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SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 9 JANUARY 2014

(19.15 - 22.03)

PRESENT: Councillors Russell Makin (in the Chair), Stan Anderson, Dennis Pearce, John Sargeant, Ray Tindle, Ian Munn, Gilli Lewis-Lavender and David Williams

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Peter Southgate, Mark Allison and Nick Draper

John Hill (Head of Public Protection and Development, ENVR), Caroline Holland (Director of Corporate Services), Mario Lecordier (Highways and Traffic Services Manager, ENVR), Chris Lee (Director of Environment and Regeneration), James McGinlay (Head of Sustainable Communities), Cormac Stokes (Head of Street Scene and Waste), Simon Williams (Director, Community & Housing Department), Chris Burke (Customer & Performance Officer) and Paul Walshe (Parking Services Manager), Julia Regan (Head of Democracy Services)

Andrew Wakefield

1. MINUTES OF THE CALL IN MEETING HELD ON 9TH OCTOBER 2013
(Agenda Item 1)

RESOLVED: The Panel agreed the minutes subject to an amendment to the attendance list to show that Councillor Russell Makin was not present.

2. MINUTES OF CALL IN MEETING HELD ON 9TH OCTOBER 2013
(EXEMPT) (Agenda Item 2)

RESOLVED: The Panel agreed the minutes subject to an amendment to the attendance list to show that Councillor Russell Makin was not present.

3. MINUTES OF THE CALL IN MEETING HELD ON 6 NOVEMBER 2013
(Agenda Item 3)

RESOLVED: The Panel agreed the minutes subject to two amendments:

- amendment to the attendance list to show that Councillor Peter Southgate's attendance was as a substitute for Councillor John Sargeant and Councillor Miles Windsor's attendance was as a substitute for Councillor David Dean
- amendment to apologies for absence to remove Councillor David Dean as he was present at the meeting.

4. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 12 NOVEMBER 2013 (Agenda Item 4)

RESOLVED: The Panel agreed the minutes subject to two amendments:

- Item 7 – public value review. Amendment to last paragraph on page 17 to replace “Councillor Ian Munn said he had received complaints” with “Councillor Ian Munn said he had received concerns from residents regarding the long absence of a well-regarded streetsweeper and that residents hoped he would get well soon and be re-instated to duties on their streets”.
- Item 9 – parking. Amendment to last paragraph on page 19 to replace “Chris Lee confirmed the approach to be taken was set out in the report” with “Chris Lee confirmed that this would be rolled out where identified as appropriate for the parade. Implementation would be progressed on a parade by parade basis”.

Matters arising – p13 - James McGinlay, Head of Sustainable Communities, confirmed that information on Rainbow Industrial Estates had been sent to Councillor Samantha George as requested.

5. BUSINESS PLAN UPDATE 2014-2018 (Agenda Item 5)

Caroline Holland, Director of Corporate Services, introduced the report and outlined the content. She said that there will be a further business plan update to Cabinet on 20 January in order to take into account the local government financial settlement. The service plans had been provided as context and they would be finalised after the completion of the budget process.

Some members said that they found the report difficult to follow, partly due to its length. They said that members without a financial background would find explanations of the kind provided verbally at the meeting easier to understand than the terminology used in the report.

Revenue budget – amendments to previously agreed savings (pages 41-43)

Chris Lee, Director of Environment and Regeneration, explained the reasons for the proposed changes to the four previously agreed savings (ER07, ER23, EN12 and ENV1).

The Panel expressed concerns at the lack of detail for ENV1 given that the proposed £334k saving is relatively large. Chris Lee and Caroline Holland said that it would be achieved through removing some underspend, income growth and reductions in a number of areas, some of which will not be easy to make. The Panel agreed that it wished to see more detail on how the proposed savings would be made before making a decision on this.

RESOLVED: to recommend that a breakdown of how the proposed ENV1 saving will be achieved should be provided prior to Cabinet making a decision on this item.

In response to a question on the basis of funding for taxi cards and freedom passes (page 30), Caroline Holland said that this had changed and was now mainly based

on usage. Members expressed concern that funding may be reduced if card users didn't touch in and out during journeys.

RESOLVED: to recommend that Cabinet consider how best to raise awareness of the importance of freedom pass users touching in and out during journeys so that the council achieves maximum financial benefit. This may include use of My Merton to communicate the message.

Revenue budget – new savings proposals (pages 59-64, 68-70)

The Panel asked questions about each of the savings proposals and made comments and recommendations as set out below:

EV02 Parking services – parking permit charges

RESOLVED: the Panel noted that the proposal was for a different percentage increase for different types of permit and recommended to Cabinet that any increase should be proportionate and proportional to the current cost of each type of permit.

EV03-EV07 – building and development control

Members said that they thought that this section was already under-resourced and that the draft service plan clearly set out the impact of the proposed changes in terms of reduced performance on key performance indicators (page 284). Panel members expressed unanimous opposition to further staffing reductions in this service area.

Chris Lee said that the proposed reductions would increase the time taken to process planning applications but would still be within the legal timeframe.

Members suggested that a scrutiny task group or other review should look at the whole development control service in order to assess the best approach. John Hill, Head of Public Protection & Development, said that the last scrutiny review had been in 2007/8 and that officers had subsequently carried out LEAN service reviews. Chris Lee added that planning is in a state of flux at present due to uncertainty over government proposals for de-regulation which may reduce costs in future. He said the service is constantly looking for efficiencies, has reduced in size already and although the smallest in London, is one of the highest performing services.

