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HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES AND OLDER PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

14 JANUARY 2015

(19.15 - 21.30)

PRESENT Councillors Councillor Peter McCabe (in the Chair),
Councillor Brian Lewis-Lavender, Councillor Pauline Cowper,
Councillor Mary Curtin, Councillor Brenda Fraser,
Councillor Suzanne Grocott, Councillor Sally Kenny,
Councillor Abdul Latif, Myrtle Agutter, Saleem Sheikh and
Hayley James

Caroline Holland (Director of Corporate Services) and Simon
Williams (Director, Community & Housing Department) Stella
Akintan (Scrutiny Officer)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

None.

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests

3 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THE 12 NOVEMBER (Agenda Item 3)

The minutes were agreed.

4 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES OF THE 12 NOVEMBER (Agenda Item 4)

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

5 BUDGET & BUSINESS PLAN 2015-2019 (Agenda Item 5)

The Director of Corporate Services introduced the report stating that each of the departments were given ratings to protect the more vulnerable areas. Current savings have been agreed and banked unless departments find there will be a difficulty in achieving these. There is a small capital programme within the remit of this panel most of which is grant funded by the Department of Health; there are no changes to the Panel's capital programme at present. The budget gap for the next four years is £32 million. The budget for 2015-16 is set but there are significant gaps for 2016-17 and 2017-18.

Councillor McCabe asked to what extent government grants will be reduced over the next few years?

The Director of Corporate Services said the Revenue Support Grant has been estimated to reduce from £31 million to £12 million. These are based on our assumptions, which were fairly accurate last time.

Councillor Grocott expressed concern that we are making budget decisions for 2016-17 and beyond yet we are not yet clear what the funding settlement will be.

Councillor McCabe said we expect officers to make projections for prudent planning.

The Director of Community and Housing said the consequences would be catastrophic if we don't plan ahead. We can improve our engagement with the public if we are looking ahead. We should plan ahead on reasonable assumptions then be prepared to review them if circumstances change.

There is a national concern about adult social care and it is often in the news especially in relation to care homes and home care. Merton has tried to protect the adult social care budget, it has had an increased share of the council budget over the last four years. While we support the principles of the Care Act it will introduce new pressures and risks into the system.

There are also national concerns around quality of care and the cost model, e.g; the fifteen minute visits and nationally people are questioning if we have a system that is based on quality care. The Local Government Association and the Association of the Directors of Adult Social Services are currently in discussions with central government about this. Any government will have a deficit and look to local government to make savings. Merton has been resilient but looking ahead we have harder things we need to do. Virtually all spend is statutory there is no room for manoeuvre and savings will have a higher level of impact.

Some of the replacement savings are not achievable in full. Providers have been squeezed to the limit; if we go any further we will encounter difficulties in commissioning care.

There are currently seven ways that people can get in touch with adult social care and we are looking for ways to rationalise this. The voluntary sector is confident that it can undertake this role competently as in fact it already does. Reviewing care packages reflects existing practice and is simply looking for greater savings on balance from this.

In relation to Day care services for people with learning disabilities, the Director of Community and Housing said that the department believe in keeping day care services, as this is a vital service for our carers. In Merton we are going against the trend of closing centres. However we need to make savings so we are reducing staff in day centres and there are some reductions in bespoke activity. We need more volunteers to work with staff and offer a mix of support, day care and respite at the weekends. We will ask customers and carers if they can manage with less.

The Director of Community and Housing said that overall the savings relate to:

1. A reduction in preventative services, we will try to retain as many as possible
2. Staffing savings: remodelling existing processes to deliver a reliable service which is possible, albeit difficult with careful planning.
3. Third party spend: This will include direct payments as we cannot exempt people because of the means by which the payment is made. We will look at support packages they may go down but it is not inevitable. We often set support plans when people are at their highest level of need so we will go back and look at what their on-going requirements are.

