

Agenda Item 3

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SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 1 NOVEMBER 2021

(7.15 pm - 10.35 pm)

PRESENT Councillors Councillor Aidan Mundy (in the Chair),
Councillor Daniel Holden, Councillor Laxmi Attawar,
Councillor David Dean, Councillor Nick Draper and
Councillor Anthony Fairclough

Charles Baker (Waste Strategy and Commissioning Manager),
John Bosley (Assistant Director Public Space Contracts and
Commissioning), Caroline Holland (Director of Corporate
Services), Cathryn James (Interim Assistant Director, Public
Protection), Steve Langley (Head of Housing Needs and
Strategy), Chris Lee (Director of Environment and Regeneration)
and James McGinlay (Assistant Director for Sustainable
Communities)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Dave Ward (with Cllr Ben Butler as substitute)

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 of the previous meeting were agreed.

4 ACTIONS LOG (Agenda Item 4)

The Director of Environment and Regeneration provided further updates.

Thames Water review is not due until the spring. It would be wise to add this item to the Sustainable Communities forward plan post April.

The Chair requested the implementation timeline column be updated by officers where necessary.

5 PERFORMANCE MONITORING (Agenda Item 5)

Follow up questions about the performance monitoring information were answered by the Director of Environment and Regeneration and the Assistant Director of Public Spaces;

Parking numbers are down - School streets is generating some revenue but across the board you'll see that parking income is well below the estimate that we set at the beginning of the year.

In terms of the street rectification within target - the driver shortage continues to be one of the primary drivers behind the reduced level of service that we've had in the refuse collection services.

With regards to complaints received from residents who have been given multiple PCN's for parking or driving through school streets – Officers are not aware of any signage that doesn't meet the regulations and the standard expected so whilst residents and motorists may not be happy with the signage, we don't believe that any of the signage is in contravention with the laid down regulations in this area. We have had residents and motorists who in some instances have had multiple tickets and we deal with each of those on a case-by-case basis in order to ensure that we apply the policies and the legislation fairly.

6 TENANTS CHAMPION UPDATE (VERBAL) (Agenda Item 6)

Cllr Nick Draper provided a brief update on his tenants champion work.

Since the last meeting, Cllr Draper has worked with Clarion on clarifying and updating their leaflet to residents, making clear what the process is for making repairs complaints, as well as suggesting rewording on the infestations leaflet to include the use of plain English.

There is currently one test case which was picked up during canvassing.

In response to a question about the opportunities for publicising the role further, Cllr Draper explained that there needs to be consideration given to the expectations that could potentially be raised that Councillors will do Clarion's work for them. The process should be that all complaints are reported to Clarion in the first instance and the only point at which the champion should step in is when things have gone irretrievably wrong.

7 PUBLIC SPEAKER (Agenda Item 7)

The Chair invited Kwajo Tweneboa to speak about his experiences.

Kwajo thanked the Panel for inviting him to speak today on what is not only his thoughts but also the thoughts of other residents. For those Members that weren't aware, he explained how he had campaigned and door knocked on every single house on the Eastfields estate and, with the help of ITV, exposed the horrific living conditions of residents on the estate, including his own. Since then Kwajo has continued campaigning on several other estates within Merton and beyond.

Kwajo described how the property he and his family lived in was already in disrepair when they moved in with mice, cockroaches, rodents and damp. Despite repeated complaints and requests for help, the property deteriorated to the point of an

unusable bathroom and kitchen and the living room ceiling collapsing. Complaints and communication were continually ignored and this feeling of being ignored is shared by all residents he has met.

The biggest concerns, which have previously been raised with the MP and Clarion's Head of Repairs by Kwajo are;

- Use of cheap materials and poor standards of repair work
- Some residents are still finding it hard to get repairs actioned
- Fire safety – Requests for information on the last fire safety tests for Eastfields, Sadler's Close and Phipps Bridge were sent on the 18th October but have been ignored.

Kwajo confirmed he is happy to share updates on complaints he has received with Councillors and whether and/or when work is completed.

The Chair thanked Kwajo for his campaigning and bringing this issue to people's attention. All Panel Members thanked Kwajo for the work he has done and the help he has provided to other residents of Merton.

8 CLARION HOUSING PRESENTATION - TO FOLLOW (Agenda Item 8)

The Chair welcomed Michelle Reynolds, Vicky Bonner and Marek Witko from Clarion Housing and invited them to provide their update to the Panel.

- Employed more Resident Liaison Officers.
- Keeping residents informed with clear processes.
- Increase visibility in our neighbourhoods
- Tasked with the development of a Customer Engagement Strategy in Merton
- Issues log from ground up – staff and residents associations
- Looking at more door knocking and pop up offices as part of the strategy

In response to Panel Member questions, the Regional Director for Clarion confirmed;

Assured that good quality materials are used, monitoring meetings with contractors are held in terms of performance and we are looking to undertake more post inspection work.

