

Agenda Item 3

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OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

20 MAY 2020

(7.15 pm - 9.20 pm)

PRESENT: Councillors Peter Southgate (in the Chair), Peter McCabe, John Dehaney, Sally Kenny, Paul Kohler, Owen Pritchard, Nick McLean, Edward Gretton, Joan Henry and Natasha Irons

Co-opted Member Mansoor Ahmad

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Stephen Alambritis (Leader of the Council)
Councillors Thomas Barlow, David Dean, Anthony Fairclough , Jenifer Gould, Daniel Holden, Oonagh Moulton and Hayley Ormrod

Ged Curran (Chief Executive), Caroline Holland (Director of Corporate Services), Stella Akintan (Democratic Services Officer) and Julia Regan (Head of Democracy Services)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies were received from co-opted members Emma Lemon and Colin Powell.

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 an accurate record, subject to the deletion of the first sentence of the second paragraph of the reference to Cabinet – “There was no seconder for this proposal.” ACTION: Head of Democracy Services.

4 MERTON COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC (Agenda Item 4)

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Stephen Alambritis, and the Chief Executive, Ged Curran, expressed sadness at the number of people that had died during the pandemic and gave their deepest condolences to the families and friends of those who had passed. They also paid tribute to the key workers, council staff, voluntary organisations, police, members of the public and many others who have provided assistance to those in need.

Councillor Alambritis provided an overview of the impact of the pandemic in Merton and the council's response to date:

- 173 deaths, of which 131 died in hospital, 21 in care homes and 21 in other locations.
- the council has incurred considerable additional costs and loss of income that will leave a funding gap of between £25m and £35m, some of which will be met by the government.
- the council has 20 days supply of PPE, has given 20,000 items to care providers that the council works with and has worked with London Councils on Londonwide procurement of stocks
- the council has provided support to people who are shielded. Note – the council does not have a formal role in relation to testing and tracking.
- The council has a good working relationship with local hospitals, care homes and the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). The Leader has received a letter of thanks from the Chair of the CCG.
- Local schools have remained open for children who need them and teachers have been working in school and at home on virtual learning. The council will respect the decisions of headteachers and governing bodies on what is best in relation to opening schools to a greater number of pupils.
- 25 homeless people have been housed during the pandemic and the council is working to find funding to provide longer term housing so that they will hopefully not return to the streets.
- The council has drawn up an emergency transport strategy to increase the provision of safe walking and cycling routes. The strategy is currently out for consultation.
- Domestic violence figures have been relatively low in Merton.
- Work has commenced to support local BAME communities with the disproportionate impact that Covid 19 has had on them.
- Local businesses have been adversely impacted and the council has moved quickly to distribute government funding on to businesses (Merton was the third fastest in London).
- Parks and open spaces have remained open in Merton.

Ged Curran drew on his perspective as the co-ordinator of the response in South West London and their representative on the London-wide local government response team, to say that Merton has responded well to the challenges it has faced. The council has implemented a number of entirely new services at short notice to protect over 6,500 people on the shielding register.

Ged Curran said that there were a number of challenges ahead, some of which would be very severe. A second wave of the virus is inevitable at some stage. Constraints on the economy will be relatively long lasting and a significant recession is likely. London may be particularly badly affected because of its large hospitality sector and its reliance on public transport. The virus has underlined and exemplified existing inequalities in relation to BAME communities and those on low income, particularly in London.

Ged Curran said that the virus and its aftermath is likely to have big impact on the economy and on how and where people work and live. The climate change strategy will have an important part to play in shaping the recovery but resourcing this will be a challenge. The funding crisis facing Transport for London (TfL) will also impact on

the council as TfL fund transport development and infrastructure in the borough (such as repairing and maintaining roads).

Members of the Commission thanked the Leader and Chief Executive for the regular information that they had provided and for steering the council through these unprecedented times. Members asked detailed questions about a number of issues:

Deaths in Merton

In response to a request for more detailed data on differences between the east and west of the borough on overall deaths and on deaths in care homes, Ged Curran said that audited figures broken down by location had not yet been received but he could confirm that around 60% of Covid deaths had been in the east of the borough. A breakdown of care home data by location has not been provided.

In response to a question about the impact on people with diabetes, Ged Curran said that this data is not available at a local level but that national figures have established that diabetes makes people more likely to be seriously affected by the virus.

In response to a question about the differences between government data and Merton data on new cases in the past 4 weeks, Ged Curran said that there were slightly different datasets and definitions. He asked the member to email him the details so that he could check and respond.

Ward allocation scheme

A question was asked about how much is currently left unspent in the ward allocation scheme and whether that money could be used for cycling and pedestrian highway improvements in the wake of the pandemic. Ged Curran said that £290k remained unspent and that any re-allocation would need the consent of the relevant ward councillors.

Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust

In response to a question about the proposed reconfiguration of hospital services, Councillor Alambritis said that St Helier Hospital provided services to those most in need and those who need a hospital nearby. He said that all options remain on the table. His preference is for the hospital to remain in its current location with its current range of services.

