

Scrutiny & Overview Committee

Meeting held on Tuesday, 11 June 2019 at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall, Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

MINUTES

Present: Councillors Sean Fitzsimons (Chair), Robert Ward (Vice-Chair), Leila Ben-Hassel (Deputy-Chair), Jerry Fitzpatrick, Stuart Millson and Joy Prince
Councillors

Also Present: Councillors Margaret Bird, Bernadette Khan, Tony Newman and Tim Pollard,

Apologies: Councillor Jeet Bains (Councillor Stuart Millson substituting).

PART A

3/19 **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 April 2019 were agreed as an accurate record.

4/19 **Disclosure of Interests**

There were no disclosures made at the meeting.

5/19 **Urgent Business (if any)**

There were no items of urgent business.

6/19 **Question Time: Leader of the Council**

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Tony Newman was in attendance at the meeting to provide an update for the Committee on the implementation of the Corporate Plan, which was adopted in September 2018 and plans for the forthcoming year. During the introductory presentation the following points were noted:-

- It was highlighted that the positive work delivered by the Council should be considered against a framework of cuts equating to a reduction of approximately 65% in funding from central Government over the past 9 years. In particular the £10m shortfall in funding support for unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) was having a significant impact upon the Council's budget.
- In the past year the Council had launched its Cultural Strategy and continued to develop the Music City initiative. Croydon had also been

identified by the Mayor of London as one of the capital's first Creative Enterprise Zones.

- The redevelopment of the Fairfield Halls was now nearing completion with its reopening scheduled for September 2019. The project represented a huge investment by the Council, but would deliver a modern cultural venue for the people of Croydon.
- The Legacy Onside Youth Zone was another major project that was nearing fruition. The project had been funded through a combination of Council, private and charitable investment and would deliver a youth hub for young people across the borough. A number of soft openings of the centre were due to be held across the summer before a full launch in September 2019.
- A deal had been agreed with Southbank University to base part of its campus in Croydon. This would not prevent the Council exploring further opportunities with other university providers in the future.
- Croydon's Violence Reduction Network continued its work making the borough safer for residents. Initial results from this work had been encouraging with a small reduction in the amount of knife crime in the borough, but it was acknowledged that there was still a long way to go on what was a long term project.
- Work continued towards creating a sustainable Croydon, with a Green Summit at Box Park later this month. Other initiatives being delivered included a campaign to discourage the most polluting vehicles from outside school gates and increasing the number of cycle ways in the borough. Following changes made to bin collections in 2018, there had also been a 9% increase in recycling in the borough.
- Affordable Housing continued to be a priority, with developments equating to thousands of homes currently on site and being delivered through Brick by Brick.
- The most recent monitoring visit of Children's Services by Ofsted had been positive. It was encouraging to see that the amount of work being put into delivering improvement for the service was being recognised.
- Funding for local government continued to be one of the key risks to service delivery, particularly as there had been no indication from central Government about the expected level of funding in 2020-21. Additionally there had been no indication about any cap on the level by which Council Tax could be increased or whether social care precepts would be permitted. All of this made it very difficult when planning the budget for next year.

Following the presentation the Committee was provided the opportunity to question the Leader, with the first question relating to the current status of the proposed redevelopment of Croydon town centre and what contingencies

were being considered should be project not proceed as expected. The Leader confirmed that there had been conversations with the new owners of the Westfield site, during which their commitment to the borough had been restated.

It was highlighted that due to the ongoing uncertainty over Brexit and the changing outlook for the retail sector, the owners were looking to reshape the original design to focus towards making the centre of Croydon a destination. It was expected that the reconfigured scheme would be brought forward in the near future. There were plans in place should the development not be delivered, but there was confidence that it would be. In the meantime the Council would continue to support local businesses during this period of uncertainty, but the scope of the support the Council was able to give was limited as it did not own either the shops or the wider development site.

It was highlighted that the outcome from the Fair Funding Review had been delayed for a year, as such it was questioned how this would impact upon the borough. It was confirmed that it would have a negative impact, as the Council had been making the case for fair funding for Croydon and other outer London boroughs. As such this would need to be put refocused towards making the case for local government funding on a national level.

As a follow up it was questioned whether the Council was sufficiently resilient in its reserves to manage any future funding changes. It was advised that the level of Council reserves had remained at the same level for the past five years. It was acknowledged that in comparison to some local authorities that retained a significant level of reserves the Council did operate on a tight budget.

It was highlighted that the budget for the redevelopment of the Fairfield Halls had increased during the project and as such the process used for approving significant budget increases on projects was questioned. It was explained that once the work had started on the Fairfield Halls redevelopment it became apparent that the level of asbestos present in the building was higher than expected, which had required an increased level of investment to clear it from the building. There was a process in place to agree any increased spending on projects, which would ultimately be authorised by the Finance Director and the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources in consultation with the Leader.

Given the ongoing uncertainty over Brexit, it was questioned whether it was the right time to make strategic investments in commercial properties. In response it was highlighted that the two recent investments, namely the Colonnades and Croydon Park Hotel, were considered to be extremely prudent and secure investments, which were delivering approximately £2m per year into the Council's revenue budget. The approach taken to decision making on strategic investments used detailed research to reach an informed judgement, with only the most prudent investments targeted. It was acknowledged that Brexit would bring an additional layer of uncertainty to the entire economy across the country and at present there had been no additional investments identified.

