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SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 3 FEBRUARY 2015

(19.15 – 21:02)

PRESENT

Councillor Russell Makin (in the Chair),
Councillor Stan Anderson, Councillor Daniel Holden
(substitute for Councillor David Dean), Councillor Ross
Garrod, Councillor Tobin Byers (substitute for Councillor
Abigail Jones), Councillor Imran Uddin,
Councillor John Sargeant, Councillor James Holmes

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillor Judy Saunders (Cabinet Member for Environmental
Cleanliness and Parking), Councillor Martin Whelton (Cabinet
Member for Education), Chris Lee (Director of Environment
and Regeneration), Cormac Stokes (Head of Street Scene and
Waste), Yvonne Tomlin (Head of Community Education),
Gareth Young (Business Partner, Community and Housing),
Rebecca Redman (Scrutiny Officer)

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Dean and Councillor Jones.

3. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 8 JANUARY 2015

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

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

Panel agreed to re-order the agenda and consider Item 6 first – call in: waste collection, street cleaning and recycling opportunities.

5. CALL IN: WASTE COLLECTION, STREET CLEANING AND RECYCLING OPPORTUNITIES

Councillor David Dean outlines his reasons for the call in and highlighted the following points:

- Lack of pre decision scrutiny;
- Recommendations of the 2011 Scrutiny Task Group Review of Waste Management and the fact that only two recommendations had been implemented, despite all 22 recommendations being agreed by Cabinet;
- That resources would be better allocated toward Adult Social Care and Merton Adult Education, rather than the wheeled bins pilot;

- Not all residents required large wheeled bins;
- The potentially negative impact on recycling rates and increase in residual waste;
- Increased costs of a wheeled bin service when collecting waste;
- Efficiency of the waste collection process with wheeled bins;
- Issues concerning storage of wheeled bins;
- Costs of processing significant volumes of waste; and
- Why the pilot was necessary

Councillor Judy Saunders agreed that scrutiny had a role to play in considering the outcome of the pilot, and any recommendations that may result from the pilot, such as the introduction of wheeled bins. This issue has been on the council's agenda for some time. One of the recommendations made by the task group was that the council review its position on wheeled bins at a later stage. It is taking this opportunity to do so now when there is ring-fenced funding from DCLG and additional funding available from an underspend in the highways budget. There is an issue with littering and this may be resolved through the wheeled bins approach. At present small recycling bins have no lids and cause an issue regarding litter and capacity. The pilot will be undertaken before any decision is to be made on wheeled bins. There are no plans to roll out wheeled bins borough wide as the council does not presently have the funds.

Councillor James Holmes asked if this was a suitable time to be undertaking this pilot given its cost and the recent cuts to adult social care and adult education budgets. Councillor Judy Saunders responded that there would always be other considerations in the budget at whatever time this pilot was rolled out. If this is taken forward, following the pilot, then it may be funded on a ward by ward basis to manage costs and operational implications.

Councillor James Holmes asked if the Cabinet Member was satisfied that this pilot was a wise course of action and use of funds, as even if the pilot is positive, the council is unable to deliver this scheme immediately. Councillor Judy Saunders explained that the department would assess the findings of the pilot and then make a decision as to how it would roll out the scheme if that was the conclusion of the analysis.

Councillor Daniel Holden asked if the DCLG grant was not solely intended for communications, and other related incentives, to increase recycling rates. Councillor Judy Saunders confirmed that communications had been undertaken and that the mega recycle campaign had not had the intended impact. Therefore other measures, which the fund is allowed to be used for are being taken forward to address the issue. Chris Lee reinforced that the mega recycle programme had minimal success and therefore the department were trialling alternative approaches allowed by the DCLG.

Councillor Daniel Holden asked why the shortfall in the grant was being made up by an underspend in highways when this funding could be better spent elsewhere, for example, in adult social care.

Councillor Judy Saunders added that she appreciated that there were pressures on adult social care budgets, however, her portfolio is in this area and as Cabinet Member she will champion those issues and services for which she is responsible.

Councillor Daniel Holden stated that the underspend in the highways budget would be better spent on repairing roads and pot holes.

