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SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 23 FEBRUARY 2023

(7.15 pm - 9.23 pm)

PRESENT: Councillors Councillor Stuart Neaverson (in the Chair),
Councillor Daniel Holden, Councillor John Braithwaite,
Councillor Caroline Charles, Councillor Anthony Fairclough,
Councillor Dan Johnston, Councillor Gill Manly,
Councillor Stephen Mercer, Councillor Martin Whelton,
Councillor James Williscroft and Councillor Victoria Wilson

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors

Councillors Aidan Mundy

Stella Akintan (Scrutiny Officer), John Bosley (Assistant Director Public Space Contracts and Commissioning), Elliot Brunton, Paul McGarry (FutureMerton Manager), Tara Butler (Programme Manager - Strategic Policy and Research) and Jason Andrews (Environmental Health Pollution Manager)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

There were no apologies for absence.

The Chair welcomed the Young Inspector to the meeting who will be joining the panel to share the voice of young people.

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

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

4 ACTIONS LOG (Agenda Item 4)

Councillor Mundy, Chair of the Planning Committee, was invited to give an overview of the work in development control applications. He highlighted that a quality assurance check in January had identified an under reporting in performance from May to November. Updated information was provided to Panel members earlier that day and tabled at the meeting. Accurate figures demonstrate that performance is on an upward trajectory and much better that was previously reported. Steps have been

taken to rectify the systems, and forthcoming new legislation will require local authorities to upgrade systems.

A panel member highlighted problems with the software as there is lack of ability to see comments on applications and for councillors to access this information and asked if this can be addressed in the software upgrade.

The Chair of the Planning Committee said members of the Planning Committee can see the responses and they are looking at greater user engagement and making the process as simple as possible.

A panel member asked if the task force will look at back-end development control issues rather than planning applications. The Chair of the Planning Committee said they will focus on back-end issues but front end issues can arise as a result of the new guidance.

A panel member said there is a high turnover of case officers and some work has been lost as a result. How will new system prevent this and alert officers to new applications. The Chair of the Planning Committee said they will do quality assurance checks and are putting in a number of measures.

A panel member expressed concerned about putting forward a recommendation to cabinet about the software as the panel are not aware of the costs.

The Chair of the Planning Committee said there is a regulatory requirement is to purchase a new system and a duty on the council to work internally to prepare to upgrade the system.

The Panel unanimously agreed recommendation B from the tabled Development Controlled Performance Report.

The Young Inspector asked how long it will take to find out how much the new software will cost. The Chair of the Planning Committee said it depends on legislation timetable and the compliant software being available, but the preparatory work will begin now.

RESOLVED

1. An officer taskforce is established to:
 1. Scope opportunities to maximise and optimise current development control software. This would include opportunities to improve data quality;
 2. Subject to available resource, and increasing returns to scale, implement improvement opportunities identified that support system migration;
 3. Scope the resource and processes required to stand up a programme of work to:
 1. Replace the current development control software.
 2. Iterating processes to improve efficiency and software utilisation following migration.

Both with the aim of being compliant with the regulations following the Royal Assent of the Levelling up and Regeneration Bill.

The Panel also ask that the findings from the task group be brought back to the scrutiny in due course.

5 PERFORMANCE MONITORING (Agenda Item 5)

The Assistant Director for Public Space Contract and Commissioning and the Head of Future Merton gave an overview of key performance indicators.

A panel member highlighted the recycling target had been missed again for CRP 097 The Assistant Director for Public Space Contract and Commissioning said there had been a long term positive trend with Merton in the top seven in London for recycling rates. There have been incremental improvements as it is a stretch target with large percentage increases.

A panel member asked officers to highlight key statistics as way to make the information more accessible. It was reported that the Chair is having discussions with officers and suggestions will be put forward in a few months.

The Assistant Director for Public Space Contract and Commissioning said he will provide a written response in regard to SP513

RESOLVED

The Chair thanked officers for their report

6 HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION (Agenda Item 6)

The Head of Housing Strategy gave an overview of the report on homelessness prevention and stated a further paper on housing enforcement will be presented at a future meeting.

A panel member expressed concern about the rise in temporary accommodation and asked how rates compare with neighbours and progress with procurement.

The Head of Housing and Strategy said the June 2022 figures on those in temporary accommodation were as follows:

Merton 333

Sutton 846

Croydon 1951

Wandsworth 2985

Richmond 349

Bromley 1598

Split of current temporary accommodation by area:

100 cases in borough
224 cases out of borough
4 outside of London, in Kent and Surrey, aim to place people in borough

The Head of Housing Strategy reported that the trend in temporary accommodation is upwards, not sure how steep. The team is still awaiting impact of new applications from people leaving the Homes for Ukraine Scheme,

The Head of Housing Strategy reported that Capital Letters Agency find private sector accommodation, they are affected by economic factors such as the drop in private sector accommodation. High rents are also a challenge. In response to questions on the council acquiring its own temporary accommodation, The Head of Housing Strategy reported Merton has access to an 81place hostel, most are spot purchase and compete with other London boroughs. It is complex to set up temporary accommodation as council does not have housing management services and repairs service. The department are looking at many options.

A panel member queried the waiting time for temporary accommodation. The Head of Housing Strategy said it depends on size of accommodation required as there is a longer wait for larger properties.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development said the Administration has a goal to build 400 homes some may be temporary accommodation.

