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SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 26 FEBRUARY 2014

(19.15 - 21.45)

PRESENT

Councillor Russell Makin (in the Chair),
Councillor Stan Anderson, Councillor David Dean,
Councillor Samantha George, Councillor Ian Munn,
Councillor Dennis Pearce, Councillor John Sargeant,
Councillor Janice Howard (substitute for Councillor Ray
Tindle)

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillor Andrew Judge, Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration, Councillor Nick Draper, Cabinet Member for Culture and Housing, Chris Lee, Director of Environment and Regeneration, Simon Williams, Director of Community and Housing, James McGinlay, Head of Sustainable Communities, Cormac Stokes, Head of Street Scene and Waste, Mario Lecordier, Traffic and Highways Services Manager, John Hill, Head of Public Protection and Development. Steve Webb, Business Support and Relationship Manager, Wayne Hainsworth, Interim Managing Director (Merton Priory Homes), Pauline Ford, Circle Housing, Rebecca Redman, Scrutiny Officer

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Agenda Item 1)

None.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies were received from Councillor Ray Tindle. Councillor Janice Howard attended as a substitute for Councillor Ray Tindle.

3. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 9 JANUARY 2014 (Agenda Item 3)

Panel agreed the Minutes as a true record of the meeting.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES (Agenda Item 4)

Panel agreed to re-order the agenda.

5. UPDATE ON THE HOUSING STOCK TRANSFER TO CIRCLE HOUSING MERTON PRIORY (Agenda Item 6)

Wayne Hainsworth and Pauline Ford gave a presentation which covered progress to date on delivering the commitments within the stock transfer form

Merton Council to Circle Housing Merton Priory (CHMP). The presentation was tabled and is available on the council's website.

The presentation covered the following:

- Changing environment for the provision and maintenance of social housing;
- Achievements to date following the housing stock transfer;
- Commitments in the housing stock transfer that have been delivered on to date;
- Outstanding commitments and how they are to be addressed;
- Resident involvement in the design and maintenance of social housing;
- Developments to sheltered housing;
- Plans for developing new homes in the borough;
- CHMP Regeneration Programme intentions;
- Current and future investment;
- Welfare Reform and support to residents;
- Neighbourhood renewal and initiatives to increase the number of residents in employment; and
- Support for better financial management by residents

Councillor Dennis Pearce asked about the number of people supported into employment and the possibility of increasing the number in the coming years.

Wayne Hainsworth stated that CHMP are delivering the programme through MTEC with the assistance of a Performance and Reward Grant, this sets out clear targets and CHMP have exceeded these since MTEC opened. It was also highlighted that many of the people supported have vulnerabilities and / or have been long term unemployed and that many clients need a lot of support before they are job ready.

The aim is to increase the numbers going into employment and CHMP are extending the programmes on offer beyond construction to include customer service and health and social care and will continue to invest in this going forward.

Councillor Dennis Pearce asked how CHMP intended to increase the number of new homes. Pauline Ford explained that Circle Housing have a clear development strategy and aim to build 1,250 new homes per annum (nationally) and highlighted that Merton was considered to be a key driver borough for development.

It was highlighted that CHMP have considered all opportunities across land in its ownership to increase units and these are included within the current programme of garage sites. Land is in short supply within the borough and it was highlighted that CHMP and Circle Housing would seek support from LBM in its enabling role support aspirations for future growth in the borough.

Councillor Janice Howard asked if high income earners occupying social housing were an issue. Wayne Hainsworth informed the Panel that this was not an issue in Merton and that CHMP has a range of residents in which a high proportion of those are struggling financially. It was highlighted that many of its residents in receipt of Housing Benefit are actually in employment. Some residents who do have higher levels of income help to create balanced and sustainable communities and CHMP work with partners to offer a range of future housing options including shared ownership to support future aspirations.

Councillor David Dean stated that any new houses needed to have sufficient sized rooms. Pauline Ford explained that residents of Circle Housing are involved in setting design standards for homes. Also as part of the regeneration programme that CHMP are currently consulting on, there will be significant involvement of residents in the master planning process.

