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HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES AND OLDER PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

20 OCTOBER 2016

(7.15 pm - 9.00 pm)

PRESENT Councillors Councillor Peter McCabe (in the Chair),
Councillor Brian Lewis-Lavender, Councillor Suzanne Grocott,
Councillor Sally Kenny, Councillor Abdul Latif,
Councillor Marsie Skeete Councillor Russell Makin Councillor Ian
Munn and Saleem Sheikh

ALSO PRESENT Councillor Tobin Byers, Councillor Imran Uddin, Councillor John
Sargeant, Councillor Michael Bull, Councillor Abigail Jones.
Simon Williams Director of Community and Housing, David
Keppler, Head of Revenues and Benefits, Steve Langley Head
of Housing Needs and Stella Akintan, Scrutiny Officer.

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors; Mary Curtin and Laxmi Attawar and co-opted member Hayley James.

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

Councillor Michael Ball declared that he is a trustee at Faith in Action; Councillor Russell Makin declared that he is a Credit Union Representative.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

4 THE IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM ON VULNERABLE GROUPS (Agenda Item 4)

The Chair welcomed members of the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel to the meeting.

Andy Fairbairn, Drop-in Manager from Faith in Action (FIA) gave an overview of his report stating that they provide a twice a week drop-in session for the homeless. Attendees are given lunch and help to write C,V's and complete job applications. The aim is to people to secure employment, which is the best route out of homelessness. One of the big challenges for the future is that universal credit will be paid into a bank account and homeless people will be affected as they cannot open an account without a permanent address.

The chair invited Andrew Wakefield to provide an update on the progress Croydon Credit Union has made in seeking to tackle this issue. Mr Wakefield stated that they are looking into opportunities for the credit union to offer bank accounts to the homeless, which local authorities are not able to do. This work is still in the early stages and he will report back in due course.

A panel member asked FIA if they co-ordinate with other charities who provide similar services. Mr Fairbairn reported that they have links with other drop in services.

A panel member asked how many people use the service and if more could be provided for with adequate resources. FIA responded that they support sixty people per day. The size of the venue is limited so people may have wait before they are served.

Councillor Bull as Trustee highlighted that FIA can face difficulties in attracting funding for running costs, as donors often like to fund new projects.

A panel member asked if the financial value of FIA has been quantified. FIA said it can be difficult to quantify the impact they are having because if a client gets job as a result of the support they received they no longer require the service and they are unlikely to hear from them again.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits said there is a small resource within his team that helps to mitigate the impact of welfare reform. They help people to apply for benefits therefore in the first five months of this year the council has saved £140,000 in savings as a result of helping people to claim the benefits they are entitled to. Merton and Lambeth Citizens Advice who has a larger team were able to make savings of £312,000.

The Head of Operations at Citizens Advice and the Head of Revenues and Benefits agreed to support FIA in calculating the added value of their work, to look at possible venues for the drop in sessions and look at the feasibility of sending benefits advisors to FIA drop in sessions.

A panel member suggested that there needs to be help with publicity, co-ordination and a celebration of their work.

The Housing Needs Manager highlighted the social value of organisations such as FIA as they are reducing rough sleeping, anti-social behaviour and criminality. Also, once people are employed it helps tackle the other issues they may be facing.

The Chief Executive of Merton Centre for Independent Living gave an overview of the report stating that they are funded by the council and conduct policy and strategy work. Many of these issues have been raised before and it is important that they are now translated into action.

The Chief Executive said welfare reform was exacerbated by the volume, complexity, interlinked and irreversible nature of the changes. For example a person's benefit entitlement can be wrongly downgraded in which case they need to lodge an appeal.

This can be a lengthy process in which time people could lose other entitlements such as mobility car, which can lead to loss of employment and homelessness and a downward spiral. By the time the assessment takes place and the benefit is restored it is too late to re-instate all that has been lost.

The Chief Executive reported that possible actions to address this issue include;
Ensure that support allowance and housing benefit is not ended simultaneously.

Improve work practices and physical access to local benefit centres.
Provide Resource local partners to provide money management and debt advice.