In response to questions, it was reported that:

People who are placed in housing outside of London have a right of review; the council can help people who choose to move to another part of the country.

The first phase of the Home for Ukraine scheme is coming to an end and it has been difficult to find new hosts, the department try to rematch to new hosts if possible. There is funding for the Scheme, but private sector affordability is a challenge. It is also difficult for those who find jobs to obtain several years worth of references, which is difficult in the circumstances.

Panel members congratulated the department on the low homelessness figures and the hard work undertaken to support the community.

A panel member suggested including temporary accommodation in performance monitoring.

Councillor Fairclough asked the panel to put forward a recommendation to support the Cabinet attempts to implement the Empty house scheme

The Head of Housing and Strategy reported the council is going ahead with the Empty Homes Scheme and this should be operational by July.

Anthony Fairclough proposed the following recommendation "This panel recommends to support the council's plans to increase the amount of temporary

accommodation through schemes such as the Empty Houses scheme which is coming forward”.

The recommendation was unanimously supported by the panel

The Head of Housing and Strategy reported that the council has a legal duty to provide housing for those in priority need and every attempt is made to ensure people are not placed far away from their local community.

Councillor Fairclough proposed the following recommendation - This panel believes we should not as a matter of policy, house people beyond 90 minutes of travel, except by choice.

This was seconded by Councillor Wilson

Those in favour:

Councillor Anthony Fairclough
Councillor Victoria Wilson
Councillor Dan Holden
Councillor Stephen Mercer
Councillor John Braithwaite

Those against:

Councillor Stuart Neaveson
Councillor Dan Johnston
Councillor Martin Whelton
Councillor James Willisroft
Councillor Caroline Charles

The Chair used his casting vote against the recommendation.
The recommendation was not carried.

Councillor Whelton proposed that the Panel recommends that the council do everything within its power to house people in Merton as a top priority and as close as possible to the borough. Also, to increase the procurement of accommodation through empty homes and Capital Letters.

This was seconded by Councillor Willisroft and passed unanimously by the Panel.

RESOLVED

This panel recommends to support the council's plans to increase the amount of temporary accommodation through schemes such as the Empty Houses scheme which is coming forward.

Panel recommends that the council do everything within its power to house people in Merton as a top priority and as close as possible to the borough. Also, to increase the procurement of accommodation through empty homes and Capital Letters.

7 AIR QUALITY (Agenda Item 7)

The Environmental Health Manager gave an overview of the report.

A panel member asked if there is enough investment, especially as there is a new legal requirement in relation to monitoring. The Environmental Health Manager said we have support of a leading university and will bid for new monitoring station at Plough Lane.

A panel member said there is not enough enforcement on idling. It was reported that this issue is being addressed.

Panel members raised a number of concerns including;

Need to prevent lorries and large vehicles on red routes and busy roads

Stop lorries illegal road use.

What steps are being taken to increase the uptake of diffusion tubes

It was reported that the council has limited controls in this area. The Ultra Low Emissions Zone (ULEZ) will impact a public health on deaths per borough. There was a recent death of a young child where the coroner cited air pollution as a contributory factor.

The Environmental Health Manager said the council is limited in what it can do regarding heavy goods vehicles, low emission zone has driven down use of the dirtiest vehicles. They are working with Sustainable Merton on diffusion uptake. In regard to concerns that school streets displace the problems of idling to nearby areas, it was reported that diffusion tubes are used to give monthly averages on border on schools streets where resident complaints have been received. Behaviour change messages are being used to address the problem.

Data published by the Greater London Authority last year showed some improvements.

The Environmental Health Manager said the work with transport partners in heavy goods vehicles is complex. The Head of Future Merton said the ULEZ will help, the council lobby Transport for London to improve air quality on bus routes, HGV have a specific network and enforced by London councils – Councillor Fairclough put forward a recommendation.

This panel recommends that cabinet supports maintaining adequate funding for the investment in infrastructure for monitoring of fine particulates.

This was seconded by Councillor Stephen Mercer

Those in favour

Councillor Anthony Fairclough

Councillor Victoria Wilson

Councillor Dan Holden

Councillor Stephen Mercer

Councillor John Braithwaite

Those against:

Councillor Stuart Neaveson

Councillor Dan Johnston

Councillor Martin Whelton

Councillor James Williscroft

Councillor Caroline Charles

The Chair used his casting vote against the recommendation.

The recommendation was not carried.

RESOLVED

The Chair thanked officers for their reports.

8 FLOODING UPDATE (Agenda Item 8)

The Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change gave an overview of the report.

A panel member raised concerns about a persistent problem at the bottom of Duram Road. It was reported there has been ongoing issues, the council and Thames Water have been involved and emergency work is being undertaken.

Panel members raised concern about relationship with Thames Water including communications to ensure residents are aware of the work programmes. Officers reported there are aware of issues with Thames Water and are responding accordingly.

A panel member asked about the stringency for flood risk assessments for new builds in Merton, it reported that Merton has one of the strictest sustainable drainage policies in London.

RESOLVED

The Panel agreed to Invite Thames Water to a future meeting to discuss issues of concern.

9 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 9)

Councillor Mercer to be invited to next meeting to discuss the community toilets task group.