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## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

7 APRIL 2014

(19.15 - 20.45)

PRESENT: Councillor Peter Southgate (in the Chair),  
Councillor Peter McCabe, Councillor Iain Dysart,  
Councillor Samantha George, Councillor Suzanne Grocott,  
Councillor Jeff Hanna, Councillor Logie Lohendran,  
Councillor Russell Makin, Councillor Diane Neil Mills and  
Councillor Dennis Pearce  
Co-opted member Denis Popovs

ALSO PRESENT: Christine Bidwell (Head of Investigations), Hayley James  
(Merton Volunteer Service Council), Julia Regan (Head of  
Democracy Services) and Simon Williams (Director, Community  
& Housing Department)

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

None.

### 2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies received from co-opted member Colin Powell.

The Chair welcomed new co-opted member Denis Popovs to his first meeting of the Commission and offered to meet him separately to outline how scrutiny works in Merton and the contribution that he could make.

### 3. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 11 MARCH 2014 (Agenda Item 3)

Agreed.

### 4. SINGLE FRAUD INVESTIGATION SERVICE (Agenda Item 4)

The Chair said that an additional sheet had been circulated (attached to the minutes) in response to questions that he had raised.

Christine Bidwell, Head of Investigations, introduced the report. She said that the team currently investigate welfare benefit fraud, council tax fraud and corporate fraud (listed in paragraph 2.1). The team has recently merged with the Internal Audit in order to share resources and pool expertise. The government is setting up a Single Fraud Investigation Service into which local authority staff who work solely or primarily on welfare benefit fraud (housing benefits at present and subsequently universal credit) will be transferred to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Each local authority has been asked to identify how many staff would be in scope for transfer to DWP.

Christine Bidwell made further points in response to questions:

- the council receives a grant for administering housing benefit, an element of which is used for investigation of fraud. It is expected that, after the first year, the grant will be cut but, at this point in time, it is not known by how much
- there isn't sufficient information at the moment to model the financial impact of the changes
- one of the challenges is to make sure there will be sufficient remaining staff to deal with corporate fraud
- some fraud is quite sophisticated and is becoming more so

Councillor Samantha George said that she had sat on the Benefit Sanctions Panel in the past and had been struck by the variability of outcome for different councils, with some councils pursuing fraud less vigorously than Merton. She was therefore not surprised that the government had sought to centralise this function.

Members stressed the importance of continuing to receive local information about welfare benefit fraud to inform proceedings on council tax and corporate fraud cases. They also wondered how councillors would convey their view on individual cases known to them through ward casework and how queries would be likely to be dealt with via DWP. Christine Bidwell said that there would be a mechanism for sharing knowledge and extracting data but the detail is not known at this stage.

Members highlighted the need to retain sufficient experienced investigators to carry out the level of work that the council wished to pursue on corporate fraud cases. For example, blue badge fraud is an area that is important to local residents as they are angered by abuse of the system. They also noted the concern expressed in the report that the council could be left vulnerable to fraud if a significant number of investigators are transferred to DWP.

Members wished to continue to monitor to make sure that the council did not lose out financially compared to other councils.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1) that the Head of Democracy Services should summarise the concerns raised at the meeting and send these to the Assistant Director of Corporate Governance and the Cabinet Member for Finance with the Commission's recommendation that these be forwarded to the DWP as part of the council's response on plans for the transfer of staff.

- 2) To recommend that the cabinet member for Finance should quickly determine the council's strategy in relation to the number of staff to be transferred to DWP

## 5. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2013-14 (Agenda Item 5)

Commission members discussed the presentation made by Doctor Freeman, Chair of the Clinical Commissioning Group at the last meeting of the Healthier Communities and Older People Overview and Scrutiny Panel. Members agreed that this item should be included in the Annual Report.

Members noted that further details of the Clinical Commissioning Group's five year strategy will be available in June. They agreed that the Healthier Communities Panel should scrutinise this when it becomes available and, if necessary, move its meeting date in order to do so.

