

## **Scrutiny Streets, Environment & Homes Sub-Committee**

Meeting held on Tuesday, 17 December 2019 at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall,  
Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

### **MINUTES**

**Present:** Councillor Leila Ben-Hassel (Chair);  
Councillor Richard Chatterjee (Vice-Chair);  
Councillors Robert Canning, Sherwan Chowdhury, Felicity Flynn and  
Vidhi Mohan

**Also Present:** Councillor Hamida Ali, Cabinet Member for Safer Croydon and Communities  
Councillor Alison Butler, Cabinet Member for Homes and Gateway Services  
Councillor Stuart King, Cabinet Member for Environment Transport and  
Regeneration (Job Share)  
Councillor Mohammed Ali  
Councillor Sean Fitzsimons  
Yasmin Ahmed, Senior Strategy Officer  
Shayne Coulter, Head of Public Protection  
Gavin Handford, Director of Policy and Partnership  
Steve Iles, Director of Public Realm  
Robert Lines, Senior Estates Manager  
Yvonne Murray, Director of Housing Assessment and Solution  
Shifa Mustapha, Executive Director of Place  
Julia Pitt, Director of Gateway Services  
Hazel Simmonds, Executive Director of Gateway Strategy and Engagement  
Caroline Toogood, Head of Strategic Projects and Growth  
Tim Coombs, Extinction Rebellion  
Micky LeVouguer, Extinction Rebellion

**Apologies:** Councillor Luke Clancy

### **PART A**

#### **36/19 Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 October 2019 were agreed as an accurate record.

#### **37/19 Disclosure of Interests**

There were none.

#### **38/19 Urgent Business (if any)**

There were no items of urgent business.

### **39/19 Sustainable Croydon**

The Cabinet Member for Environment Transport and Regeneration ( Job share), Councillor Start King gave a presentation and the following points were noted:

- Following the declaration of a Climate and Ecological Emergency, the Council had made a commitment to becoming carbon neutral by 2030 and was working closely with the GLA to deliver a sustainable agenda.
- In order to ensure the influence and representation of the voice of residents was reflected in the actions taken to address climate change, the Council was in the process putting together a citizen's assembly for which members were currently being recruited. 70 residents would be selected through various wards and groups in order to ensure diversity of representation from across the borough.
- Additionally the Council was in the process of creating an independent Sustainable Croydon Commission whose purpose will be to identify long term objectives and recommend realistic actions in the drive to establish Croydon as a sustainable borough.
- To date, the Council had already increased recycling rates in the borough, reconfigured the waste collection service and completed the successful roll out of new bins. A commitment had been made to plant at least 3,500 trees over five years and published a five year Air Quality Strategy and Action Plan 2017-22.

Following the presentation the Sub-Committee was given the opportunity to ask questions on the content of the report and the information provided during the presentation.

In response to a question on the feasibility of achieving carbon neutrality by 2030, the Cabinet Member said that it was hoped that it would be achieved before that date as it could be argued that this target date does not show enough urgency. Officers were confident that it could be achieved and the advice received was that this was a deliverable ambition.

It was asked how members of the citizen's assembly would be sourced and the level of expertise they possessed, additionally concerns were raised on conflicts of interest in a project like this. Officers reassured Members that they were keen to get this right and the appropriate people would be appointed. The comments made on ensuring expertise and experience would be taken on board during selection process.

A Member commented on the level of time it had taken since the declaration of the Climate Emergency to the present time and questioned when actions

plans and recommendations would be published. It was further commented that it was important that Extinction Rebellion be involved in the process due to extensive work they had carried out to raise awareness and being one of the drivers in ensuring this emergency was declared.

Officers advised that Extinction Rebellion would be involved and they looked forward to receiving their advice throughout the project. Members were told that since the declaration was made, research was being carried out on the delivery of a sustainable borough. This had included visits to other boroughs and sharing learning. The recruitment for the Citizen Assembly was now completed and was within the timeline for a final report to be presented to Cabinet in March 2020

It was highlighted that whilst there has been a relative delay since the declaration, the Council had continued to do all its work in areas such as air quality planning as it would be an armory to tackling the climate crisis. Although there was a sense of urgency, it was important to ensure the right appointment of people in order to take advice from them as to how quickly things can be put in place and how to tackle difficult issues. The Council had also been working on broader set of actions such as recycling and managing waste. It was vital that all was being done to ensure that the targets and objective set were achievable.

Questions were raised on the cost for a Citizens Assembly as well as the Commission and whether this would be money well spent with real value to be realised. Officers responded that this was a fair challenge and confirmed there would be costs associated to the Citizens Assembly, but the Commission would only incur limited costs due to Members being voluntary. There would be much needed value added by both projects that would make a difference to achieving targets.

It was further questioned how success would be measured in the Council's ambitious quest to be carbon neutral. The Cabinet Member recognised that although this was an ambitious target, it was deliverable and measurable. Many factors would be taken into consideration in measuring success as this was a growing and evolving borough.

At the conclusion of this item the Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and Officers for their attendance at the meeting and their engagement with the Committee and questions.

