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OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

11 NOVEMBER 2020

(7.15 pm - 9.10 pm)

PRESENT: Councillor Peter Southgate (in the Chair),
Councillor Brenda Fraser, Councillor Paul Kohler,
Councillor Owen Pritchard, Councillor Nick McLean,
Councillor Edward Gretton, Councillor Joan Henry,
Councillor Natasha Irons and Mansoor Ahmad

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors

Caroline Holland (Director of Corporate Services)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Peter McCabe (Cllr Ben Butler as sub)

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of pecuniary interest.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

The minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record.

4 BUDGET/BUSINESS PLAN SCRUTINY (ROUND 1) (Agenda Item 4)

The Director of Corporate Services gave a brief overview of the Business Plan drew the Panel's attention to Appendix two which has an update of Covid costs and some of the grants received.

The Local Government Settlement will be announced before Christmas. Savings proposals will be brought to the December Cabinet Meeting, with all scrutiny Panels having the opportunity to review these in the New Year.

Any further savings required and the outcome of the settlement will go to 18 January Cabinet with an additional meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on 17 February 2021 to scrutinise.

In response to Panel Member questions, the Director of Corporate Services provided additional details:

- A 2% increase in Council Tax has been assumed but no Adult Social Care precept as yet.
- 1% in Council Tax is worth £900,000 in revenue.

- We have not yet had confirmation of what our allocation for the Local Government Income Compensation Scheme is.
- The budget gap going into the new financial year would have been £1.3 million. Due to the impact of COVID-19, the gap has risen to £15 million.

The Panel moved on to look at the individual savings in the report and asked further questions of clarification;

- The Chair noted the lack of Equality Impact Assessments. The Director of Corporate Services reported that full information and risk assessments will be added to the savings pack in the December
- The number of children's centres has remained unchanged but the range of services being delivered from the buildings has reduced. It makes sense to consolidate the offer into fewer locations therefore prioritising the service delivery over keeping a particular number of buildings open.
- ENV2021-04 will be coming to the 8 December Sustainable Communities scrutiny panel.
- A revised Carers Strategy will be presented to the Health & Wellbeing Board, taking into account the impact of Covid, the increase in number of carers and the importance of respite for these carers.
- The Dementia Hub contract ends in September 2021. The service will be reviewed with a view to enhancing the service and a potential move to Colliers Wood Library which is a dementia friendly building.

The Panel RESOLVED to make a recommendation to Cabinet;

"Members welcome the opportunity to scrutinise the draft budget, and appreciate the difficulties officers have faced in compiling it under the exceptional stress of the pandemic.

Members endorse the split between Covid and non-Covid elements of the budget deficit, with savings limited to the non-Covid elements.

Because of the delay to the Spending Review, Cabinet is asked to defer decisions on the non-Covid savings until the funding position is clearer.

In the absence of equalities impact assessments, members ask Cabinet to defer decisions on the following savings:

- Rationalisation of children's centres
- Review of in-house day-care provision
- Review of in-house LD residential provision
- Dementia Hub re-commissioning

The size of the Covid gap potentially overwhelms the council's General Fund, and members endorse the LGA's position "It is vital that the government addresses in full the financial challenges facing councils as a result of Covid-19, including all lost income and local tax losses".

5 VOLUNTARY SECTOR CAPACITY (Agenda Item 5)

The Chair welcomed Simon Shimmens, CEO Merton Voluntary Service Council, and Lysanne Eddy, Interim Policy and Scrutiny Manager, to the meeting.

The Interim Policy and Scrutiny Manager and CEO of MCVS both gave a short presentation to supplement the report already circulated.

In response to Panel Member questions, the Interim Policy and Scrutiny Manager provided additional details;

- Our short term approach is to make funding available to the sector and work with them to set up the Merton Community Response Hub. We will continue looking for opportunities to use the voluntary sector as front line defence to support communities which has been a real success in Merton.
- Looking at long term modelling, we will look at what have we learnt and how services could be offered differently in the future.
- Some smaller groups serving BAME communities identified in the survey that they felt they may not be able to survive the pandemic. These smaller organisations were prioritised and we ensured our resources moved towards supporting them
- We recognise the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health and we are focusing on young people's voices and looking at how we can provide more support.
- We are mindful to work across the range of organisations (we have around 600+ on our database)

6 RECOMMENDATION FROM THE FINANCIAL MONITORING TASK GROUP (Agenda Item 6)

The Chair introduced the recommendation from the Financial Monitoring Task Group which asked Cabinet to review the appropriateness and fairness of the Disability Related Expenditure disregard of £10 per week which has remained unchanged for ten years.

A Panel Member raised concerns about going forward with a proposed raise in costs given the current circumstances and the items discussed tonight and suggested this recommendation should be delayed.

Panel Members were interested to see costings of this proposal. The Scrutiny Officer clarified that if the RPI was applied over those ten years it would give a figure of £13.50. There are 762 customers that receive a DRE so rough costings could be supplied.

The Panel agreed the item should return back to the Commission once the budget picture is clearer as, in the meantime, customers can apply for the discretionary element by supplying additional evidence to the Financial Assessments Team.