Members discussed the resolution of Council on 5 February in relation to St Helier Hospital and agreed that the Chair of the Healthier Communities and Older People Panel (rather than the Commission) should consider whether he wished to write to Dr Freeman to draw his attention to that resolution.

RESOLVED: to approve the Annual Report subject to the following changes:

- 1) An update on the scrutiny of policing from the Commission's 11 March 2014 meeting
- 2) Inclusion of the discussion of the Single Fraud Investigation Service at Commission's meeting on 7 April 2014
- 3) Inclusion of a paragraph about St Helier Hospital in the Healthier Communities and Older People Panel's section of the report

## 6. PLANNING THE COMMISSION'S 2014/15 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 6)

Members agreed that having the Leader and Chief Executive to the July meeting and the Borough Commander to the meetings in September and March had worked well.

Members had found the census report useful and agreed that it would be important to continue to scrutinise the implications that changing demographics would have on policy and service provision.

RESOLVED:

- 1) to recommend that the incoming Commission repeat the pattern of inviting the Leader and Chief Executive to the July meeting and the Borough Commander to the meetings in October and March in 2014/15.

- 2) to recommend that the Commission and all the Panels should scrutinise how the service departments are using census and other data to identify implications for their service area.

## 7. UPDATE ON RESPONSE TO VOLUNTEERING SCRUTINY TASK GROUP REPORT (Agenda Item 7)

Simon Williams, Director of Community and Housing, introduced the report and welcomed the Commission's continued interest which is adding impetus to volunteering work. He provided a summary of recent volunteering initiatives by each of the council departments:

### Environment and Regeneration

- Dig Merton
- Street Champions

### Community and Housing

- Neighbour to Neighbour – puts people in touch with each other to provide support in an informal way – exploring synergies between this scheme, street champions and neighbourhood watch
- Out and About – volunteers take people with learning disabilities out to an activity that they both enjoy
- Age UK – volunteers visit selected care homes to assess the quality of care and make recommendations for improvement
- Merton Memories Project relied heavily on support from volunteers

### Children, Schools and Families

- Volunteering networks have been set up in a number of primary schools including Morden, The Priory, Merton Park, St Peter and St Pauls.

### Corporate Services

- Financial Capability – volunteers to help people manage their money – being piloted in May/June
- Customer Contact project – exploring ways in which volunteers can support this project in the longer term

Simon Williams welcomed the suggestions made by a member of the Commission for the involvement of other groups in some of the projects. In response to a question he said that the Council had arranged for DBS checks to be carried out at reduced cost for voluntary sector organisations. Also, once volunteers are registered with the DBS update service, they can give a reference number to organisations so they can check the DBS information, again reducing cost.

Members commented and asked questions about progress on some of the task group's recommendations set out in the appendix to the report:

#### Recommendation 5

A member challenged the response and asked if a "light touch" way could be found to implement the recommendation so that volunteers making a significant contribution to council services could receive reduced prices for some library and leisure services. Simon Williams said that administrative costs would be incurred in measuring a "significant contribution". Hayley James added the ongoing monitoring of who is still volunteering to be entitled to the incentive would incur an administration cost also. Simon Williams will be taking a report to the Council's Management Team (CMT) suggesting that a volunteer recognition certificate could be issued (at a total cost of £1000), to coincide with National Volunteers' Week as a first step towards what incentives might be offered.

#### Recommendation 7

In response to a question, Hayley James (Merton Voluntary Service Council) said that those volunteers who already used social media were generally happy to use it to talk about their volunteering and those who didn't use it chose not to do so.

#### Recommendation 11

A member asked how easy it is to get information published in My Merton. Simon Williams said that editorial space is limited and is "hard fought for". He will be asking CMT to identify the promotion of volunteer opportunities as a priority for editorial space. He confirmed that, if editorial space was provided, it would be free of charge.

In response to a question about the merger of Merton Voluntary Service Council and Volunteer Centre Merton, Simon Williams said that the trustees of both organisations are fully committed and see the benefits of the merger. It is on track to be completed by the end of June.

The Chair thanked Simon Williams and Hayley James for the updates and said that the Commission was keen to see the project continuing to make progress and would provide whatever support it could.

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