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OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

19 SEPTEMBER 2013

(19.15 - 22.00)

PRESENT: Councillors Peter Southgate (in the Chair), Iain Dysart, Samantha George, Suzanne Grocott, Jeff Hanna, Logie Lohendran, Russell Makin, Diane Neil Mills, Peter McCabe and Dennis Pearce.

Co-opted member Peter Connellan.

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors John Dehaney, Stephen Alambritis, Suzanne Evans, Richard Hilton.

Sheila Knight.

Ged Curran (Chief Executive), Sophie Ellis (Assistant Director of Business Improvement), Simon Williams (Director, Community & Housing Department), Hayley James (Volunteering Strategy Programme Manager, Merton Voluntary Service Council) and Ian Murrell (Service Manager, EH TS and Licensing)

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

None.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies were received from co-opted members, Jo Sullivan-Lyons and Colin Powell.

3 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 16 JULY 2013 (Agenda Item 3)

RESOLVED: to agree the minutes with the addition of a further action point asking the Borough Commander to provide information on the number and roles of all police officers in the borough pre and post the move to the Local Policing Model, not just those in neighbourhood teams.

ACTION: Head of Democracy Services to contact the Borough Commander to request this information

Matters arising – the Chair announced that budget scrutiny training had been arranged for 10 October and questioning skills training for 24 October.

4 VISION, KEY PRIORITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR 2013/14 - PRESENTATION BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL AND THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE (Agenda Item 4)

The Leader welcomed the contribution that scrutiny makes to decision making and said that Cabinet have implemented many recommendations from scrutiny. He illustrated the achievements and challenges facing the council by outlining a day in the life of a hypothetical family in Merton. The achievements cited included food and bulky waste collections, excellent schools and library services, good local parks, lunch clubs, being a safe borough, ambitious plans for regenerating Mitcham, Morden and Raynes Park and frozen levels of council tax for last three years. The Leader reminded the Commission that Merton had won the Municipal Journal's best achieving council award this year, highlighting the role that low spend, high performance and partnership working had played in this achievement. He said that one of the key challenges was to retain and expand employment opportunities in the borough.

The Chief Executive outlined some of the strategic issues facing the council:

- ensuring the energy from waste plant meets the borough's needs and to explore potential additional benefits for other waste services that could accrue from working in partnership
- improving the quality of leisure facilities in the borough
- working with the NHS and other partners to improve the health of local residents and to protect St Helier hospital
- implementing proposals in the government's care bill whereby local authorities would have responsibility for keeping track of how much each person has spent on "qualifying" care services (the government is proposing a cap on individual expenditure on adult social care)
- identifying the best provision to meet the need for additional secondary school places
- understanding the drivers behind the above national average increase in referrals to children's social care services and numbers taken into care
- Continuing to improve the speed with which adoption applications are handled
- Improving the youth justice service – currently average in comparison with other London boroughs
- Continuing to provide quality and value for local residents

The Chair of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel said that the Panel had considered a report on adoption at its last meeting and had found that the numbers in Merton are relatively small and so average performance is disproportionately influenced by delays with one or two cases. He added that the figures showed that the average time taken is already decreasing substantially.

The Chief Executive said that the borough had begun to address its funding gap prior to neighbouring authorities and had made significant changes the way services are provided as well as reducing the number of staff by 20% since 2009. A small funding

gap remains for the next two financial years but it is likely to increase again from 2017/18 if the Office of Budget Responsibility's predictions of national debt are accurate as the government will have limited room for manoeuvre in relation to local government funding. He added that recent growth projections are more hopeful so those pressures may be mitigated – the council will plan for the worst and hope for the best.

In response to a question about council tax levels, the Leader said that the administration planned to freeze these again next year if possible but recognised that this would be difficult.

Members asked what shared services were being considered, what the optimum level of aggregation of services would be and what was being done to monitor the longer term performance of the services. The Chief Executive said that a lot of conversations are currently taking place around potential shared services with other boroughs. The pension service will be shared with Wandsworth and a 4 borough shared regulatory service has been agreed plus discussion with Wandsworth on sharing social care and with other South London councils on sharing back office functions. The optimum number of partners varies according to the nature of the service. Where there are economies of scale, then the larger the better. Where the service is more complex and/or there needs to be more involvement in day to day detail of the work then a smaller shared service is better. A client monitoring officer is assigned for each shared service to keep track of performance and hold the service to account.

