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OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

10 NOVEMBER 2021

(7.15 pm - 9.10 pm)

PRESENT: Councillor Peter Southgate (in the Chair),
Councillor Peter McCabe, Councillor Ben Butler,
Councillor Billy Christie, Councillor Paul Kohler,
Councillor Nick McLean, Councillor Aidan Mundy,
Mansoor Ahmad, Councillor John Dehaney,
Councillor Thomas Barlow, Roz Cordner, Councillor Sally Kenny
and Dr Stannard

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Owen Pritchard
Matt Burrows (Head of Communications and Customer
Experience), Frank Dick (Interim Head of Recovery) and
Caroline Holland (Director of Corporate Services)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

No apologies were received.

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of pecuniary interest.

3 MINUTES OF MEETING ON 8 SEPTEMBER 2021 (Agenda Item 3)

The minutes of the meeting on 8 September were agreed.

4 MINUTES OF CALL-IN 19 OCTOBER 2021 (Agenda Item 4)

The minutes of the call-in were agreed with one amendment. Amend minutes of call-in - Record the fact Cllr Martin Whelton stated he was going to hold Clarion to account and take a robust approach to doing so.

5 BUDGET/BUSINESS PLAN (Agenda Item 5)

To note: Included within the agenda pack were the October Cabinet papers with the first iteration of the business plan. On the day of the Commission meeting, further business plan information that had been approved at Cabinet on the 8 November was circulated to Members of the Commission. This business plan provides an update on the government's autumn budget and spending review and it also includes the draft capital programme.

The Director of Corporate Services provided an overview of the report including the various issues and assumptions.

Some of the current challenges are;

- Prices - particularly energy costs and rising inflation - so we've had to adjust some of the assumptions that we put into our previous MTFS to allow for this.
- Pay awards - the unions have currently rejected the current offer of 1.75% so we've adjusted pay inflation across the MTFS as well.
- Impact of the reversal of the emissions based charging proposals.

The council won't know its specific settlement allocation from central government until mid-December. Therefore the January update to the scrutiny panels will have details of the impacts of that information along with some additions to the capital programme and sales proposals.

Within the budget and spending review the government did confirm that it will allow local authorities to levy a 1% adult social care precept and it's also expected that the threshold for council tax will remain at 2%

In response to questions from Commission Members, the Director of Corporate Services clarified the following;

We have adjusted the level of inflation we were allowed for in 22/23. The expectation is that inflation will start to fall again so we have dropped it back down in future years.

The £1m set aside for Your Merton is to utilise in the short term for the priorities that have come out of the Your Merton engagement work. The first tranche of that £1m was drawn down to utilise for street scene works so £250,000 will be spent on those in the short to medium term.

In terms of maximising grant funding, some of it is a decentralised approach because some of the grants we receive are very specific. For example, the disabled facilities grants which we use for adaptations in people's homes. Trying to maximise the use of that as much as possible enables people to be discharged from hospital or it can enable people to stay independent in their own home.

There's LIP funding that comes through from TFL so again trying to maximize and align our priorities around cycle networks and road works

There are very few capital grants that don't have conditions attached to them.

Depending on the outcomes of the conversations with the DfE and whether we have made correct assumptions around the settlement figures, these numbers could change come January.

6 YOUR MERTON - PRESENTATION BY ROB FRANCIS FROM TRAVERSE (Agenda Item 6)

The Commission welcomed Rob Francis from Traverse to present the findings of the 'Your Merton' engagement exercise.

The exercise sought to understand the views, experiences and ambitions of local people (including residents and also those who work and study in the borough) and had three main areas of interest as follows:

1. Experiences of living, working and studying in the borough: Merton wanted to know how people felt about living and working in the borough – what they liked as well as what they found frustrating.
2. Experiences of the pandemic: Merton wanted to understand how the pandemic had impacted different communities in Merton – what they found most challenging, as well as any aspects of life they wanted to maintain as the local area moved into recovery.
3. Priorities for the future: Merton wanted to know what residents wanted the Council to prioritise in the recovery – what did they want their local area to look and feel like in the immediate and long-term future?

