

Agenda Item 3

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OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

24 JUNE 2020

(7.15 pm - 9.20 pm)

PRESENT: Councillors Peter Southgate (in the Chair), John Dehaney, Sally Kenny, Paul Kohler, Owen Pritchard, Nick McLean, Edward Gretton, Joan Henry and Natasha Irons

Co-opted Member Mansoor Ahmad

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Tobin Byers (Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Health and the Environment), Eleanor Stringer (Cabinet Member for Schools and Adult Education) and Daniel Holden

Tom Walsh, Sustainable Merton

Rachael Wardell (Director, Children, Schools & Families Department), Chris Lee (Director of Environment and Regeneration), Katie Halter (Climate Change Manager), Dominique Hill (Climate Change Officer) and Julia Regan (Head of Democracy Services)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies were received from co-opted members Emma Lemon and Colin Powell. Apologies were also received later in the meeting from Councillor Peter McCabe.

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of pecuniary interest from members of the Commission. In relation to agenda item 4, Councillor Eleanor Stringer (Cabinet Member for Schools and Adult Education) declared that she was employed by the Education Endowment Foundation.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

The minutes were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting.

4 COVID 19 PANDEMIC IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE (Agenda Item 4)

The Cabinet Member for Schools and Education, Councillor Eleanor Stringer, introduced the report, drawing members' attention to the impact that the pre-existing housing crisis had on families' ability to cope during the pandemic. Councillor Stringer said that staff in the council's Children Schools and Families department had worked hard to adapt and to implement new ways of working in order to protect services and that staff sickness levels had been lower than initially anticipated. Youth services were

adapted to provide remote and outdoor provision. Home learning opportunities have been provided throughout and the number of children in schools has been increasing and reached over 4,500 this week.

Councillor Stringer said that her main concerns now were an expected increase in the number of children eligible for free school meals and the consequent impact on educational outcomes; an expected increase in safeguarding referrals and the need to continue to deliver planned savings. She said that she was confident that the resilience of staff, partners and children and young people would enable them to rise to these challenges.

Councillor Stringer and the Director of Children, Schools and Families, Rachael Wardell, provided additional information in response to questions:

- Approximately 2,500 children are classed as vulnerable under the government's definition during the pandemic. Staff have made contact with each family to discuss the appropriateness of those children returning to school – many of those with Education Health and Care Plans have chosen to stay at home due to health concerns. Social workers have made home visits to those at high risk and have made virtual contact with others.
- There is a significant variation in the home environment that will impact on children and young people being able to access home learning. As children return to school the first priority will be to help them to settle in and to feel safe and ready to learn. Teachers will then assess and address pupils' learning needs. Teachers are used to providing differentiated learning within the classroom but this is likely to be more complex post-Covid.
- Once the detail of funding available from the National Tutoring programme is known, the council will support schools to access this fund and any other funding opportunities and to use these to the best possible effect.
- The council has been providing advice and guidance to assist all schools to open to as many pupils as possible by thinking imaginatively about how to use available space. Government regulations prevent schools from using other community buildings.
- Youth centres are still not permitted to provide face to face services so services have been redesigned around the detached youth worker model. Zoom and other software has been used for meetings of the Youth Parliament and other groups. The council will be reaching out to existing external funders to encourage them to continue supporting youth services.
- Around 300 school staff are self isolating or shielding, the vast majority of whom are working from home.
- Although there is not currently a shortage of foster carers in Merton, the council is always looking to recruit more and has used this period of time as an opportunity for a fresh campaign to encourage community-minded people to consider this as an option
- Prior to the introduction of the national voucher scheme for pupils on free school meals, schools took a variety of approaches. The national scheme proved difficult to access at first and some families experience difficulty in obtaining and using the vouchers. Although the scheme will continue to fund

families during the summer holiday period, the system is due to finish operation at the end of July so applications to cover the summer holidays must be made prior to that date.

- Other provision in the borough, such as the community fridge, has been extremely effective in providing food to families in need.
- Parents have been reluctant to take children to medical appointments due to the fear of catching Covid 19 and there are concerns that this will have an impact on children's health in the immediate and longer term. Communication to address this has been channelled through schools and other organisations.
- The council is undertaking a corporate piece of work to look at the disproportionate impact that Covid 19 has had on Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and how to mitigate this.