In response to a question about how the work of the Violence Reduction Network would be assessed, it was advised that success would be a reduction in crime in the borough in the medium to long term. The number of voluntary and community sector organisations working with the Council in this area was a real strength for the borough. The fear of crime was another issue to be tackled in Croydon and this would involve working with the Police to help dispel this perception of the borough.

In response to a question about the possibility of borough wide controlled parking zones being introduced, it was confirmed that there were no plans to introduce such a scheme at the present time.

It was advised that the project to deliver increased locality based working continued, with it at its most advanced stage in the north of the borough. It was hoped that this work would eventually reach the stage where the Council had a presence across the borough, although the format for how this could be delivered would need to be flexible with mobile centres one option being considered.

The forthcoming opening of the Legacy Onside Youth Zone in September 2019 was welcomed, although it was noted that it would have been preferable if the venue could have opened before the school holidays in July and August. It was agreed that further information on summer activities for young people would be provided.

As a follow up, it was questioned how the Council monitored its work with young people to ensure that the hardest to reach were being reached. In response it was highlighted that there had been cuts to youth funding across the country, but the Council would be submitting a bid to the Mayor of London's Young Londoner Fund. Should this bid be successful, it would provide funding for community groups across the borough.

It was questioned what the Council could do to ensure that community groups bidding for funding were aligned with the priorities of the Council and that the outcomes delivered through funding community groups tracked. In response it was highlighted that all funding bids were evaluated and the outcomes tracked, which was particularly important in the current climate of restricted resources. If a particular organisation was not delivering as expected it would be questioned, but there was a history of strong partnership working across the borough.

It was noted that there had been a recent rise in hate crime across the borough and as such it was questioned what the Council was doing to help tackle this issue. It was confirmed that the Council worked closely with the Police to tackle hate crime. It was important that the Council worked across the borough on this issue, with the public encouraged to remain vigilant, reporting hate crime as it occurred.

In response to a question about the possible outcomes from the current Governance Review, it was advised that possible changes to current system that delivered increased public engagement with the Council would be

welcomed. This was something that could possibly be achieved through the use of technology.

As education had not been covered in the presentation, it was questioned whether there had been any developments in this area. It was confirmed that any move to increase the role of local government in education again would be welcomed as it could in some instances be difficult to engage with academies under the present system.

It was agreed that more information would be supplied to the Committee on the Apprenticeship Levy in response to a question about whether there was a risk that part of the funding provided would need to be returned if it was underused.

As the Council's Digital Strategy had been considered at the previous meeting of the Committee in April, it was questioned how the leadership of the organisation could help to deliver digital improvements. In response it was advised that the introduction of the Digital Strategy had recently been signed off, which included an additional £2m of investment to deliver the strategy.

In regard to the street cleaning contract, it was highlighted that fly tipping continued to remain a huge challenge for the Council, but a tough line was being taken on enforcement whenever possible. Since the new recycling system had been introduced in September 2018, there had been a 9% increase in recycling. There had also been an improvement in street cleaning of the local high streets, but further improvement could be delivered through adjustments to the frequency and timing of street cleans.

In response to a question about what the Council could do to improve sustainability and carbon reduction in the borough, it was acknowledged that greater planning powers than were presently available would help to deliver improvements. The Council also needed to give consideration to a range of different approaches to tackling this issue and there was a need to engage with the people of Croydon on how best this could be achieved.

It was agreed that further information would be provided on the Disabilities Discrimination Act (DDA) compliance of the Council's sheltered housing schemes in the borough following a concern raised by a Councillor on this issue. It was also agreed that the performance of the Housing Repairs Service maybe something for the Streets, Environment and Homes Scrutiny Sub-Committee to schedule into its work programme for the forthcoming year.

The capacity of the Council to cope with the potential rise in demand for services following the introduction of Universal Credit was questioned. It was advised that a huge amount of work was underway to prepare for Universal Credit and that there was a framework in place to monitor the potential impact.

At the conclusion of this item, the Chair of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee thanked the Leader of the Council for his attendance at their meeting and his engagement with Members questions.

Information Requests

1. Further information on the Disabilities Discrimination Act (DDA) compliance of sheltered housing schemes in the borough.
2. Further information on the summer activities available for young people in the borough.
3. Further information on the Apprenticeship Levy and percentage that was required to be met to prevent funding from being returned.

7/19

Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities

The Chairman of the Committee, Councillor Sean Fitzsimons introduced the report which summarised the Statutory Guidance that had recently been published on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities. The report was presented to the Committee for its information, with it suggested that the three Scrutiny Chairs could lead on preparing a response to the guidance that would be brought back to the next meeting on 16 July to be finalised.

From a discussion of initial observations there was a general level of support for many of the proposals set out in the guidance. In particular the reiteration of Scrutiny's powers to access information was welcomed as this would help with planning the work programme. It was agreed that consideration should also be given to how Scrutiny engaged with the public to influence its work programme.

It was questioned whether there could be a mechanism put in place to use the call-in process to review decision making on a more frequent basis. It was highlighted that effectiveness of the call in process could be limited due to the timeliness of decision making and if Scrutiny was given greater opportunity to undertake pre-decision scrutiny, it would negate the need for using a call-in.

It was agreed that the comments made at the meeting would be taken into consideration by the Scrutiny Chairs when preparing their response to the guidance for the next meeting.

8/19

Exclusion of the Press and Public

This motion was not required.

The meeting ended at 8.20 pm

Signed:

Date:

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