Traverse undertook four separate engagement activities to involve local people in different ways:

- A representative survey of the borough gathered the views of 1,000 residents reflective of the population.
- Around 500 residents contributed via an open access engagement website.
- Focus groups run through 13 local community organisations
- A two-stage deliberative workshop

The key findings of the consultation were:

- Green spaces and a supportive, vibrant sense of community were the things that residents most liked about their local area. Residents grew to appreciate these more during the pandemic, and wanted the vision for the borough to be built upon them.
- Litter and traffic were key frustrations to be addressed.
- Residents highlighted the impact of isolation and social distancing on their wellbeing. Health, education, finance and work were also concerns for some residents. Accessing support from the local community was the main positive aspect that residents wanted to build upon in recovery.
- High street regeneration was a shared ambition for residents across the borough. Including a Community Hub.

Commission Members asked questions of clarification about the findings and answers were supplied by Rob Francis and Frank Dick, Head of Recovery:

We aimed for a spread in terms of age, ethnicity, social background and ward which matched the borough

With regards to the immediate next steps and actions – the full findings have been published for exploration and comment by Cllrs. We are beginning to engage with other stakeholders (Merton partnership, health organisations, Merton chamber of commerce) to continue these conversations and these will also extend to the voluntary sector and local businesses.

Short term - Officers are looking at initiatives around street scenes and health advice etc.

Medium to long term planning - Plans for high streets will be a 5 year timescale and the long term strategic vision and how to meet the issues is yet to be decided.

Figures highlighted in bold show where the change is greatest on past data or where the gap is biggest (so something stands out in this data).

An initial workshop was held with the Merton Partnership before the detailed work was commissioned and there was a good level of interest and engagement from the partners. A follow-up meeting with the partnership was held this Monday to really start getting to grips with delivery ideas.

A Commission Member commented on the outcomes of the findings as being rather obvious - The fact that the frustrations were litter and traffic, there is pride in the community and the green spaces, and there is a desire to reinvigorate the high street. Whilst there is nothing wrong with a report confirming what we already know but what in this report, if anything, surprised you?

The Head of Recovery agreed that litter, fly tipping, crime and safety will indeed be seen in every London borough though it is useful to have these things confirmed regardless. The surprises were the sense of pride and importance of high streets within neighbourhoods in terms of the community.

We delivered grants during the covid crisis to tackle the street scenes and we specifically focused the grants from central government on micros and small business. The addition of parklets has also been utilised.

Further report goes to Cabinet on 22 January 2022. Prior to this, the Chair asked Members to think on these questions:

- A place-based vision is essentially local - how scalable is it from the high street to Merton as a whole?
- How will bridging the gap and addressing east - west inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic be incorporated into the new vision?
- Do the findings represent a snapshot of Merton at an exceptional point in time i.e. during the pandemic? Will they still be valid as behaviours driven by the pandemic revert towards the pre-pandemic "norm"?

7 COMMUNICATIONS SERVICE UPDATE (Agenda Item 7)

Matt Burrows, Head of Communications, updated the Commission on the progress made in the Communications & Engagement Service (C&E) since September 2020.

Covid 19 communications during the pandemic - Successfully engaged with 65,000 to 70,000 residents per week, primarily through digital channels.

The Council purchased a digital communications and marketing platform, which was launched last year, which allows much more tailored communications to residents. Residents can choose to sign up for a range of specific newsletters and regular updates of interest to them (news, climate change, health, events etc.) The system currently has around 50,000 subscribers and a priority for 2022 will be to continue this work and maximise it with new alerts and sign-ups for residents.

The service will also be looking at the emerging priorities identified during the Your Merton work and aiming to refocusing the communications support around those. A vision document will be produced in January/February 2022.

Questions from Commission Members were answered by the Head of Communications and the Cabinet Member for Performance, Recovery and the Local Economy, Cllr Owen Pritchard,

The platform allows to get a little deeper into digital marketing and keeping residents informed will drive up satisfaction levels. Once we have firmly built a digital audience we will be able to survey them.

We recognise there needs to be closer integration between the Council's CRM, website and the communications functions and work will commence over the next eighteen months.

There are three functional areas to consider and that require further work;

- strategy performance and delivery (Your Merton) S
- digital data and technology function – use of data internally and externally D
- communication engagement and partnerships C

The Council is already active on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram with a total of almost 30,000 followers. It has now also launched on Next Door as an additional way to communicate with local residents. The use of Next Door has presented challenges but it has substantial reach across the borough and can be very successful for specific issues such as fly tipping and roadworks.

8 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 8)

The work programme was agreed.