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## HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES AND OLDER PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

13 MARCH 2018

(7.15 pm - 9.40 pm)

PRESENT: Councillors Councillor Peter McCabe (in the Chair),  
Councillor Brian Lewis-Lavender, Councillor Laxmi Attawar,  
Councillor Mary Curtin, Councillor Brenda Fraser,  
Councillor Suzanne Grocott, Councillor Sally Kenny,  
Councillor Abdul Latif, Di Griffin and Saleem Sheikh

### ALSO PRESENT:

Richard Jackman, Borough Partnership Manager Mitcham Job Centre, Kam Patel, Partnership Support Manager, DWP. Karen Brunger Head of Services, Merton and Lambeth Citizens Advice. Lyla Adwan-Kamara, Chief Executive Merton Centre for Independent Living

Councillors Tobin Byers, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health

Stella Akintan (Democratic Services Officer), Daniel Butler (Senior Principal Public Health Officer), Hannah Doody (Director of Community and Housing), Kris Witherington (Consultation & Community Engagement Manager), Dr Dagmar Zeuner (Director, Public Health) and John Morgan (Assistant Director, Adult Social Care)

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

There were no apologies for absence

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

None

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

The meeting of the previous meeting were agreed as a true and accurate record

### 4 PERSONAL INDEPENDENT PAYMENT PROCESS IN MERTON (Agenda Item 4)

The Chief Executive of Merton Centre for Independent Living (Merton CiL) gave an overview of the main issues highlighting that challenges with the Personal Independent Payment (PIP) process was discussed at this Panel in September.

Recent evidence has shown that Merton has a higher rate of declined applications than neighbouring areas.

The Head of Services at Merton and Lambeth Citizens Advice reported that an increased number of clients are seeking help, usually after their first application is turned down, 85% of cases are successful on appeal. The application form is more descriptive and many clients are struggling to complete it. People with mental health problems face the biggest challenge with this process. An increased number of claimants are successfully awarded a lower rate of benefit, which is positive as more people are receiving help.

A panel member asked if patients have to pay for their GP to provide medical evidence. It was reported that GPs are asked to waiver fee but if this is not possible the client has to pay.

The Chair invited a local resident to address the Panel.

Ms H reported that her son is 50 year old man with Downs Syndrome. She recently had to complete three benefit application forms on his behalf. Even though she has a high literacy level the forms were complex. During the face to face medical assessment she had to say negative things about her son's health in front of him. This was very challenging because as parents they have always sought to be positive about his capabilities.

The Chair invited the next local resident to address the Panel.

Ms M reported that she is deaf cannot lip read and uses British Sign Language. Being deaf means that she faces a number of challenges including using the tube, accessing information at the doctors and jobcentre.

Ms M reported that it was a big shock when her benefits were changed from Disability Living Allowance to PIP. The language in the letter was very confusing. The questions were difficult and she was told to go to PIP assessment. At the medical assessment they asked Ms M if she was deaf and she also had to prove it. An assessor asked Ms M to face a wall and someone was speaking behind her. The application was turned down and Ms M has appealed and is waiting for letter for tribunal attendance.

A panel member said the case studies shared had been distressing and asked what will be done to ensure this situation is rectified and services are made accessible.

The Partnership Support Manager for Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) said face to face consultations had been contracted out to Independent Assessment Services. Claimant champions had been appointed to help identify issues and ensure they are escalated. Claimants are asked to highlight their support needs before a face to face interview. Home visits are also provided. The aim of the PIP assessment is understand how the condition affects the individual and their everyday activity, therefore they encourage the use of a diary. Clients are not expected to pay for medical evidence as independent assessors will do a review of the case. They go to health professionals to obtain necessary information.

A panel member expressed concern that the assessment process is not using existing wealth of evidence about health conditions instead people are being subject to emotional and financial stress.

The Partnership Support Manager said existing medical evidence can be used but the assessment uses the most recent evidence to assess the claimants' health condition.

A panel member asked how many assessment centres in Merton have accessibility problems and what measures are taken to improve this. The Chief Executive of Merton CiL highlighted that there are no assessment centres in Merton, the two main locations are in Wandsworth and in Croydon both have access issues. Merton residents are also sent to Barking and Dartford.

The Partnership Support Manager said the contractors are responsible for estates. This is a priority area as it is recognised that there are not enough assessment centres in London, The assessors will arrange home visits and claimants can request for a taxi or families and friends can take people and claim expenses.

The chair asked for the issues raised at this meeting to be escalated through the partnership manager and for Merton Council to consider if it has any suitable premises to rent for assessment centres.

A panel member highlighted that DWP has awarded a contract to people who are not able to provide suitable premises. The Partnership Support Manager, DWP said sixty percent are of claims are currently been referred to assessment centres, the aim is to reduce this and encourage decisions to be made through paper assessment.

A panel member asked why the application process takes so long. The Partnership Support Manager said it was 26 weeks in the beginning now average is six weeks things have improved but aim to reduce time frames even further. This will be achieved by having the right evidence at the beginning of the process.

