SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
9 OCTOBER 2013

7.15PM – 9:18PM

PRESENT: Councillor Ray Tindle Russell Makin (in the chair), Councillors Stan Anderson, David Williams, Samantha George, Ian Munn, John Sargeant, Dennis Pearce, Geraldine Stanford (substitute for Russell Makin)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Diane Neill Mills, Councillor Maurice Groves, Councillor Henry Nelless, Councillor Phillip Jones, Councillor Judy Saunders, Councillor Agatha Akyigyina, Councillor Andrew Judge, Cabinet Member, Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration, Councillor Nick Draper, Cabinet Member for Community and Culture, Caroline Holland, Director of Corporate Services, Chris Lee, Director of Environment and Regeneration, James McGinlay, Head of Sustainable Communities, Paul McGarry, Project Manager – Future Merton, Valerie Mowah, Principal Planner (LDF), Rebecca Redman, Scrutiny Officer, Deborah Upton, Group Director of Governance – Merton Priory Homes, Tim Sargeant, Director of Regeneration – Merton Priory Homes

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None.

3 CALL IN – MERTON PRIORY HOMES REGENERATION PROGRAMME

Councillor Diane Neil Mills outlined the reasons for the call in including:

- The lack of consultation regarding the vision that Merton Priory Homes has for the housing stock;
- That meetings were happening formally for a while and that there had been no consultation with ward councillors;
- Reason for urgency in presenting the proposals to Cabinet at last minute was questioned;
- Why were members not given the opportunity to undertake pre decision scrutiny;

- Principles of regeneration were established by Cabinet which will influence the proposals without any ward councillor involvement;
- Residents were more aware of the potential proposals that Councillors were
- Lack of scrutiny of financial information linked to the proposals; and
- Potential changes to the original housing stock transfer agreement and if this will actually result in bringing the housing stock up to the 'decent homes' standard

Councillor Henry Nelless explained that he felt that the decision should be reconsidered due to the lack of early indication that proposals would be commented on by residents; the absence of cross party briefings and the fact that Members were only made aware the day before the Cabinet papers were published. This did not provide enough time for councillors to feed into the consultation process. Councillors were not provided with the opportunity to comment on the nature of the questions and proposals that residents would receive.

Councillor Andrew Judge responded to the reasons expressed and outlined for the call in by arguing that this was not an appropriate call in and that this was not a Cabinet decision but a series of proposals from a third party (Merton Priory Homes) and that consultation with residents first was the priority. Cabinet has simply noted the processes being undertaken by Merton Priory Homes and that the principles drawn up by Cabinet are in draft at this stage and will be firmed up when more concrete proposals have been submitted for Cabinet consideration. Equally, the call in does not reflect the principles drawn up.

Furthermore, the 3 ward councillors for the affected areas were invited to a presentation and a further presentation was held for all group councillors. Cllr Andrew Judge stated that he welcomed scrutiny of the proposals at the appropriate intervals.

Councillor Nick Draper added that nothing has been agreed in terms of a regeneration programme. He agreed that whilst there has been little councillor involvement that opportunities were provided to meet with MPH to discuss the intention to consult.

Chris Lee said that he welcomed the opportunity to consider proposals from MPH which were cited in the transfer agreement, acknowledging the potential for regeneration. Some of the stock transfer doesn't meet the decent homes standard so an approach like this might help. The council welcomes the

opportunity to discuss the proposals with MPH when all of the information is available. The proposals are outside of direct control of Merton Council. The timing is not in the gift of the council and MPH wished to let their residents know about the regeneration scheme without it being put in the public domain by the council. There are matters of commercial confidentiality.

Caroline Holland explained that the original cabinet paper set out issues if the regeneration programme is to go forward and noted the potential financial consequences for the council. However, the recent Cabinet report did not have financial information which is not yet available from MPH.

Deborah Upton explained that MPH customers were their first priority and that the consultation was very important. MPH is at a very early stage in the process. Detailed questions are not being asked as yet as the programme is in an early initial phase. Furthermore, all councillors were invited to events to hear the outline of the process.

