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OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

24 NOVEMBER 2015

(19.15 - 22.00)

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 and Denis Popovs

Julia Groom (Consultant in Public Health), Caroline Holland
(Director of Corporate Services), Howard Joy (Property
Management & Review Manager), Julia Regan (Head of
Democracy Services) and Yvette Stanley (Director of Children,
Schools & Families)

1 WORK PROGRAMME 2015/16 (Agenda Item 9)

AGREED.

Noted that the asset management plan will be reported to Cabinet in January 2016 instead of December 2015.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies were received from co-opted members Geoffrey Newman and Colin Powell.

3 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

None.

4 BUSINESS PLAN UPDATE 2016-20 (Agenda Item 3)

Corporate services savings proposals

Caroline Holland, Director of Corporate Services, introduced the replacement and new savings proposals for the corporate services department. In response to a question about which posts in the resources division were affected by proposal CS46 and whether they were vacant posts, Caroline Holland undertook to provide this information, together with an explanation of why the deletion was being deferred.

ACTION: Director of Corporate Services

In response to question about savings proposal CS2015-05, Caroline Holland confirmed that the proposed staffing savings would be dependent on the successful rollout of the new financial management system.

In response to a question about savings proposal CS2015-06 deletion of an auditor post, Caroline Holland said that this would be partly offset by reduced costs within the shared service but may also result in a reduction of audit provision.

Medium term financial strategy

Caroline Holland highlighted some of the adjustments that had been made to the medium term financial strategy, including inflation assumptions, pay adjustments and revised predictions on government grants.

In response to a question about reserves Caroline Holland explained that the earmarked reserves include a “balancing the budget” reserve to assist in ensuring that a balanced budget is achieved each year (if savings exceed the target in one year the reserve can be topped up and then paid out if there is a shortfall in a subsequent year). If the Revenue Support Grant is considerably lower than predicted, the reserve can be used to give the council time to consider its approach to identifying further savings.

The Chair invited Lyla Adwan-Kamara, CEO, Merton Centre for Independent Living to address the meeting. Lyla Adwan-Kamara said that many of the proposed savings, not just those in adult social care, would impact on disabled people in the borough. She said that she was looking for a robust debate about the savings choices being made by the council, including challenge from the scrutiny panels. She said that the year on year approach made it difficult to appreciate the full scale and impact of the savings programme and that the public had been consulted on some aspects but not on others. She also said that it was difficult to understand why some departments’ savings targets had increased more than others.

Caroline Holland responded by explaining that unmet departmental savings targets were rolled forward each year in order to not penalise those departments who had met their targets. The ratios set for each department related to controllable expenditure and were as follows:

- 0.75 Children, Schools and Families Department
- 1.00 Communities and Housing Department
- 1.50 Environment and Regeneration Department
- 1.50 Corporate Services Department

Caroline Holland added that there was a statutory requirement to consult the public on some savings but not on others. There is no requirement to consult on the medium term financial strategy or on the overall budget, apart from with business rate payers. The council has re-instated the meeting with voluntary sector groups to explain how the budget is put together. Meetings also take place with the trade unions.

Members discussed whether to send a reference to Cabinet. It was generally felt that the savings that were being proposed were inevitable and that there was a lack of alternative measures that could be taken. There was some frustration that alternative savings had not been submitted to provide a basis for choice. There were mixed views on whether, given the context, scrutiny should express its anxieties and

concerns to Cabinet and there was a consensus to not send a reference to cabinet in relation to this round of budget scrutiny.

Members asked Julia Regan, Head of Democracy Services, to email all councillors alerting them to the briefing session on the budget that the Director of Corporate Services will be giving on 6 January. ACTION: Head of Democracy Services

RESOLVED: to use a future meeting of the Commission for in-depth scrutiny of the allocation of savings target weightings between council departments, including consideration of changes in demand and information on the approach taken by other boroughs. The recommendations from this review would apply to the 2017/18 budget.

5 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 4)

AGREED subject to the addition of apologies received from co-opted members Peter Connellan and Colin Powell

6 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS - UPDATE REPORT (Agenda Item 5)

Yvette Stanley, Director of Children Schools and Families, introduced the report. She said that the report provides an overview of the strategic work that has been carried out by the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Board since she last reported to the Commission a year ago. She highlighted the work that has been done on improving the performance of the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference.