ACTION: the Chief Executive undertook to find out whether shared service monitoring includes mystery shopping.

In response to a Commission member's comments about Lord Rogers' thoughts, made at the recent Future Wimbledon conference, on redesigning Wimbledon Broadway, the Leader said that they would be looked at should any organisation bring any proposals forward. The Chief Executive added that the Conference had been a good example of politicians from different parties working together for the good of the borough.

The Leader and Chief Executive made further points in response to questions:

- the council could choose to give older people concessionary prices for leisure centre use but, under the terms of the contract, the provider GLL would have to be compensated for any income loss. The council's public health team could work to increase uptake to offset income loss.
- in relation to making further savings from 2017, it is likely that every approach taken to date would be used but to a greater degree as well as looking at experience from other authorities
- the management of the council's debt is ultimately a political choice, taking into account the level of debt and the cost of servicing it

- the council has introduced the London Living Wage for its directly employed staff. Contracts with external organisations are monitored to ensure that their staff are treated fairly
- targets have been set to increase the amount of waste that is recycled. In response to a question about how schools could contribute, the Leader said that some have solar panels on their roofs and Peter Connellan, co-opted member, added that schools had separate paper recycling bins .

A Commission member pointed out that lunch clubs are not funded by the council. The Leader said the Council provides grants to voluntary organisations such as FISH and the Merton and Morden Guild and these organisations decide how to spend them. He undertook to review support for lunch clubs.

5 CABINET RESPONSE TO REFERRAL ON NOISE CONTROL SERVICE (Agenda Item 5)

Ian Murrell, Service Manager - EH, TS and Licensing, introduced the report. He explained that Cabinet's response in relation to the Commission's request "to explore options for a 24/7 noise service as soon as possible", having received a report on options at its meeting on 18 February, was to defer a decision on this until it had further information on how the service worked with MASCOT and to await the outcome of discussions with neighbouring authorities on setting up a shared regulatory service that would include noise nuisance.

Ian Murrell said that Merton, Croydon and Richmond had made a formal commitment to a shared service and that Merton would be the lead borough. Other south-west London boroughs may join at a later stage. He added that Richmond's Out of Hours service is very similar to Merton's and the Croydon service has a narrower band of out of hours service but there are also dedicated officers who work a night shift.

Commission members noted that Friday and Saturday nights are the busiest periods for the service, averaging 10-12 calls per night when the out of hours service is operating compared to 3 on other nights. They commented that it would be helpful to have further information setting out how calls are spread across days of the week and for each month so that an assessment could be made of the cost effectiveness of a 24/7 service.

In response to questions on noise nuisance generally, Ian Murrell said that several callers about one incident and callers who are experiencing persistent noise nuisance (as opposed to a one-off) are prioritised as regards the deployment of monitoring equipment and other measures as appropriate. However all complaints about noise nuisance are investigated.

The Commission requested data on the number and type of legal action taken in 2013/14 so far, in a similar format to the 2012/13 data in the table in paragraph 2.11.
ACTION: Ian Murrell, Service Manager - EH, TS and Licensing

In response to a question about the costs set out in paragraph 6.2 of the report, Ian Murrell said that it would cost an additional £200k for a 24/7 service, a model similar to Croydon's would cost an additional £100k and extending the current service to all Friday nights(11pm-4am) year-round would cost an additional £20k. In response to a question about whether the Croydon service had spare capacity that could be used by Merton as a temporary measure, Ian Murrell said that this would be unlikely. Ian Murrell also indicated the shared service had a 25% savings target.

The Chair invited Councillor Suzanne Evans to address the Commission because she had been involved previously in bringing the issue to the Commission's attention. Councillor Evans said that the issue had first been raised by the Commission in February 2012 and asked the Commission to make a reference to Cabinet to register its dismay at the lack of action on an issue which has commanded cross-party support at Commission meetings.