Crime and disorder

A member asked whether the comparatively low domestic violence figures were due to under-reporting. Ged Curran said that there had been an increase in calls to the helpline and that it was not clear why these had not translated into an increase in cases. The council had made provision for an increase in cases and has widely publicised the service. He said that there may be an increase once the lockdown has eased.

In response to a question about crime and disorder, Ged Curran said the council had been working with police and with its contractor, Kingdom, to ensure an appropriate level of enforcement during the lockdown and afterwards.

Transport infrastructure

In answer to a question about Merton's approach to responding to funding opportunities, Councillor Alambritis said that the council considered officer time and capacity when considering which to apply for. He undertook to review the specifics of the cycling infrastructure fund and reflect on the council's approach..

Care homes in Merton

A member asked whether care homes had been alerted to the pandemic sufficiently early to be able to take precautions and how the council could ensure they would be protected in future. Ged Curran said that because Merton has a relatively small number (21) of care homes in the borough and already had good working relationships with them, it had been able to work with them in January and February to identify and mitigate risks. The number of care home places had been reduced and the council had assisted with this through payments and provision of PPE. Merton has experienced a comparatively small number of deaths as a result. He added that there was national recognition of the need to review the model for care home provision and funding post Covid 19.

The voluntary sector

A member asked what steps were being taken to protect the voluntary sector in Merton. Councillor Alambritis said that he had been working at both a local, sub-regional and Londonwide level to identify what could be done to assist and safeguard the voluntary sector through the pandemic and afterwards. Ged Curran said that the strength of social capital in Merton had been demonstrated through the active response of the voluntary sector to the crisis and the emergence of lots of new groups to provide assistance to local people.

Support for small businesses

In response to question about the use of the discretionary payments from government to small businesses and charities that are exempt from business rates and therefore haven't already received financial support, Councillor Alambritis said that the criteria had largely been set by the government. There is some local discretion and so the council has established a panel, including representatives from the Chamber of Commerce and Merton Voluntary Services Council, to advise on the allocation of the funding. The total sum involved is £1.3m.

Recovery

In response to a question, Councillor Alambritis said that the first steps would be to assess the damage and to work out how to help those who had been most adversely affected. The council would then look at how it should operate in the new environment, bearing in mind that resources would be limited, looking for better and leaner ways of operating. Ged Curran said that this would be done jointly with partner organisations to identify ways of maximising the application of scarce resources (for example working with health partners to invest in primary care and promote social prescribing).

Ged Curran said that the impact of the difficulties facing businesses in central London may encourage some small businesses to relocate to outer London areas such as Wimbledon and these may also become attractive locations for families.

In response to a further question, Councillor Alambritis said that the council would review the local economic strategy and the council's own medium term financial strategy.

In conclusion, the Commission RESOLVED to record its gratitude to the staff of the council and the voluntary sector for the dedication, commitment and ethos of service to the community that they have demonstrated during this exceptionally difficult period.

5 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC (Agenda Item 5)

The Chair invited the Chief Executive, Ged Curran, to set out ways in which scrutiny could add value without impeding the work to respond to and recover from the pandemic. Ged Curran welcomed the understanding that members had displayed at the start of the pandemic and said that he was pleased that scrutiny was now able to resume. He asked for continued acceptance for the time being that requests for written reports and officer attendance would need to be carefully managed. He said that scrutiny would have a valuable role in looking to the future, whilst ensuring that it does not impinge on the council's response to the pandemic.

The Chair introduced the proposal set out in the report for an interim model of scrutiny carried out solely by the Commission for the next 2-3 months. Discussion revealed a general consensus that shorter reports and more question and answer sessions with Cabinet Members and senior managers would be helpful. However, there were opposing views as to whether the Commission-only model, kept under review at each meeting, was most appropriate for the time being or whether the scrutiny panels should also resume meeting in order to scrutinise a wider range of issues and engage a larger number of members.

A number of members suggested that the pandemic provided an opportunity to rethink how scrutiny operates and to engage Cabinet members in dialogue in order to work together and achieve the councils goals.

It was also suggested that the work of the current task groups had been overtaken by events and should therefore be wound up rather than drawing further on officer resources at this time.

Members agreed that the suggested priority areas for scrutiny set out in paragraphs 2.14-2.18 were helpful and a good starting point for developing a work programme. It was suggested that the transport strategy, cycling and use of public spaces could be added to the list. A member suggested that the impact on schools and vulnerable children should be a priority for the next meeting. The Chair announced that he had received a request for pre-decision scrutiny of the Climate Strategy and Action Plan prior to consideration by Cabinet in July.

The Chair proposed that the Commission should continue to be the sole scrutiny body operating for the time being and should review this at its meeting on 24 June. The June meeting would also discuss the climate strategy and action plan, alongside a second topic. A vote was taken with 6 votes in favour and none against – the proposal was therefore agreed.

The Head of Democracy Services undertook to work with Directors and lead scrutiny members from all four political groups to bring a report to the June meeting setting out a proposal for re-starting the scrutiny panels with an indicative work programme for each.