A panel member said the case studies in the report highlight that there seemed to be a lack of sensitivity amongst staff highlighting there may be training needs. The Partnership Support Manager said poor treatment of claimants is not justifiable and should be escalated to customer services. Claimant champions also want to hear about this. Assessment managers need to be informed if an issue of this nature occurs.

A panel member asked why so many appeals are successful given the high level of face to face assessments. The Partnership Support Manager said decisions are not made during home visits, clients are awarded points and the final decision is made by DWP. The claim forms take longer to complete but they aim to get a holistic understanding of the condition.

A Panel member asked why penalties are not built into the contract so that independent assessors receive financial sanctions if they fail to deliver a service. There should be clear recognition that they are dealing with vulnerable adults who may not have the cognitive ability to plan their accessibility. The failures in this

service leading to high levels of successful appeals must be placing a huge financial burden on the tax payer and will have an impact on the council at a time then there is limited resource.

The Partnership Support Manager accepted the Panel's concerns and suggested a meeting with the independent assessment teams, Merton CiL, Merton and Lambeth Citizens Advice to address these issues.

The Panel agreed there will be a meeting with independent assessors within the next four weeks to address this issue and determine if there are premises in Merton that can be used. Following this meeting there will be a report back to this Panel.

#### RESOLVED

Chair to participate in meeting with Independent Assessment Services, DWP, Merton CiL, Merton and Lambeth Citizens Advice to address issues raised and report back this Panel.

### 5 UNIVERSAL CREDIT ROLL OUT IN MERTON (Agenda Item 5)

The Head of Service Merton and Lambeth Citizens Advice gave an overview of the report and stated that many Merton residents are refused their benefit claim on a 'right to reside' basis. This is often overturned on appeal and therefore implies that the criteria was applied incorrectly in the first instance. They are issuing more food bank vouchers. Housing costs are an issue as claimants are now responsible to pay it, previously payments went directly to landlord. There has been a decrease in benefit overpayments.

The Head of Revenue and Benefits gave an overview of the report and stated that Merton had been a pilot for rollout of Universal Credit for some wards since January 2016.

A panel member said many people find it difficult to understand what benefits are available to them. The Head of Revenues of Benefits said all new claimants will be transferred to universal credit, some residents think there is a choice and it is confusing. The Benefits team are able to support people over the phone, however the process is administered by Jobcentre Plus.

The Jobcentre Plus Manager said there had been an improvement in the speed in which claimants are receiving their benefit payments, people can apply for advance payments. Benefits are issued on monthly basis which may explain why there is a shortfall and need for food vouchers. Jobcentre Plus are also working with partner organisations to tackle digital exclusion.

#### RESOLVED

The Panel thanked officers for the report and asked for a further update in six months time.

### 6 PREVENTING LONELINESS IN MERTON - DEPARTMENT ACTION PLAN

(Agenda Item 6)

Loneliness in Merton

The Senior Principal Public Health Officer gave an overview of the report and stated that loneliness considerations will be included in falls, hoarding and volunteering strategies. All the task group recommendations have been implemented and wider work is taking place including fire safety visits.

The task group chair said she was pleased to see the progress with the work. Officers were asked to remember that some Merton residents are registered with GP surgeries outside the borough.

Councillor Brenda Fraser said she is a befriender with Age UK Merton, Panel members were invited to consider if they wish to apply for the role as more volunteers are needed.

RESOLVED

The Panel thanked officers for the progress with the work and asked for a further update in six months time.

7 HEALTHWATCH MERTON - FUTURE PROCUREMENT ARRANGEMENTS  
(Agenda Item 7)

The Consultation and Community Engagement Manager gave an overview of the report highlighting that Healthwatch had conducted a wide range of consultation as well in depth reviews of specific issues and they also made use of their power to 'enter and view' care homes.

It was reported that in regards to future procurement, Local authorities are free to provide the service as they see fit. Given there is a lack of competition in the market this service will be incorporated into the voluntary grants programme.

RESOLVED

The Panel thanked the Consultation and Community Engagement Manager for the report.

8 HEALTH & WELLBEING BOARD AND HEALTH & WELLBEING STRATEGY  
UPDATE (Agenda Item 8)

The Director of Public Health gave an overview of the report

The Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health said the Health and Wellbeing Board works well with voluntary sector and Merton Clinical Commissioning Group. The aim is to continue to build on the work of the last four years.

A panel member asked for clarification on the childhood obesity figures and expressed concern about the impact of charging in parks. The Director of Public

Health said they working closely with colleagues in environment to understand if there are any potential effects.

A panel member said there are difficulties in GPs being encouraged to refer people to voluntary sector services. The Director for Public Health said they are working closely with practices to make referrals easier through social prescribing. The evaluation has demonstrated that this project has freed up GP time. It is now being rolled out across East Merton.

A panel member said female life expectancy between the East and West of the borough had improved but for men it has decreased. The Director of Public Health said this analysis is taking place and the annual public health report will provide more information.

RESOLVED

The Panel thanked the Director for her Report

## 9 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 9)

The Panel noted the work programme report

RESOLVED

The Chair asked Panel members to contact the scrutiny officer with suggestions for the future work programme.