

# **Merton Council - Call-in: Adult Education in Merton: Options Appraisal – Response document**

## **Introduction**

On 16<sup>th</sup> February 2014 the Cabinet agreed to the following recommendations within a Cabinet report entitled Adult Education in Merton – evidence and options for achieving a value for money service:

- A. That Cabinet consider the evidence, including the financial analysis, responses to the public consultation and the equalities analysis
- B. That Cabinet reconfirm their commitment to offering adult education services in the borough and their continued rejection of the previously outlined option 6 to cease offering these services.
- C. That Cabinet approve the recommendation to move Adult Education to a Commissioning model (option 4) for the reasons outlined in 3.9 and based on the financial analysis provided in 2.1 That this is based on a commissioning strategy that seeks to provide courses in a diversity of locations around the borough and to make arrangements with providers that provide a supportive and nurturing environment for learners.
- D. That Cabinet endorse the equalities action plan (appendix H)
- E. That Cabinet adopt a series of core principles to underpin future commissioning of this service, in addition to a phased commissioning timetable (3.14)

The Cabinet report was accompanied by a “Reference from Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel – Adult Education in Merton: evidence and options for achieving a value for money service” after the Panel had conducted pre-decision scrutiny on the above report. This reference contained the following recommendations:

That the Cabinet consider the following recommendations made by the Sustainable Communities O&S Panel further to undertaking pre decision scrutiny of Adult Education in Merton: evidence and options for achieving a value for money service:

- 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; and
- 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.
- 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.

Cabinet accepted the recommendations of the Scrutiny panel.

The Cabinet decision on the substantive report was Called-In on the 23<sup>rd</sup> February.

This short covering note is designed to respond to points raised within that ‘Call-In’ notice and to furnish additional information required by the Call-In.

## **Issues raised within the Call-In notice**

### **1) Proportionality and consideration and evaluation of alternatives**

## **Budget**

The Call-in mistakenly states that the current service 'generates a gross surplus for the Council and makes a significant contribution to the central corporate overhead.'

Whilst it is true that the adult education service contributes to paying for its overheads this is very different to stating that the service generates a gross surplus; a statement which suggests that the overheads are not part of the running costs of the service.

The issue of overheads was explored within the Cabinet report including in Appendix A (1.50-1.55) in response to questions raised by the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel who wanted to understand the difference between the controllable and non-controllable overheads; i.e. those directly related to service delivery and those that are a product of cost sharing across the whole local authority (such as health and safety or data protection). Again, these are detailed in Appendix A.

### **Splitting Adult Skills Budget (ASB) and Community Learning (CL) funding**

Members of the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel requested that some work be done about splitting the ASB and CL funding and whether this could be a robust model for the future of the service. This work was done and presented to the Cabinet for their consideration.

The Call-in queries why this information was not presented to the public and argues that this casts doubt on the decision making process.

As the desk-top exercise details this work did not present a viable alternative to the options presented to the public. Nor did any member of the public suggest that as an option in the section of the consultation that requested alternatives. The purpose of the consultation, and indeed or pre-decision scrutiny, is to ensure that the Cabinet are able to make an informed decision and we believe the combination of the consultation and the additional work ensures that this happened appropriately.

### **Other consultation concerns**

The Call-in also argues that the approach within the consultation of presenting a number of mutually exclusive options was misleading.

This does mis-represents the consultation. As outlined in previous reports, the options consulted on included hybrid options. In addition, the consultation was actually far broader than a simple referendum about 5 options; instead it tried to discern from services users and interested residents what they valued about the service and what was important to them as we designed a new service. Presenting additional hybrid options that had already been discounted using the desktop analysis would not have changed that element of the consultation.

### **Scrutiny Review**

The Call-in refers to the recommendations from the Adult Skills and Employability scrutiny task group and argues that these could have allowed the service to return to a break-even position, even in light of future SFA grant cuts.

The recommendations largely focus on income generation. Unfortunately, the evidence so far has not been positive, a position that was once again referenced in the Cabinet report (2.21 onwards) in a detailed discussion of the income needed to bring the College to a break-even position.

With a lack of tangible evidence that this is possible at the level needed by the service and no business case available to back up any claims that this is deliverable it would be highly unlikely that they could deliver the income targets required. Meanwhile, it seems more likely and is more fully evidenced that the council as commissioner will be able to deliver against these recommendations.

## **Risk management**

In 12.13 of the November report to Cabinet it states under option 4:

***This option is recommended as it would move financial risk away from the council,*** make the best use of the local providers in Merton and maximise the benefits to the service users by reducing the amount spent on non-teaching activities. As commissioners the council will be in a position to steer provision and the spread of venues so that the service fully addresses the challenge of “bridging the gap” between east and west. This option is also the most likely to provide long term cost certainty and stability to adult education provision in Merton.

This is the first line of the officer recommendation and has remained consistent throughout.

It was a mistake to not refer to this again in section 17.

### **2) Due consultation and the taking of professional advice from officers;**

#### **Whatley**

The Call-in argues that the consultation was leading and intended to get a certain set of answers from residents. This is a position we reject and in fact the report notes that a majority of respondents preferred option 1, no change.

The Call-in then argues that the report ignores the responses of users who value the Whatley site. The responses in favour of this are all presented to Members to consider – indeed, the chart immediately following 2.79 shows that 178 respondents who gave a reason for their preference says that they valued the Whatley site. Indeed, in section 2.116-2.117 the paper reports:

It is clear from the consultation that people value the current service. However they see the service as indistinguishable from the current main delivery site at Whatley Avenue. They value the site as among other things: a nurturing environment, a community asset, an ideal location, providing good facilities and as a good location for adults of all ages, abilities and requirements to learn.