Commission members discussed how they wished to respond to Cabinet and RESOLVED that the Commission make a reference to Cabinet stating that it:

- is not minded to accept the Cabinet's deferment without comment
- welcomes the establishment of a shared regulatory service, including Merton's role as lead borough
- regrets that so much time has elapsed since the Commission first received a report on this issue in February 2012
- recommends that Cabinet request further analysis of the pattern of calls by hour of day and day of week for 2012/13 and 2013/14
- would wish to be confident that the proposed shared service will provide an improved service in terms of coverage
- recommends that Cabinet spend £20,000 to enhance the current service. It was suggested that a pilot with increased out of hours coverage would demonstrate whether there is actual demand for such a service. Cabinet is asked to note that some members of the Commission pressed for a 24/7 service to be commenced as soon as possible.

6 PUBLIC VALUE PILOT REVIEWS (Agenda Item 6)

Sophie Ellis, Assistant Director of Business Improvement, explained the background to the reviews and said that the purpose of the public value review pilots had been as much to test the process as to get results from the pilot reviews. She said that the report was somewhat weighted towards reflecting on lessons learned rather than setting out the successes of the pilots.

When asked what she would have done differently, Sophie Ellis said that she had hoped to incorporate more external expertise and independent challenge and that there would now be a period of reflection so that a revised process could be finalised

and a new programme could start in April 2014. Simon Williams, Director of Community and Housing, added that the Corporate Management Team (CMT) had established the public value reviews in order to take a broader view of services and that the planned four year programme had been hugely ambitious. The pilot had shown that the reviews as initially envisaged focussed too much on process and CMT had therefore chosen to refocus the programme in order to take a sharper, quicker look at those services which it prioritises for a public value review

One member commented that the use of smart, sophisticated tools to understand customer needs and demands would be helpful.

In response to a question about how service managers are rewarded for improving service quality and reducing costs, Simon Williams said that such performance was expected of all managers and so was not explicitly rewarded. CMT will be introducing a new statement of management behaviour against which they will be assessed.

Sophie Ellis undertook to provide information about what a “digital newsroom” is (paragraph 6.14).

ACTION: Assistant Director of Business Improvement.

The Commission AGREED that it wishes to see the revised proposals relating to the public value reviews in due course and that it chose not to comment on the findings of the individual pilot reviews at this point in time.

7 CABINET RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE VOLUNTEERING SCRUTINY TASK GROUP (Agenda Item 7)

In response to a question of clarification, Simon Williams, Director of Community and Housing, said that both Merton Voluntary Service Council and Volunteer Centre Merton had entered the merger on a fully voluntary basis, agreed by both boards of trustees.

Members of the Commission made a number of observations on the response to the recommendations:

Recommendation 1

The Commission asked to see analysis of existing data on volunteers from the 2012 Annual Residents Survey. Hayley James, Volunteering Strategy Programme Manager, Merton Voluntary Service Council, undertook to send the report to members of the Commission. She said that the results showed that 80% of respondents hadn't spent any time volunteering over the past year – the main reason given was lack of time. The Volunteering Strategy therefore includes the provision of different types of volunteering opportunities for those who don't have much time to spare but would like to volunteer.

ACTION: Volunteering Strategy Programme Manager, Merton Voluntary Service Council

Recommendation 2

The Commission asked that the present system whereby the Mayor uses their own discretion as to when to give out a pin badge be retained. It was therefore AGREED to delete the last sentence of the recommendation and sections 2.2 - 2.4 of the implementation plan.

Recommendation 6

The Commission asked that the response to this recommendation be re-worded in order to demonstrate the use of My Merton and other low-tech mechanisms of communication. One member commented that he welcomed the re-print of the MVSC directory of organisations and that it was helpful to have a print copy as well as on-line access.

On behalf of the Commission, the Chair thanked Hayley James for the detailed response that had been provided to the task group's recommendations. He advised the Commission that Simon Williams and Hayley James would be attending its April meeting with a further update on task group recommendations as well as an update on the Volunteering Strategy and action taken on volunteering by the Council's Corporate Management Team

8 NOTE OF MEETING OF THE FINANCIAL MONITORING TASK GROUP, 4 SEPTEMBER 2013 (Agenda Item 8)

RESOLVED: to note the minutes of the financial monitoring task group's meeting of 4 September 2013.

9 WORK PROGRAMME 2013/14 (Agenda Item 9)

RESOLVED:

1. to agree the work programme as set out in the report
2. that the Chair and Vice Chair would prioritise items for the November meeting agenda as it is over-full

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