

All minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the committee/panel. To find out the date of the next meeting please check the calendar of events at your local library or online at [www.merton.gov.uk/committee](http://www.merton.gov.uk/committee).

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

31 JANUARY 2024

(7.15 pm - 8.45 pm)

PRESENT: Councillor Edward Foley (in the Chair), Councillor Michael Brunt, Councillor Agatha Mary Akyigyina, Councillor Laxmi Attawar, Councillor Billy Hayes, Councillor Usaama Kaweesa, Councillor Paul Kohler, Councillor Nick McLean, Councillor Stuart Neaverson, Councillor John Oliver, Councillor Tony Reiss, Becky Cruise, Dr Stannard and Roz Cordner

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Billy Christie, Eleanor Stringer, Peter McCabe, Brenda Fraser, Natasha Irons, Ross Garrod

Susan Botros (Equalities and Community Cohesion Officer), Polly Cziok (Executive Director of Innovation & Change), Jane McSherry (Executive Director of Children, Lifelong Learning and Families), John Morgan (Executive Director, Adult Social Care, Integrated Care and Public Health), Asad Mushtaq (Executive Director of Finance & Digital) and Lucy Owen (Executive Director of Housing & Sustainable Development)

### 1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies were received from Co-opted Member, Mansoor Ahmed.

### 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 of the previous meeting.

A Commission Member queried whether the OSC working group looking at the alignment of scrutiny panels would be established soon. Unfortunately, with scrutiny officer resource still being minimal, it is not currently possible to commence this project.

### 4 EQUALITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION STRATEGY (Agenda Item 4)

Susan Botros, Equalities & Community Cohesion Lead, gave an update on the work of the Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Strategy 2024-26.

The strategy outlines Merton's commitment to tackling inequalities and this refreshed Strategy has incorporated feedback from the public consultation, which ran from August to November 2023.

Beyond the nine characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010, the strategy considers four additional groups who are at risk of experiencing disadvantage in accessing Council services. The four identified groups are:

- Care experienced young people.
- Armed forces veterans
- One-parent households
- Socio-economic status.

In response to questions from Commission Members, the Equalities & Community Cohesion Lead expanded on the following points.

There is a heritage action point that will continue the work on street names. Objective 4, improving our evidence base to inform our decision making, includes evidence gathering via consultations and ensuring these are inclusive of certain communities. Next steps will also involve getting in touch with Windrush community members and stakeholders.

An additional Monitoring & Evaluation document will be included alongside the strategy. Once the strategy is approved, monitoring and evaluation and KPI's will be included.

The actions in the implementation plan are linked to the Council Plan and other key Council Strategies and delivery plans. The actions are also linked to consultation feedback.

The topic of blind recruitment sits with the internal workforce EDI. An internal strategy is being developed, with EDI at the heart of it and staff will be offered inclusive recruitment training.

A Commission Member suggested that parents and widows should also be considered along with the additional groups.

The Equalities & Community Cohesion Lead was thanked for her attendance.

## 5 BUDGET/BUSINESS PLAN (Agenda Item 5)

The Chair invited Cllr Billy Christie, Cabinet Member for Finance & Corporate Services, to introduce the report. The second round of proposals follow on from the

first round of budget scrutiny and includes information on the government provisional settlement and the proposals agreed at Cabinet.

The Cabinet Member added that although the new Government funding was announced today, we are far from receiving the funding that we need. We stand to receive £20m less this year than we did in 2010 (Received £93m in 2010. The coming year will see us receive £75m). Yet inflation in the years since then has increased by nearly 47%.

However, through some adjustments, we have been able to identify growth bids to further invest and maintain our vital local services (these are outlined in Cabinet papers). We are confident this budget is robust, reasonable, and sustainable and projects a balanced budget for the next financial year.

The Chair invited the Executive Director of Finance & Digital to comment on the MTFS for 2024/25. There are continued pressures around social care, and temporary accommodation.

This is the fifth year of receiving a one-off settlement which makes strategic planning difficult.

The Chair invited questions:

Pressures still exist, especially around social care, but there is good work being done in tackling agency costs.

Capital programme info – how can this be scrutinised? The Executive director of Finance stated that Members are welcome to request further detail on the projects. The Leader commented that several of the lines within the Capital Programme have been longstanding and included for years and therefore subject to scrutiny, discussed at multiple panels, published etc. Also, as with the budget process, questions can be raised at any point by Members, not just in scrutiny. The Leader committed to take away the feedback about the request for further information to be included on the capital programme items.

Core Spending Power – Merton's CSP increases by 5.8% but 3.6% of that is an assumption that we will be raising council tax by the maximum amount. The Government Settlement is not enough, many Local Authorities are on the brink of bankruptcy.

Cost of Living crisis – Around 13,000 families are in fuel poverty. Helping residents through the cost-of-living crisis remains the administrations number one priority. We set up a cost-of-living emergency fund, young savers, hold advice days. Cabinet Member highlighted Merton investment of £13m into Council Tax support scheme, which is one of the most generous support schemes in the country.

## 6 BUDGET/BUSINESS PLAN - LATEST CABINET PAPERS (Agenda Item 6)

Taken with Item 5.

7 SCRUTINY OF THE BUSINESS PLAN; COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANELS (Agenda Item 7)

There were no comments received from the Panels.

8 IDENTIFY QUESTIONS FOR THE BOROUGH COMMANDER (Agenda Item 8)

Commission Members were reminded to send any questions for the Brough Commander by 5pm on 5th February at the very latest. This will allow enough time for Clair Kelland to provide written responses as requested.

9 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 9)

The work programme was agreed.