We will continue with regular letters and official engagement activities – The leaflet was the start of the process. We will update residents regularly through newsletters with reminders on how residents can report repairs and make complaints, as well as including information in the pack for new residents

Add to Action Log: Clarion committed to coming back on details of the regeneration timetable, non-material amendments to planning, the quality of materials used and also resending the information on investment that has taken place since 2010. The Chair requested Clarion also circulate some detail on fire safety

Chairs Action: Following a suggestion by a Panel Member, the Chair is to consider organising a tour of the Clarion estates.

9 CLARION PERFORMANCE UPDATE (HEAD OF HOUSING NEEDS) - TO FOLLOW (Agenda Item 9)

The Head of Housing Needs praised Clarion on their engagement work so far and stressed the importance of continuing this agenda going forward. Again reminded the Panel that the Local Authority does not have a regulatory role and there are 22 other Housing Associations that could also be involved in the scrutiny process.

Updates to the Merton housing advice web page include;

- Matrix of performance data
- Housing association tenants' rights
- The role of the tenants champion and his contact details
- How to contact the local government ombudsman

Following news of his retirement, the Chair asked it to be officially noted how much the Sustainable Communities Panel wished to thank Steve Langley for his long years of service and his hard work on keeping homelessness down as well as the recent work in supporting residents across the borough.

10 WASTE AND RECYCLING (Agenda Item 10)

The Assistant Director of Public Space gave an overview of the presentation supplied and discussed how the biggest blocker to improving our recycling rate is contaminated waste.

Recommendations

The Panel were reassured to hear that Merton's current recycling rate places us in the top quartile in London and would like to build on this work. However it should be noted that whilst Merton delivers similar levels of food waste and recycling as its neighbouring boroughs, our garden waste is much lower in comparison which has led to the Panels suggestion at point

Panel Members also asked questions in relation to resident queries they have received regarding contaminated waste, with the Assistant Director of Public Space agreeing that this issue is the biggest blocker to improving the recycling rate.

The Panel RESOLVED (six votes for, one abstention) to send the following recommendation to Cabinet;

The Sustainable Communities Panel recommends Cabinet look at the feasibility of offering discounted access to our paid for waste services, to those residents on council tax support, in order to incentivize take up of these services and further increase the rate of recycling. This should include garden waste collection.

Furthermore the Panel recommended (five votes for, two abstentions) that as a Council we lobby the government to accept central responsibility for producing effective policy and legislation to deter and deal with fly tipping.

Lastly, all seven voting Members of the Panel agreed to recommend that the Council, over a suitable time frame, proactively writes to all those blocks of flats with communal recycling, with details on how to recycle correctly and avoid waste contamination

11 BUDGET AND DRAFT BUSINESS PLAN (Agenda Item 11)

The Director of Corporate Services provided an overview of the report in front of Members 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.

We have set savings targets for each of the four departments based on the same ratios as previously given, so Children, Schools and Families have the lowest ratio, followed by Community and Housing and then Environment and Regeneration and the Corporate Services department share the same ratio to deliver on those savings. Those targets are set out for you on page 26 and we are looking to bring proposals to meet those savings targets to the December Cabinet.

Subsequent to this paper being published has been the spending review of the Government's budget last Wednesday however we will not find out the specific allocation back to Merton until we get this provisional settlement around the 15th December. The January update will have some of the impacts of that and we also plan to bring some additions to the capital programme, as well as some of the sales proposals, to those Scrutiny Panels in January.

It is likely at this stage that there will be the referendum limit of 2% on council tax again - that will be confirmed in the provisional settlement - and it is likely that we will be able to raise an adult social care precept of 1%.

In order to minimise the impact on departments of trying to find savings next year, particularly with the impact of savings not being achieved for the previous two years, we've looked to ear mark some reserves.

In response to a Panel Members question, the Cabinet Member for Finance commented that given the successive years of government cuts to the council's budget, coupled with some of the cost pressures that we saw last year, particularly with the pandemic but also with the DSG had left the Council in a particularly difficult position. If Members review the financial monitoring report that will be presented to

Cabinet next Monday, they will see that we are in a very similar position with continued covid costs and no further government support for these.

12 WORK PROGRAMME AND AOB (Agenda Item 12)

The work programme was agreed.

Cllr Daniel Holden requested this panel look at reviewing the diesel surcharge so it's more harmonized with the Mayor's ULEZ. Cllr Holden has received multiple letters from residents concerned over the anomaly of being able to drive all day long in the Mayor's ULEZ but returning to Merton and having to pay large amounts.

The item was noted for future planning