RESOLVED:

1. to ask Cabinet to reject savings EV03-EV07 and to find alternative savings
2. to recommend that the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel set up a task group review of enforcement, development control and building for its 2014/15 work programme, bearing in mind that this is a broad remit and the task group will need to agree focussed terms of reference

EV08 – waste disposal

A member commented on the importance of encouraging residents to recycle more. Chris Lee said that a range of awareness and education methods are used.

EV09 – leisure centres

Chris Lee, Director of Environment and Regeneration, explained that this saving was subject to renegotiation of the contract.

Caroline Holland said that the baseline budget figure was wrong.

EV10- Greenspaces

The Panel noted that the deliverability risk was set at medium and the reputational risk as high. Chris Lee outlined how these assessments had been made and that reputational risk was high due to the high level of public interest. He said that cost reductions could be made by modernising some of the booking systems. He added that Dig Merton (a community food growing project led by Sustainable Merton) was eager to be involved as volunteers in parks and highway green spaces.

Members said that they would like more detail on the implications of the saving – these were all marked as “to be determined through the TOM (target operating model)”. Chris Lee said that the TOM would be developed over the next five months.

RESOLVED: to ask Cabinet to defer consideration of this 2015/16 and 2016/17 saving to next year when more detail will be available.

EV11 – on street pay and display parking charges

In response to questions, Chris Lee and Paul Walshe, Parking Services Manager, said that this proposal is consistent with and follows on from a number of service reviews that have recommended a rationalisation of tariffs and a free parking period of 20 minutes. Changing the tariff structure will require extensive public consultation.

RESOLVED: to recommend that Cabinet accept this saving proposal.

Councillors Gilli Lewis-Lavender, Ray Tindle and David Williams asked for their dissent to be recorded and called for a thorough review of the controlled parking zone structure and charges.

CH5 – Library and Heritage service- reduction in media fund

RESOLVED: that Cabinet should accept the proposed saving.

CH6 – Library and Heritage service – increase income

RESOLVED: that the wording of the savings proposal should be amended to show that increased use of space for income purposes would not encroach into the library core offers such as choice of books.

CH7 – self service libraries at off peak times

In response to questions, Simon Williams explained that the saving would not be achieved until 2017/18 so that different models of service delivery could be piloted and that staff are used flexibly to work in any library as required.

CH8 – reduction of homelessness prevention grant

Panel noted the increased housing demand and the number of people in housing need set out in the Merton 2017 report (page 187) and asked whether, in the light of these, the proposed saving is realistic. Simon Williams agreed that there was a risk that the saving wouldn't be achieved but that the number of people in temporary accommodation is low in Merton and so he considers that the saving is achievable.

Caroline Holland drew the Panel's attention to the details on the housing benefit expenditure increase and an increase in the number in private sector rented accommodation (page 317) and said that there was some flexibility in the budget due to an underspend.

CH9 and CH10 – housing needs and enabling

RESOLVED: to recommend that Cabinet accept these saving proposals.

Capital programme

In response to a question about a seeming disparity between figures set out on pages 79 and 80, Caroline Holland undertook to check them.

The Panel noted that the information in Appendix 4 had already been scrutinised and so focussed its discussion on Appendix 7 which sets out recent movements in the capital programme. Caroline Holland said that, although there is still room for further improvement in forecasting capital spend, she is confident that the figures for 2014/15 are more realistic than previous forecasts.

A member said that it is difficult to interpret the information provided and asked whether there was a different way of presenting the figures. Caroline Holland said that would be difficult because the capital programme is fluid during the year and so there will be different figures in each of the financial monitoring reports. She added that these are examined by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission's financial monitoring task group.

Merton 2017

RESOLVED: to discuss the details at a future meeting of the Panel.

6. STREET LIGHTING CONTRACT - OPTIONS REPORT (Agenda Item 6)

Chris Lee, Director of Environment and Regeneration, introduced the report and said that the current street lighting contract will run till the end of September. The two options are to extend the contract for two years or to re-procure through competitive tendering. He said that officers are likely to recommend the contract extension subject to negotiations because the current contract is working well. Officers are in the process of negotiating further improvements that could be included in a contract extension.

Chris Lee and Mario Lecordier, Traffic & Highways Services Manager, said that they consider the current contract to be competitive and good value for money

In response to questions, Chris Lee and Cormac Stokes, Head of Street Scene and Waste, said that they are in discussion with other boroughs regarding the potential for achieving savings through a shared service and/or a joint contract. Extending the current contract would give time for this to be explored further. Cormac Stokes said that it is not necessary for all boroughs' current contracts to finish at the same time because it can be helpful to the contractor to start these on a phased basis and that this approach has worked for other services.

A Panel member noted the lack of contractor and council resources referred to in the report and asked how much of an issue this was. Mario Lecordier said that the difficulties for the contractor had mainly been due to staff turnover in the first two years of the contract but that the workforce was now stable and performance has improved.

A number of Panel members commented that they thought highly of the street lighting service and the current contractors, based on their own experiences and views received from residents.

RESOLVED: that the officers should take the Panel's comments into account when drafting the report to Cabinet's meeting on 20 January 2014

7. WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 7)

RESOLVED:

1. The Panel agreed to make the Merton Priory Homes report the main item for its meeting on 26 February 2014 and to delete the following items in order to have sufficient time for discussion :
 - Commercial waste
 - Morden town centre regeneration programme

- Quality of footpaths
 - Passing inspection
2. The Panel agreed the following changes to the agenda for its meeting on 23 April 2014:
- add report of the climate change and green deal scrutiny task group
 - delete work programme report
3. The Panel agreed that there should be a meeting of the Public Transport Liaison Committee in June 2014, at a date to be determined by officers.
ACTION: Head of Democracy Services to inform the Future Merton Programme Manager

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