Councillor Samantha George enquired about the timetable for master planning for the regeneration programme. Pauline Ford stated that there was a procurement process underway for an organisation to undertake this master planning with Circle Housing/CHMP. There are a number of factors that would determine the timescales and at this stage there is no definitive answer.

Councillor Samantha George asked about repairs and issues with performance against response times. Pauline Ford explained that response times are in place and vary according to the type of repair required and its urgency.

CCH has implemented all the promises and actually now undertakes emergency repairs in 4 hours rather than 12 hours. The issue has occurred with the IT system and response time starting when the call was made or when the repair was logged with the response team as opposed to when the job is received by the contractor. There is work being undertaken to address these IT issues as well as other activities to deliver continuous improvement in this area.

Councillor Samantha George asked about the investment programme and who the new contractor for repairs was. Pauline Ford informed the Panel that United House Limited was the new planned contractor and that they are a reputable family run company which covers a number of social housing companies across London and the South East.

Councillor Ian Munn asked for clarification on the number of new houses target. Pauline Ford explained that the 1,250 target was based across the whole of Circle Housing and re-enforced Circle Housing's commitment to growth within the borough subject to the availability of land.

Councillor Ian Munn asked if CHMP envisaged meeting the 340 new homes which were in the borough plan for Merton for this year. Pauline Ford explained that this target for housing growth was for the whole borough and

included the development of private sector homes as well as those in development by other social housing providers in the borough.

Councillor Samantha George asked about the right to buy scheme and if changes since 2010 benefited CHMP rather than the council. Steve Webb explained that changes introduced by the coalition government have increased the level of discounts available for people under the 'Right to Buy' scheme. This has resulted in an increase in sales but a decrease in the capital receipt. The biggest beneficiary is the tenant. The council share of the sale is significantly less now but there is an increase in sales. The share from the sale to CHMP has increased slightly.

Councillor Samantha George added that there should be a dialogue with Future Merton to look at how we can encourage more houses being built in the borough.

Councillor Samantha George asked if a copy of CHMP accounts could be shared with the Panel. Steve Webb confirmed that this is a public document and it can be shared.

Councillor David Dean asked what percentage of the sale of a house under the 'Right to Buy' scheme the council receives. Steve Webb explained that this amount varies and is dependent upon the type of property house/ flat, the number of bedrooms, the market value and the level of discount.

Councillor Dennis Pearce asked what quality control measures were in place for contractors. Pauline Ford explained that CHMP undertakes regular pre and post inspections on a sample of properties and all works over a certain value. All major works are post inspected and signed off by residents. In addition further audits and checks are carried out on statutory works such as Gas servicing by external consultants.

Councillor Russell Makin asked if CHMP were setting up their own credit union. Pauline Ford explained that the Circle Housing Group are currently looking at this but highlighted the priority is to ensure accessibility of these services in parts of the group where local provision is not available. It was noted that CHMP made a commitment to support the local credit union at the point of transfer and this commitment continues.

RESOLVED: Panel noted the presentation.

6. VERBAL PRESENTATION - POLICY DEVELOPMENTS (CONVERTING COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES TO MEET RESIDENTIAL HOUSING NEED) (Agenda Item 7)

Please refer to the presentation tabled at the meeting which is available on the council's website.

James McGinlay presented on the policy developments in the area of housing, in particular provisions now available to apply to convert business and commercial properties into residential units.

The presentation covered:

- Government incentives to increase home ownership and reduce bureaucracy;
- National Planning Policy Framework 2012 aims to significantly boost the supply of housing via development plans on viable sites meeting an “objectively assessed housing need”.
- Absence of need for planning permission as a result of this framework which is problematic in that no design standards, space standards, or support for necessary local infrastructure etc, have to be captured in an application
- The scheme to convert commercial into residential was introduced in May 2013 with the stipulation that homes must be built by May 2016
- Applications must receive ‘prior approval’
- DCLG refused Merton’s request for exempting Wimbledon town centre and the main industrial estates to seek planning permission if they want to convert to residential with effect from April 2015
- This scheme is being monitored with the Mayor of London to determine the impact on London’s economy. Officers are examining where this might affect Merton

Councillor Andrew Judge stated that Cabinet oppose this scheme due to its negative impact on businesses in the borough, including those that want their premises to grow. Both employment and business activity will be lost through this and some businesses have already been told by landlords that their lease will not continue. Article 4 will allow the council to push for a change in policy in this area.