Chris Lee explained that the department do not yet know the costs of a borough wide scheme. The costs of recycling and disposal have varied over the years. Recycling now provides an income stream for the council and there are associated benefits in street cleanliness and to the health of the workforce in rolling out wheeled bins. This pilot will establish the net cost to the authority if this scheme is rolled out.

Cormac Stokes added that there had been various developments in the technology used which provide opportunities to move from a gate fee to income from the services that are being provided.

Councillor John Sargeant argued that there was a need for creativity in the budget setting process and that there have been few alterations to the budget despite concerns raised through the scrutiny process about how it had been set. He added that it would have been beneficial to involve scrutiny earlier before a decision was taken on this. The questions within the consultation also need to be seen in advance. Councillor John Sargeant asked if an adequate baseline had been established to compare against the results that the pilot will generate. He asked if the pilot was an exercise to satisfy residents that a course of action has been tested that has already been agreed will go ahead.

Chris Lee reassured members that benchmarking would be established by April. He added that the department were happy to share this information with scrutiny. Outcomes and output performance indicators had been established and both resident satisfaction and recycling rates would also be measured.

Councillor John Sargeant asked if the percentage increase in recycling could be established from the pilot. Cormac Stokes explained that the residual waste, food waste and recycling would be measured by tonnage in advance of and during the pilot. Trends would be established within this 6 month period to establish whether or not the use of wheeled bins has a positive impact on diverting recyclable waste from the residual waste bins. The analysis of the pilot can be shared with scrutiny at a later date.

Councillor John Sargeant asked if the pilot presented an opportunity to establish with residents what size wheeled bins they would want as the choice

given to residents is important. Cormac Stokes confirmed that resident's views would be sought on size etc.

Councillor Tobin Byers asked if any analysis had been undertaken on revenue costs when recycling gets damp and cannot be sold on, and what the associated cost of disposal is. Chris Lee explained that the department would look to make reasonable adjustments where possible to address this. Cormac Stokes added that the council could expect some dividend from a reduction in contaminated waste. There is no contamination expected when wheeled bins are used.

Councillor James Holmes asked if this pilot was the best use of funding rather than re-running the mega recycle campaign. Councillor John Sargeant added that perhaps other methods of educating residents on recycling were more appropriate and also a more appropriate use of funding.

Councillor Daniel Holden enquired about the risks to staff health of certain types of recycling and wheeled bin types and associated collection methods. Chris Lee confirmed that the main cause of muscular skeletal issues was bending to pick up waste sacks and boxes rather than walking and rolling wheeled bins to the collection vehicles.

Councillor Daniel Holden asked if there was an opportunity to sell the wheeled bins on, that will be used in the pilot, upon completion. Cormac Stokes explained that there was a market for wheeled bins with other councils, residents who wish to purchase their own, and also for the council waste collection teams to carry waste to vehicles.

Councillor John Sargeant put forward a motion that this decision be referred back to Cabinet for reconsideration. This motion was seconded by Councillor Daniel Holden. Panel voted 4 in favour and 5 against.

RESOLVED: That the decision taken by Cabinet, at their meeting on 19th January 2015, on waste collection, street cleaning and recycling opportunities go ahead as agreed.

6. ADULT EDUCATION IN MERTON: EVIDENCE AND OPTIONS FOR ACHIEVING A VALUE FOR MONEY SERVICE

Gareth Young introduced the report and sought the Panels views, ahead of Cabinet consideration, on the proposed move to a commissioning model for the delivery of Merton Adult Education Service (MAE).

Gareth Young outlined the arguments for the recommended commissioning model and the benefits to the council and service, in light of Skills Funding Agency grant reduction expected in future years. The design and model put forward is in response to financial information, identified risk to the council and to the type of service that residents have shown they would like to see in the future. The commissioning model also enables the council to retain an adult

education service which can easily be varied in light of grant reduction. It also provides a more flexible cost effective model and enables the council to retain full control over the commissioning process.

Gareth Young outlined the commissioning principles that the service would adhere to.

Councillor Ross Garrod asked if the consultation was open to the wider public or just existing users of Merton Adult Education. Gareth Young explained that the consultation was aimed at the wider public. The aim of the consultation was to allow as many to input as they wished. Most respondents were those that are service users at present but this is to be expected in a consultation of this nature. There were 850 respondents and a range of public meetings were held.