The Sub-Committee reached the following **Conclusions:**

- Careful attention needed to be given to the composition of members on the Citizens Assembly as well as the Commission to ensure there was appropriate representation of the diversity of the borough
- Officers should give consideration as to how to measure success in order to ensure that it was on target to meet commitments to be Carbon Neutral by 2030

- It was positive and reassuring that the Council had made a decision to involve and seek advice and expertise from Extinction Rebellion in its proceedings.
- The Council must exercise caution in managing the costs associated to the projects and ensure that all costs incurred were quantifiable to work that was being undertaken.
- Whilst it was recognised that the Council was trying to be thorough in its research and fact finding, consideration must be given to expediting progress as there had been considerable delay since the declaration was made to producing an action plan, which was still currently awaited.

#### **40/19 A Housing and Homelessness Strategy For Croydon**

The Director of Gateway and the Head of Strategic Projects and Growth gave presentations on the Housing and Homelessness Strategy:

During the presentations, the following points were noted:

- There were specific drivers for a new Housing Strategy including population growth coupled with need, climate emergency and sustainability as well as affordability concerns.
- Priorities would be focused on increase of supply, affordable homes, and improvements to current stock as well as better access to homes whilst promoting independence.
- The current Administration and the Council were united in the decision that understanding need and a clear direction of travel was required which culminated in the production of the Strategy. The focus was on intervention with residents at the heart of responses, provision of services and support.
- Hidden homelessness remained a large issue, with many families experiencing in work poverty. Similarly street homelessness remained a priority which was more about tackling the range of contributing factors, all of which required outreach and holistic support.
- Several initiatives had been launched with partners and community services, who were all valued for their contribution as it was clear that the housing crisis could only be ended through working in partnership

Following the presentation the Sub-Committee was given the opportunity to ask questions on the content of the reports and the information provided during the presentations.

Officers were commended on the detail and level of work that had been undertaken in the development of the Strategy

In response to a question on how to define affordable housing, the Cabinet Member said that this term in itself was confusing as homes could be described as affordable but the level of difference in meaning would vary for different people. It was important to strike a balance and to be clear on what it actually meant for Croydon residents as the Government had taken the position that it should be 80% of market rent, but the reality was that in some areas with lower rents this was affordable and in others not.

A question was raised on whether there was an interconnection between planning applications, housing need in the borough and if there was a scope to steer developers towards submitting applications for homes that were more favourable. Officers responded that the planning department worked with developers and encourage them to provide as much affordable homes as possible from proposed schemes. They ensured environmental and space standards were taken into consideration and met. Officers also worked with Housing Associations to help meet housing need through their offers of social rented properties and shared ownership as part of proposed schemes.

A Member queried the expansion of the seaside homes scheme to facilitate people that wanted to move out of the borough. It was asked whether there was any figures available on the uptake of these schemes as well as any other schemes that the Council may have to assist people that wanted to move out of the borough. Officers agreed to circulate related information after the meeting.

A Member highlighted that there had been a commendation by the Ministry of Housing for Croydon and its Gateway team on its innovation and good practice to reduce homelessness.

It was emphasised that more assistance was needed for single people, young people and key workers. Officers acknowledged this and advised that exploring options to support these residents remained a priority for the Council. They were exploring different schemes for key workers in order to attract good quality staff to the borough.

In response to questions on social letting agencies and what was being done to support families on housing benefit. Officers said that the key was ensuring that tenancies were sustainable and that the Council continued to work with housing associations to ensure that they offered support to their residents to enable them to sustain their tenancies. The Council also ran the Croydon Lettings Project which was developed to assist residents that struggled to access rental properties on the open housing market by helping residents find and keep homes in the private rental sectors and working with landlords to

meet their needs by matching them with reliable tenants on a free service basis. The scheme continued to be successful after its launch over a year ago.

It was further questioned what was being done to support Croydon's Homeless population. Officers explained that they were working in partnership with various outreach services on engagement. Various services including mental health, drug and alcohol outreach services had been commissioned as well as other community voluntary services working together. Churches in the community has come together to run emergency floating shelter services, especially during evenings of severe low temperature.

In response to a question on the impact of Right to Buy legislation on the Housing Strategy, officers said that social housing remained a priority as social homes are being lost at a rate at which they could not be replaced. Members were informed that 70% of the income from Right to Buy was paid to central government with councils only keeping 30% so the money raised was not reinvested in replenishing lost stock. The Council's housing stock had depleted from over 25,000 to 13,000 as a result of the Right to Buy scheme.

A Member asked how Croydon's Strategy compared to other Authorities that may not have a Gateway service. Officers confirmed that Croydon was trailblazing with the early intervention and prevention work it was doing. Partnerships were strengthened and the community, both young and older were working collectively on preventative methods to tackling the housing and homelessness crisis.

At the conclusion of this item the Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and officers for their attendance at the meeting and their engagement with the Committee and questions.