In response to a question about what support is provided to young people who were previously homeless and are now in temporary accommodation, Rachael Wardell undertook to contact the lead officer in the Communities and Housing Department to find out how many young people are affected and what the arrangements are.

ACTION: Director of Children Schools and Families and Head of Democracy Services

5 CLIMATE CHANGE STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN (Agenda Item 5)

The Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Health and the Environment, Councillor Tobin Byers, welcomed the opportunity to bring this issue for pre-decision scrutiny prior to discussion by Cabinet on 13 July. He stressed his personal commitment to the urgency of addressing climate change and the importance of collective action by the council, partner organisations and residents to deliver the desired outcomes.

Tom Walsh, Sustainable Merton's representative on the Climate Emergency Working Group, said that the response to the Covid pandemic demonstrated how much could be achieved when there is a clear rationale, leadership and funding. He said that climate change is a more dangerous threat with the potential for a much greater loss of life and he stressed the importance of lobbying in order to access new sources of funding and redirect existing funding streams.

The Director of Environment and Regeneration, Chris Lee, introduced the report. He re-iterated the urgency of the issue and highlighted the need to ensure that the climate change strategy is linked to other council strategies.

Chris Lee said that the action plan would present a funding challenge for the council, currently costed at £88m but this is certain to change. The increase in remote working will reduce some of the costs of council and other buildings but there is a need to invest, particularly in school buildings, to deliver renewable energy solutions. Also, infrastructure is required across the country in order to deliver the scale of new technology that will provide heating systems for homes, businesses and schools. This is currently unaffordable for most householders.

Councillor Byers, Chris Lee, Katie Halter (Climate Change Manager) and Dominique Hill (Climate Change Officer) provided additional information in response to questions:

- The council's economic strategy is nascent, reflecting the financial situation of the council. The Director will look at how this could be addressed.
- The stakeholder group provided considerable professional expertise and assistance in developing the action plan. The implementation phase will need to reach out across the borough's diverse communities and engage with people for whom climate change is not a priority. Scrutiny of the implementation phase will sit with the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel.
- The climate action plan workshop in February 2020 was attended by Clarion and some private housing developers. Local Plan policies are currently being reviewed to identify how these could embed mitigation measures and more ambitious standards, particularly for new buildings.
- Sustainable travel policies will focus on the promotion of active travel (walking and cycling) as these generate zero emissions and also have health benefits. Electric vehicles will be the preferred option for circumstances in which private vehicle use is essential but these are not carbon neutral when embodied carbon is taken into account.
- The council will apply for all relevant external funding opportunities it is able to as they arise.
- The council is working with London Councils and the London Environment Directors Network to develop a London wide green approach to recovery from the pandemic. The recent statement from the Chancellor of the Exchequer provides grounds for optimism about this.

The Chair read out a number of recommendations to assist Cabinet and Council in taking this important policy initiative forward and to ensure that progress is subject to scrutiny. These were all agreed, with the addition of a specific mention of the promotion of low car and no car environments for new housing developments.

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission therefore RESOLVED to recommend to Cabinet that:

- the Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan be embedded in all Merton's policies where relevant, just as the equalities policy is now;
- the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel should be asked to monitor delivery of the Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan and successor plans for the next 30 years;
- delays in the adoption of the Local Plan be used to check that its policies reflect the ambitions of the Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, including in relation to the promotion of low car and no car environments for new housing developments;
- the role of the voluntary and charity sector, including Sustainable Merton, in encouraging individual actions to mitigate climate change is recognised and supported by the Council.

6 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC - A PROPOSAL FOR RESTARTING THE SCRUTINY PANELS (Agenda Item 6)

The Commission RESOLVED:

- 1 to restart the scrutiny panels, with indicative work programmes as set out in the report
- 2 to agree the work programme for the Commission subject to information being provided to Commission members by email on the progress made during 2019-20 on the Equality and Community Cohesion Strategy Action Plan so that members could take a view on whether this addresses issues highlighted by Black Lives Matter and, if not, whether an additional report could be received earlier than the scheduled April date.

ACTION: Head of Democracy Services

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