Councillor David Dean stated that he did not support the policy and asked if it would end in 2016. James McGinlay confirmed that this was a probationary period and it wasn’t clear as yet if this would be extended beyond 2016.

Councillor Ian Munn stated that he was appalled by the prior application regulations and was pleased that officers were trying to resist this scheme. Councillor Ian Munn added that it was disappointing that the council had to wait until 2014 before it was able to issue Article 4.

Councillor David Dean added that we need to avoid building on land that will generate employment opportunities.

Councillor Samantha George asked if officers had been able to determine why Merton is among the highest number of applicants in London. Given that 17 of the 36 applications made were refused by the council, Merton does have some power in this situation.

James McGinlay confirmed that this 3 year period of the scheme introduced a number of measures and it is too early to evaluate these yet. Merton has a good offer which is perhaps why we have had a significant volume of applications. However, the majority of the 36 applications have been refused on the grounds that there was poor conditions on site or due to the impact on infrastructure and transport. However, developers have gone away to address these issues and have made a further application.

Councillor Ian Munn asked a question about Brook House and James McGinlay committed to providing a response outside the meeting via email.

Councillor Janice Howard highlighted that the offices near Home base in Wimbledon Park were vacant for some time and had attracted vandalism. They have now been transformed into housing and this has had a positive effect.

James McGinlay said that the council didn't seek blanket exemption given that some vacant buildings could be used for housing and be of benefit to the area.

RESOLVED: Panel noted the report.

7. SCRUTINY REVIEW - 20MPH LIMITS/ZONES UPDATE (Agenda Item 5)

Chris Lee introduced the report. The data reflects the mix of 20mph zones and limits that the borough has which can include signage and physical traffic calming measures. It is timely now to start carrying out a more up to date piece of work in this area.

Chris Lee added that the police do not have the capacity to enforce these limits and the case for enforcement sadly relies on the number of fatalities in the area. 3 other authorities have rolled out blanket 20 mph schemes. For example, Islington has rolled out a scheme which covers 22% of their roads. This involved a £1.6 million investment.

Chris Lee explained that, given some of Merton's schemes were implemented 5 years ago, it is only now that an appropriate period of time has passed to gather new data and make an evaluation.

Councillor John Sargeant stated that there was an absence of data that would enable the Panel to comment on the feasibility or necessity of 20mph zones and limits in the borough, in line with the earlier council motion of November 2012.

Councillor Dennis Pearce noted that there could be an increase in resident complaints if zones or limits were introduced and traffic took alternative routes to avoid these measures.

Councillor Janice Howard commented on the number of drivers that ignore 20mph zones that just display signage and that physical traffic calming

measures were required. Also this needed to be approached on a street by street basis.

Councillor Ian Munn added that there was not sufficient data to make a decision on if and where 20mph zones and limits should be put in place.

Councillor Samantha George asked when the data needed would be available. Also that benchmarking should be undertaken by contacting Islington and Portsmouth.

Councillor Andrew Judge explained that data didn't exist at the national level and that the effectiveness of these zones and limits needs to be considered on a case by case basis.

Councillor David Dean added that all side roads should be 20mph limits.

Councillor Andrew Judge stated that he was happy to bring back information and data when available to enable the Panel to comment. There is also a programme of road resurfacing and the council could look at traffic calming measures alongside this.

Chris Lee apologised for the lack of progress against the council motion and that data could be collected in 2014 to enable the council to look at where 20mph zones and limits may best be implemented.

RESOLVED: Panel noted the report.

8. PERFORMANCE REPORT - VERBAL UPDATE (Agenda Item 8)

Chris Lee presented the performance information. Councillor Russell Makin asked that any questions be raised outside the meeting via Rebecca Redman and sent to Chris Lee to respond via email.

RESOLVED: Panel noted the information tabled.

9. WORK PROGRAMME 2013/14 (Agenda Item 9)

RESOLVED: Panel noted the work programme.

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