Councillor Ross Garrod asked how close to the make up of users was the data capture on age and ethnicity of respondents within the report. Gareth Young explained that there was a pretty good match to users, but not as good a match to the population of Merton as a whole.

Councillor Imran Uddin stated that there needed to be sufficient monitoring and review of the results of the operation of a commissioning model, once implemented, to determine with providers and users how effective this model is. Gareth Young explained that commissioned providers would be responsible for ensuring certain outcomes and user satisfaction. Provision can be varied dependent upon the outcome of on going monitoring and review of existing contracts and an analysis of user satisfaction. He added that this model wouldn't necessarily alleviate the full impact of a reduction in the Skills Funding Agency grant. There would have to be further cuts to the service if grant was reduced. This commissioning model however, enabled the council to respond to this reduction in grant funding.

Councillor John Sargeant enquired about the potential cuts to vocational versus community learning courses and how it would be decided which courses to cut. Gareth Young explained that these courses have separate funding pots and therefore this is not a decision that will be made by the council, but reflective of the cuts to the grants received for either type of course.

Councillor James Holmes stated that the commissioning principles needed to be meaningful and there should be full commitment to them. Councillor Martin Whelton added that these basic principles would be implemented if there was a move towards a commissioning model and full commitment to their delivery.

Councillor James Holmes asked what these principles meant in practice. Gareth Young explained that tutors would have TUPE rights and have the right to be retained. Appropriate environments for certain learner groups, such as those who are older or have disabilities, would be commissioned and students would be engaged in the design of these services. A stakeholder group would

also be set up internally to manage the commissioning process on an area by area basis and would engage with service users.

Councillor James Holmes enquired about the task group of adult skills and employability, that was previously undertaken by the Panel, and the recommendations made regarding MAE and courses for career development. Councillor James Holmes asked if these courses were being referred to in the economic skills agenda highlighted within the report. Gareth Young explained that the colleges were already working on implementation of the recommendations that were agreed.

Councillor John Sargeant stated his reservations about South Thames College being the main provider of courses and asked if they would be the predominant supplier. Gareth Young explained that South Thames College would be the dominant provider as they have the required facilities to deliver certain courses. The council would want to approach this relationship as a partnership. Councillor Martin Whelton added that there would be some smaller providers and flexibility in service provision, where necessary.

Councillor Daniel Holden proposed that the Cabinet Member should publicise his pledge to the commissioning principles outlined within the report.

Councillor John Sargeant asked what residual cost was to the council after the commissioning model was setup. Gareth Young drew Members attention to the residual overheads within the report at paragraph 2.35. This would cover management, staff, and fixed costs over time and would be adjusted to make the service cheaper to deliver or for it to be provided in different ways.

Councillor Stan Anderson asked if the council could commission specialist tutors if the preferred providers were unable to deliver a specific course. Gareth Young explained that this would be the case.

Councillor Daniel Holden asked what additional resource was required from council staff outside of the MAE service to support the commissioning process. Gareth Young explained that this was funded by a grant from the Skills Funding Agency.

Councillor John Sargeant highlighted that residents raised the issue with the wording of the questions in the public consultation. They felt the questions were not well conceived. Councillor Martin Whelton agreed that there were some valid points regarding the construction of the consultation questions. Gareth Young added that the consultation included open questions to get a sense of where people's priorities lie. The survey was designed to get a wider sense of what people valued in the service.

Councillor James Holmes added that the officer was making reasonable assumptions but that the Panel needed to see things happen and for the commissioning principles to be committed to and communicated to residents.

RESOLVED: Panel agreed to forward a reference for Cabinet consideration at their meeting on 16th February which would outline the following recommendations:

- a) That the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel support the recommendation that a commissioning model be adopted for the delivery of an adult education service in Merton;
- b) That Cabinet communicate their commitment to the commissioning principles outlined within the report at paragraph 3.14, in particular, the retention of staff, where possible, and the development of a nurturing environment for learners; and
- c) That Cabinet consult the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel at key stages of the implementation of the commissioning model to enable the Panel to undertake pre decision scrutiny.

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