Most importantly we need to ensure that social care receives adequate funding.

A panel member said universal credit will consist of one monthly payment so people will need advice on money management. The Head of Revenues and Benefits said Universal Credit is being rolled out in one postcode area in Merton. It is not paid for the first seven days. Some first time payments have not been paid for up to seven to eight weeks. The council has £430,000 for discretionary housing payments to support benefit claimants who are facing financial difficulty. This government has asked this to be used to support those affected by the under occupation subsidy, however the cost of the subsidy is £750,000.

The Housing Needs Manager said the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) are trying to safeguard people and protect them from losing their homes. They would be best placed to respond to councillors concerns about the roll-out of universal credit.

The Chief Executive of Merton Centre for Independent Living said they have not taken on any new cases for the last four weeks as they cannot meet the demand. They have also calculated their added value and found that the council provided £804,000 and they have provided £830,000 for the community.

A panel member said we could invite DWP to the panel or send them case studies on the impact of welfare reform.

The Panel also discussed the impact of the potential Adult Social Care precept which could raise additional funding for social care.

The Head of Operation at Merton and Lambeth Citizens Advice gave an overview of the paper he provided and stated that providing people with information is not enough as some people need additional help and support to respond to the impact of welfare reform. Staff are working tirelessly to support people which can be difficult when they present with a range of problems including mental health issues. Local partners are working to ameliorate the impact and not only sharing information but also by looking at co-location of services.

A panel member highlighted that there are a number of operational difficulties that need to be resolved. A panel member asked if it would be useful if there was a formal partnership approach. The Head of Operations said it depends upon the local circumstances and there are good examples around the country on how this has been done.

The Chair of the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel thanked the Panel for inviting them to their meeting and highlighted the insight she had received by focussing on the real human impact of the budget savings.

The Chair thanked all the speakers for attending the Panel and for all their work with vulnerable groups

RESOLVED

Welfare Reform Group to work with Faith in Action to look at value added cost calculations and welfare advisors attending their drop-in sessions.

5 SUSTAINABILITY AND TRANSFORMATION PLAN (Agenda Item 5)

Dr Andrew Murray gave an overview of the presentation highlighting that the Sustainability and Transformation Plan (STP) will focus on prevention and out of hospital care. The current health system is unsustainable in its current form. It is hoped that the NHS will have a balanced budget by 2020. Dr Murray stated that the final Sustainability Transformation Plans for all London areas remain confidential at this stage. Dr Murray reported that in regards to the future configuration of health services in South West London, it is likely that there will be four acute hospital sites although this has not been finalised nor confirmed at this stage.

A panel member asked why the report is confidential; Dr Murray reported that NHS England has asked for it to remain confidential as it is still being developed. The draft will be submitted on the 21st October, there will be an assurance process, this will be followed by feedback and final amendments, then the report will be published.

Both the Chair and Vice Chair, who are members of the South West London Joint Health Scrutiny Committee expressed concern that the Panel had not been given the opportunity to comment on the draft STP. It was highlighted JHOSC members were also only given 24 hours to respond to the very large document.

The Cabinet Member of Adult Social Care and Health said there has been lots of frustration at the process and many would like the draft STP to be a public document. However good work is taking place within the health sector, including plans to integrate health and social care. The STP will make significant improvements in out of hospital care, so it is important not to lose sight of the bigger picture.

A panel member expressed concern that the current plans are very similar to those given fifteen years ago under Better Healthcare Closer to Home proposals and that local councillors have not been involved in the process.

A panel member said demand for health services is increasing yet supply is being decreased. As the world's fifth largest economy we not have to resign ourselves to the fact we cannot afford five hospitals in south west London. There will be a significant impact on older and vulnerable residents if they have to travel to St George's or Mayday hospital's.

Dr Murray said supply is not being reduced but rather provided in a different way. There are no proposals to close services but re-profiling what is provided in hospitals. Many people present to Accident and Emergency departments but it is not the best place for them.

RESOLVED

The Chair thanked the Merton Clinical Commissioning Group for attending the meeting.

6 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 6)

The work programme was noted.