As such, a lot of the opposition to any of the alternative options stems from concern about the future of the Whatley Avenue site and whether the provision provided at that site could be replicated elsewhere.

### **3) respect for human rights and equalities;**

#### **Respondents**

The Call-in is concerned about the provision for learners with disabilities. We have committed to working with the learners concerned to develop provision through a gradual implementation process to make sure we get this right.

The Call-in is also concerned that the consultation did not attract a truly representative sample of the Borough. This is true and reflected in the report however we do not believe this devalues the consultation which reached a large population and was accompanied with other consultation feedback.

However, it is worth noting that we did make special effort to engage with ESOL users and learners with disabilities and this was not reflected in the Call-in's reference to a concern about limited response from learners from a BME background. Many of these learners may have used the alternative route.

**4) a presumption in favour of openness; and e) clarity of aims and desired outcomes;**

The Call-in returns to claiming a changing rationale for the changes and queries the potential future usage for the site. As mentioned above the financial sustainability of the provision and the removal of financial risk has been a key part of the recommendations throughout this process.

The issue of the site has come up many times with respondents concerned about the use of the site for housing or, as referenced within the Cabinet report and the Call-in, as a site for a new school.

The council has been transparent that Harris Federation expressed an interest in the MAE site during the future of adult education consultation period as a possible location for a Free School. Equally, the council has been clear that no decision on possible alternative uses for the site would be taken before the future direction for adult education was known.

No decision on the issue of the site was considered within the report and this discussion will need to follow a final decision on the model of delivery.

Documents supplied

- Cabinet Report and appendices
- Scrutiny panel reference
- Miscellaneous e-mails

*Gareth Young 27/2/15*

	<b>RECOMMENDATION</b>	<b>PROPOSED ACTION</b>	<b>LEAD OFFICER</b>	<b>PROGRESS UPDATE NOV 2014</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Recommendation 10</b> That Cabinet, in consultation with local businesses, considers the viability of offering additional courses/training that meet employer demand and may increase the employment opportunities of residents in the borough. The Task Group acknowledges that any delivery model and the courses that will be delivered are part of a wider Cabinet decision on the outcomes of the Public Value Review being undertaken of Merton Adult Education. (MAE)	Business consultation training needs exercise to be undertaken. MAE have engaged with the Tesco South Kensington and New Malden branches regarding IT and ESOL training for staff	Yvonne Tomlin MAE	<p>Much networking has been undertaken to capture some training needs.</p> <p>Survey of local businesses has not yet been completed</p> <p>Have liaised with Wimbletech campus in offering free and reduced rates on room usage at Wimbledon and Whatley site this has resulted in increased requests for room lettings.</p> <p>Room letting promotion has commenced with listings on a number of key sites, in the Google search for venues in Wimbledon MAE is high on the list</p>
<b>11</b>	<b>Recommendation 11</b> That Cabinet explore the possibility of offering an enhanced set of courses and qualifications that are more attractive to employers for example, offering bespoke training to local companies or diplomas that enable students to graduate and move into the second year of a degree programme.	<p>Discussion underway with the Higher Education Funding council regarding degree programmes.</p> <p>Consultation on the types of courses required will be integrated in the survey in point 10.</p> <p>Bespoke Adult Social Care courses being developed for launch in the new year. The service has undergone a staffing re-structure whereby new commercially focused sales roles have been established.</p>	Yvonne Tomlin MAE	<p>Discussions with ABE, a business focused examination body, began in March 2014.</p> <p>Two report writing courses have been developed one focused on Social Workers the other a more generic audience. The course has been developed in partnership with 'Create Expectation'. The first course is due to launch in May 2014.</p> <p>Further social media, marketing and business courses under development, with plans to launch in June.</p>
<b>12</b>	<b>Recommendation 12</b> That Cabinet support the development of the Merton Adult Education	Development and implementation of commercial business plans.	Yvonne Tomlin	The service has completed the Target Operating Model (TOM) exercise and produced action plans for the

	service as a commercial brand, alongside longer term work on further developing the reputation and provision of MAE.			commercial short courses.  Adult Learning Review has resulted in further activity taking place a decision is due to take place in January 2015 regarding the future of MAE
<b>13</b>	<b>Recommendation 13</b> That Cabinet consider setting up a virtual Merton Business School that will support Merton residents and existing and prospective businesses.	MAE will develop further for possible implementation in 2015	Yvonne Tomlin	This is built into the College's future service plans
<b>14</b>	<b>Recommendation 14</b> That Cabinet agree to Merton Adult Education (MAE) becoming accredited to deliver higher level qualifications and to engaging local in the delivery of these courses.	Discussion underway with the Higher Education Funding council regarding degree programmes.  Currently delivering the CELTA Cambridge higher level qualification	Yvonne Tomlin	MAE is exploring extending the curriculum offer to include Access Courses.  ABE offer degree level courses, discussions began in March 2014.  ABE Accreditation to deliver Higher Education Qualifications has been prepared, submitted and approved, a range of leadership and marketing courses now on offer. A specifically designed marketing campaign is being developed for launch in 2015  Contacted Kingston University regarding possible partnership working. A successful meeting took place at the university whereby we have agreed enrichment activities for our Early Years programmes as this could result in progression onto the Kingston widening participation degree