Arising from the discussion of this item, the Sub-Committee would like to request the following information be provided:-

1. Information on the seaside scheme including data on the levels of take up.

The Sub-Committee reached the following **Conclusions**:

- The level of detail that had gone into developing the Strategy was commendable
- The Strategy highlighted the importance of integrated working between the Council and its partners as well as the community to tackle the housing and homelessness crisis.
- In addressing issues of homelessness it was important to understand the wider influencing factors that contributed to homelessness with the appropriate services identified and put in place as preventative measures.

- Hidden homelessness remained a big issues and a cause for concern, the effects of which were felt by the whole family including children in terms of education and welfare.
- The provision of holistic support and outreach services through joint working with multidisciplinary agencies as well as the voluntary sector was making a difference to the lives of residents.

#### **41/19 Policy for Council Community Properties, Rent Subsidy and Rate Relief**

The Cabinet Member for Safer Croydon and Communities delivered the presentation and answered questions arising.

During the presentation the following points were noted:

- The Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) was a fundamental part of Croydon which played a vital role in the delivery of services and support for residents.
- This policy had been drafted to provide a transparent, criteria guideline driven formal policy of funding as there was no existing policy, to ensure that funding was widely distributed as possible, towards areas that will have as high an impact as possible for the community.
- Due to the amount of funding available, only a small amount of the borough's large voluntary sector could be supported, making it important that a clear policy was established.
- Through engagement with the VCS the lack of availability of affordable premises was highlighted as a major challenge. It was clear that actions such as the monitoring of performance and property usage, using clear criteria for the allocation of premises and having rent subsidies which encouraged organisations to share available space were all actions that that this policy would seek to implement.
- In drafting the policy, careful consideration had been given to the criteria, eligibility and allocation process, in particular the possible exclusions of any particular organisations or groups and the impact this could have on the organisations.

Following the presentation the Sub-Committee was given the opportunity to ask questions on the content of the report and the information provided during the presentation.

The Chair informed Members that the focus of questioning should be on the eligibility criteria and the proposed timetable.

In response to a question on how to assess newly established organisations to ensure that they met the needs of residents, the Cabinet Member stated that this was the reason why these arrangements were being proposed. The

Policy provided a clear process that required organisations to demonstrate that they fitted the criteria for eligibility and could meet the needs of residents.

It was further questioned how organisations would be asked to provide evidence to substantiate their proposals, to which officers responded that supporting evidence would be requested from applicants. Including documentation such as terms of reference and annual monitoring reports on the services they have delivered.

Additionally the Council would reserve the right to review each organisations activities and random spot checks would be carried out by the administrative team, in particular instances when in receipt of any intelligence that required further investigation.

There were concerns raised regarding the proposal to exclude social enterprises, with a consensus that organisations should not automatically be excluded should they meet the criteria.

It was questioned how much time and effort would be required from organisations to complete forms, officers said that the application form would be proportionate and should take no more than 30 minutes to complete. It was expected that there would be over subscription, and in shortlisting, evidence of the use of the policy framework to complete applications would be sought. Organisations and their trustee boards would be advised and expected to submit proactive applications.

It was confirmed that due to a lack of control over schools and usage of school buildings, this rate relief would not be extended to community groups that use school building. Planning policy required schools to have a community use school policy and prescribed that rates be affordable.

It was acknowledged that this investment should support the VCS but not be used to subsidise other areas. There was a small pot of funding and if eligibility criteria was widened the money would be spread too thinly and would not have its intended impact.

There was concern raised regarding the timeline and the suitability of length of time before applicants were notified of the outcome of their application. It was acknowledged that during a re-valuation year it would be beneficial for notification to be made later, but that there was little benefit to applicants to be notified late in other years.

At the conclusion of this item the Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and officers for their attendance at the meeting and their engagement with the Committee and questions.

In reaching its recommendations, the sub-committee came to the following **Conclusions:**



1. It was not deemed appropriate for Social Enterprises and Co-Operatives to be automatically excluded from submitting an application for Rent Subsidy.
2. The timeline for the notification of any award of discretionary Business Rate Relief should be amended to ensure that organisations were notified as early as possible of the decision made; to enable alternative arrangements to be made ahead of the beginning of the financial year should they not be eligible for the rate relief.

The Sub-Committee resolved to **Recommend**:

1. That Social Enterprises and Co-Operatives should:
  - a) Be eligible to submit an application should they meet the criteria and their application be considered on its own merit.
  - b) Officers to discuss and formulate a plan as to how to assess the eligibility of these groups if there was to be a difference in application criteria to that of Voluntary Organisations.
2. That in order to reduce the length of time between the submission of applications and notification of the decision, organisations should be notified of the outcome of their application for discretionary rate relief no later than the January following submission. Except in a re-evaluation year when notification should be made in March following submission of their application to ensure that a definite decision is provided in the first instance.

**42/19 Work Programme**

The Sub-Committee **NOTED** the work programme for the remainder of 2019/20 municipal year.

**43/19 Exclusion of the Press and Public**

This was not required.

The meeting ended at 10.50 pm

**Signed:**

**Date:**

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