme board had taken a

conscious decision that any movement must not be on quality since this would impact on residents and therefore had accepted some movement in timescales.

Sophie Ellis explained that the approach being taken to the launch of the new website is to delay the release of new pages until there is functionality that will enable customers to conduct transactions online. Waste services will be the first to go live later in April on a “beta site” that will run alongside the current site with a link for people who want to try it out. Further services will be added gradually and it is expected that the new website should go live in full (with all planned automation in place) by August.

In response to questions about the data handling capacity of the customer relationship management system, Nathan Rogers said that a cloud based platform would be used, that demand for the next four to five years had been anticipated and that the council’s retention policy had been built in to remove information as appropriate. Sophie Ellis said that an incremental approach was being taken in linking it to other council systems in order to provide a single masterset of customer data and this will be lead by customer demand. Nathan Rogers reassured members that appropriate and rigorous security systems would be in place.

Members expressed interest in the capacity of the customer relationship management system to produce data that could be used for performance management purposes as well as for predicting and managing demand. They also asked a number of questions regarding the savings that would be achieved as a result of the customer contact programme and asked that this information be included in future reports to the Commission.

RESOLVED: to thank the officers for the report and to request an update in due course that would include information on savings achieved through the customer contact programme.

## 5 MONITORING THE COUNCIL'S EQUALITIES COMMITMENTS (Agenda Item 5)

Evereth Willis, Equality and Community Cohesion Officer, highlighted the considerable achievements of the past year as set out in the report. In relation to the coming year she said there would be more outreach work with small and medium sized businesses in the borough, a refresh of the corporate equalities steering group and a review of the action plan.

Commission members praised the excellent work that had been carried out, in particular by the Children Schools and Families Department in raising the achievement of Bangladeshi and Asian-Other pupils. Yvette Stanley, Director of Children Schools and Families, explained that work had been done to raise levels of achievement across the board, together with targeted work with specific schools to close the achievement gap between groups of pupils. This work will continue with other groups of pupils, tailored according to their needs.

In response to a question about how the changes to the provision of Merton Adult Education would impact on equalities monitoring, Yvette Stanley said that the contracts with the service providers include specification for the provision of monitoring information so that progress against the action plan targets on reaching specific groups can be assessed. She undertook to include the data, including on impact of the changes, in next year's report.

The officers were asked about what might be done differently in future. Evereth Willis said that the strategy was still very relevant and would only require a light touch refresh but that she would seek to reduce the number of activities listed in the action plan. Yvette Stanley said that many of the issues they were dealing with had been around for a very long time and were now being tackled in the context of declining resources so the focus is to prioritise the most vulnerable. She added that continuing to work in partnership and ensuring there was a strategic influence over commissioned services would be a key issue for the next strategy.

RESOLVED: to thank the officers for the report and for progress made in implementing the equality strategy.

## 6 SCRUTINY OF THE DEPARTMENTAL SAVINGS WEIGHTINGS (Agenda Item 6)

Caroline Holland, Director of Corporate Services explained that the report, written in response to a referral from Council, set out how the allocation of savings between council departments has been approached since 2007/8. The report also provides examples of how different weightings would impact on departmental budgets going forward.

Members welcomed the opportunity to review the decision making process in relation to the distribution of savings between departments. Members reflected on the role of budget scrutiny and expressed some frustration with the current process whereby on the one hand proposed savings presented to the Panels and the Commission are increasingly unpalatable and on the other hand no alternative savings are presented.

Members discussed two potential alternative approaches. The first would be to request savings that represent a greater total than that required to balance the budget so that there would be an element of choice. Members acknowledged that this could be difficult because it could raise anxiety about proposals that would then not be taken forward and may become politicised. Caroline Holland said that last year the departments did not meet the savings proposal targets set by Cabinet and so may be unable to outline proposals that would meet higher totals.

The second would be to conduct detailed scrutiny and challenge of each budget line of expenditure. Members noted that this would be time consuming but could be done by selecting a small number of service areas for a "deep dive" approach similar to that conducted by the financial monitoring task group over the past year. Task groups or workshops within panel meetings might be useful mechanism for carrying out this work. Caroline Holland said that there had been a detailed scrutiny of expenditure in

the preparation of the 2012/13 budget. She reminded members that the service plans that were provided as part of the budget pack set out the budget (section E), performance information and key projects for each service area alongside the budget book pages (appendix 9).

Members agreed that the service plans could provide a useful starting point for detailed scrutiny of services and as context for prioritising items at the topic workshops to include in the 2016/17 scrutiny work programme. Members also agreed that it would be helpful for the scrutiny panels to share their learning on budget issues.

The Commission RESOLVED:

1. to support the principle of protecting services to the most vulnerable residents;
2. that the Commission's financial monitoring task group should carry out detailed scrutiny of expenditure for a small number of service areas and report back to the Commission on how this has worked so that the Commission can reflect on this and identify any changes it wishes to make to the budget scrutiny process for the coming year;
3. that in carrying out detailed scrutiny of service expenditure, the financial monitoring task group should look for revenue opportunities, procurement and efficiency savings and should draw on learning from the scrutiny task group work on shared and outsourced services and on commercialisation;
4. That the financial monitoring task group should ask the chairs of the scrutiny panels for suggestions as to which service areas should be prioritised for detailed scrutiny of expenditure.

## 7 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT (Agenda Item 7)

RESOLVED: to agree the report for presentation to Council at its meeting on 13 July 2016, subject to the full titles being used for each of the NHS Trusts referred to within the report.

## 8 REVIEW OF ARRANGEMENTS FOR CO-OPTED MEMBERS (Agenda Item 8)

The Chair invited Geoffrey Newman, co-opted member, to talk about his experience in the role. Geoffrey Newman said that he thought that a one year period was too short to get to grips with the work of the Commission, particularly given all the jargon used. He had found the role interesting but had been disappointed initially in what was achieved at meetings but felt that this evening's meeting had demonstrated what scrutiny could do. He suggested that any future co-opted member be given a longer induction and encouraged to attend a meeting prior to taking up the role.

Commission members agreed that it was useful to have some non-statutory co-opted members who could bring specific expertise and independence. They understood that it would be helpful to make appointments for a two year period but would wish to retain the flexibility to review the appointment at the end of the first year.

RESOLVED:

1. to make future appointments for a two year period, with the opportunity to terminate after 12 months should either party wish to do so. To invite new co-opted members to attend a meeting of the Commission prior to taking up the role.
2. That the Chair should talk to Geoffrey Newman to find out if he wishes to continue for a second year.

9 DISCUSSION OF QUESTIONS TO ASK THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL AND THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE AT THE COMMISSION'S MEETING ON 7 JULY 2016 (Agenda Item 9)

RESOLVED:

1. to retain the flexibility to ask the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive any questions members wish at the meeting on 7 July;
2. to ask the Leader to describe the proposals for public consultation on the budget, and specifically on the levy for adult social care. The Leader may respond at the meeting or in writing prior to the meeting.