Yvette Stanley provided additional information in response to questions:

- The prevalence data in the Cordis Bright report is based on population estimates and triangulated with local police data
- It is hard to get figures on trafficking but there is no evidence that there is a particular issue in Merton. There is a local organisation that is actively working to expose trafficking and that is why Merton has hosted meetings on the issue
- There is a range of awareness raising and training activities in schools including specific training, work by the child protection lead group, PSHE curriculum advice and resources, theatre groups and targeted work with girls on self esteem and boys on gangs
- The Cordis Bright report has been value for money and has given focus and identified priorities which have been helpful and lead to a more sophisticated way of working
- There are insufficient programmes for perpetrators nationally, regionally and locally
- Refuge provision has recently been re-commissioned by Public Health in accordance with a pan London agreement as people experiencing domestic violence are often placed out of borough
- There is an advertising campaign to provide information to potential and actual victims, including details of where to go to get support. Work has also been carried out with referring agencies to identify and address any under-reporting

Members agreed that it would be helpful to have Merton baseline data that would then be tracked over time to measure success. Yvette Stanley said that the Board was working towards this but pulling together disparate data sets, including police data, was proving complex.

RESOLVED: to receive a report in 12 months time on progress with implementation of the four Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference action points. This report should include data, where available, on the number of offences and reoffending rates, based on actual numbers rather than extrapolations.

7 HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD RESPONSE TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE IMMUNISATION TASK GROUP (Agenda Item 6)

Julia Groom, Consultant in Public Health, said that the Health and Wellbeing Board had endorsed the scrutiny task group's recommendations and had incorporated them in the immunisation action plan as set out in the report. She drew the Commission's attention to the most recent data on immunisation and the description of recent changes in commissioning arrangements. She provided additional information in response to questions:

- Public Health attends GP locality group meetings each month. Discussion includes the latest immunisation data so that GP practices are aware of their performance
- There are about 20 health champions at present, mainly towards the east of the borough. Public health are looking for opportunities to recruit more but health, council and school staff are also expected to promote immunisation

Members welcomed the improvement in immunisation rates but noted that the performance on the pre school booster for diphtheria, tetanus, polio, pertussis is below the London average. Julia Groom said that particular immunisation had been a challenge for some years, partly due to communication issues, but the full picture is not clear and it would be interesting to do some research on the reasons for this under-performance. Members said they would support that work being done.

RESOLVED: to request an update report in 12 months time

8 TRAVELLER PROTOCOL (Agenda Item 7)

The Chair explained that this draft protocol had been brought to the Commission prior to Cabinet so that there would be an opportunity to make recommendations for change.

Howard Joy, Property Management and Review Manager, introduced the report. He said that the draft protocol had drawn on experience of dealing with Traveller encampments in Merton and in adjoining boroughs, an examination of available legislation and discussion with the police. It is expected that the processes set out in

the draft protocol will speed up the process for removal whilst ensuring that the council's responsibilities in respect of safeguarding the Travellers' welfare are met.

Yvette Stanley, Director of Children Schools and Families, added that further changes would be made to the draft protocol once it had been checked against requirements under the Children's Act. It also requires amendments in relation to staff training on safeguarding issues, the timeline in relation to inter-agency assessments and to embed safeguarding reassurances.

The Chair said that, due to concerns regarding the statement in paragraph 2.15 that "it has proved very difficult to engage with Sutton and Merton Community Services both in this review and in obtaining welfare assessments", he had invited them to send a representative to attend this meeting. As no-one had been available at short notice, they undertook to provide a written statement. The Chair expressed disappointment that this had not been received.

Yvette Stanley informed the Commission that the health welfare assessment service had been re-commissioned and there would be a new provider from April 2016. The previous contract had been poorly specified and had been inherited by the council. The new contract would provide an opportunity for a fresh start to ensure that arrangements are as robust as possible.

Howard Joy provided additional information in response to questions:

- his team provides advice to private landlords regarding the legislation and what action they could take. Private landlords are not required to undertake welfare assessments.
- The number of unauthorised encampments, particularly large ones, has been increasing. He undertook to provide data by email.
- There is a shortage of sites across London and no councils had offered to provide more when the Mayor reviewed the issue a few years ago

Members commented on the anxiety and disruption that Traveller encampments cause to local residents and welcomed the faster process set out in the draft protocol. They commented on the importance of communication to ward councillors, especially in relation to the council's conflicting responsibilities, and thanked Howard Joy's team for being proactive in regard to this in the past. They requested that the task of updating ward councillors be included in the protocol and set out in the flowchart.

Members suggested that a checklist containing bullet points would make it easier for officers to follow the process. Caroline Holland, Director of Corporate Services, added that the Corporate Management Team has asked for timelines to be added to the chart.

RESOLVED: To recommend to Cabinet that the following changes be made to the draft protocol:

- To include, in the text and in the flowchart, the responsibility to provide regular updates to ward councillors about unauthorised encampments and progress being made towards removal, as well as explaining the council's responsibilities in regard to safeguarding the welfare of Travellers.
- To include a checklist in bullet-point form to make it easier for officers to follow the process.

9 NOTE OF THE FINANCIAL MONITORING TASK GROUP MEETING, 5
NOVEMBER 2015 (Agenda Item 8)

AGREED subject to the factual amendments approved by the task group Chair, Councillor Hamish Badenoch, being made.