Councillor David Williams asked about the officer meetings with Circle Group and why this report to Cabinet was submitted late with a reason for urgency. This is a significant redevelopment programme which, it appears, has had minimal input from Cabinet Members and officers prior to public consultation.

Councillor Andrew Judge explained that the report was presented late to Members days before the consultation began. Cabinet have had little contribution at this stage. Chris Lee added that the level of detail in the proposals is limited and MPH has gone out to consultation. Cabinet have been informed and there will be discussions regarding feasibility but at this point there is nothing to negotiate.

Councillor Samantha George enquired about site maps, any negotiations between MPH and Merton Council, and financial information requested as part of the call in which was not made available in the agenda pack. Councillor John Sargeant added that an oversight of the work of MPH by the Panel had been slight despite requests for information.

Chris Lee said that we are at an early stage at this point and any programme would need to be considered in the context of the transfer agreement and any changes that need to be considered. MPH is a long way off negotiation. There have been no other meetings with the council and a project group has recently been set up to work alongside MPH during this process.

Councillor Dennis Pearce said that he believed ward councillors should be involved at the earliest possible time but that there is little to scrutinise at this stage. Councillor Stan Anderson added that there was nothing to discuss at

this stage and that residents and members should be appropriately consulted when there are more concrete proposals.

Councillor David Williams explained that it was important for members to have clarity on the process and that, as important strategic partners, MPH should be working closely with the council throughout the process.

Councillor Ian Munn stated that ay regeneration proposals and the principles should be firmly linked to the council's core strategy and Local Development Framework.

Councillor Ian Munn argued that councillor input was needed to ensure that there was confidence in the emerging vision being put forward by Merton Priory Homes and that a working party should be set up to enable involvement and input into the development of the proposals. Councillor Samantha George added that MPH was a close strategic partner of the councils and that councillors needed the opportunity to make appropriate comments on the potential proposals. Scrutiny would welcome the opportunity to review the detail surrounding these proposals.

Councillor David Williams enquired about a meeting with a potential tenderer for master planning. Deborah Upton advised that this was not the case as the proposals were in their infancy and not yet agreed by the MPH Board. MPH would not accept any tenders unless and until they had decided that they would proceed to the next stage. The first stage that MPH is at now is consultation and equalities impact assessment. The second stage of the process would involve wider resident consultation as part of the master planning and the MPH board have yet to make a decision as to whether it is proceeding. MPH avoided sharing information at this early stage beyond the Group presentations it offered to ensure that residents did not hear via the press or another third party given that some residents are particularly vulnerable and they wished to minimise any distress or concern caused.

Councillor Ian Munn asked if a more detailed and agreed timetable could be circulated to Members for information.

CLOSED SESSION

The Panel held a discussion in closed session to the public as it referenced an exempt report on the agenda regarding Merton Priory Homes Regeneration Proposals. This information was discussed in private session for the reasons outlined in the exempt report (information relating to the financial or business affairs) and this discussion is detailed in the exempt minutes.

OPEN SESSION

The Panel resumed the meeting in open session and invited residents and MPH Officers back to the meeting. Councillor Ray Tindle summarised the discussion highlighting that informing Councillors of a significant development of considerable value such as this programme was critical. Councillor Ray Tindle stated that there was a clear need for transparency, ensuring that all parties were kept aware of developments associated with the project.

RESOLVED: Panel agreed for the decision to be implemented but that the following recommendations are made to Cabinet for consideration:

a) That Cabinet appreciate the concerns expressed by the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel regarding the lack of clarity on the process and timetabling (which needs to be re-addressed) that gave rise to the call-in;

b) That Cabinet agree that there be a full and timely scrutiny of the Master plan, financial impact of the proposals from Merton Priory Homes, and of the fit with the Borough's Development Framework (and other relevant core strategies);

c) That consideration be given by Cabinet to establishing a cross party Member working group to engage in the process of drawing up proposals for the Merton Regeneration Programme; and

d) That any proposals from Merton Priory Homes regarding regeneration be brought to the Council in due course for full consideration

This page is intentionally left blank