The consultation on adult social care was launched after the December cabinet to allow maximum time for responses and to fit into the decision making process. The feedback will come to this panel on the 11th February and Cabinet on the 16th February. This will ensure that the decision makers are aware of the consultation results.

In terms of the equality impact assessment, it is a level three impact which will affect our protected groups and there are doubts about our ability to mitigate it.

The Chair invited members of the public to address the meeting:

Jeanette Townley, speaking on behalf of Sally Burns.

Ms Townley said Merton provides a brilliant day care service. Centres provide a safe reliable place for people to meet up. Staff in the day care centres are good, and we need to maintain their level of expertise as they are dealing with complex care and they provide therapy as well as behaviour management and activities. They link activities to a range of disabilities. Carers have all the work related stress and is the equivalent of working two jobs. There is concern over the consultation, we feel cheated; its unfair and completely wrong and we were only asked after it was completed.

Lyla Adwan-Kamara, CEO, Merton Centre for Independent Living Outlined three main concerns:

The savings should be measured by the impact on the service rather than the a ratio for each department.

The equality impact assessments.

The consultation process .

Merton is already a low spend borough and has saved £17 million over the last four years. The proposed changes to day care services will lead to reduced independence, people being isolated; this is not reflected in the equality impact assessments.

When the consultation process began, accessible surveys were made available a week later for disabled people. Until yesterday there were no plans to consult with scrutiny and we are pleased there has been a change in this regard.

Sarah Henley, local resident.

Sarah said she relies on 24 hour care, this enables her to make decisions about when she goes to bed, gets up meets friends, goes shopping and to various activities such as swimming, art class the pub. She relies on three pots of money, the independent living fund, money from social services and her own savings. She is very worried that more cuts could mean that she has to go into residential care and be stuck in front of a tv all day. This would take away her freedom to do activities and not have the support she needs.

Councillor Brian Lewis Lavender said he was concerned about the effect of the cuts on the most vulnerable people in the borough. He is concerned about proposals to make staff cuts and replace them with volunteers. The staff have knowledge and built relationships with people. Volunteers come and go they are less reliable which will have an adverse effect on clients.

Councillor Grocott said Cabinet have asked for below inflation payments to providers, we should also use reserves for some of the savings that need to be made.

Councillor McCabe said he has raised concerns a number of times about squeezing providers to the extent that could go out of business or move out of the borough. Have we made too much provision for inflation? Also is concerned that some of providers care generate high profits from care homes.

The Director of Corporate Services said that The Consumer Price Index has fallen our contracts are based on the Retail Price Index which is higher, we will keep this under review for future years.

The Director of Community and Housing said we have moved below inflation uplift to providers, can we buy and support the same prices as this year. Our block projects are coming to an end and providers are asking for an increase.

Councillor Grocott said we may not need to use the 1.5% uplift since inflation has dropped.

Councillor McCabe asked if we will be able to recruit the volunteers required to help keep the day centres open?

The Director of Community and Housing said the use of volunteers had been successful in the library service and although it is a different service we can encourage people to get involved. We also need to improve the offer for volunteers.

Councillor Latif asked if we had taken into consideration for the fact that the council will be liable for volunteers?

The Director of Community and Housing said he recognises this is an issue we have to ensure that our practice is safe and appropriate.

Hayley James Co-opted Member said she had started to deliver the volunteers strategy when working at MVSC. It is important to look at creative ways to deliver services. The volunteers service will get better because of the merger of MVSC and Volunteer Centre Merton so it can work.

Councillor Grocott moved a motion asking the Panel to reject saving CH13.

The proposal is for officers to look for a replacement saving for 2015/16 such as a review of the amount currently included as an inflationary uplift were overstated or seeing if any saving proposals for 2016-17 could be brought forward to 2015-16. If not, the money should be taken from the reserves.

Councillor Lewis Lavender seconded the motion

Councillors : Lewis Lavender, Latif and Grocott voted in favour of the motion

Councillors: McCabe, Cowper, Fraser, Kenny and Curtin voted against the motion

The motion was denied

The meeting ended at 21.30

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