

Scrutiny & Overview Committee

Meeting held on Monday, 27 June 2022 at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall, Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

MINUTES

Present: Councillors Rowenna Davis (Chair), Councillor Richard Chatterjee (Vice-Chair), Leila Ben-Hassel (Deputy-Chair), Jade Appleton, Sean Fitzsimons and Simon Fox

Also Present: Executive Mayor Jason Perry

Apologies: None received

PART A

32/22 **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 June 2022 were agreed as an accurate record with the amendment that on page 2, paragraph 3 the word 'highlighted' is substituted for 'concluded'.

33/22 **Disclosure of Interests**

There were no disclosures of interest made at the meeting.

34/22 **Urgent Business (if any)**

There were no items of urgent business for the consideration of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee at the meeting.

35/22 **Executive Mayor Update to Scrutiny**

The Chair introduced the item and explained that the Committee would be focusing their questioning to the Executive Mayor, Jason Perry, on four main topics. There were 'strengthening our democracy', 'budgeting', 'planning' and 'climate change'.

The Executive Mayor thanked the Committee for inviting him to the meeting and stated that he looked forward to working with scrutiny going forward as a part of his commitment to opposition led scrutiny. Members heard that the Executive Mayor's top priorities were finances; the budget; securing additional income from government; reformation of planning with the revocation of the Suburban Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document 2 (SPD2); amendments to the Local Plan; the Housing Directorate; regeneration of the

town centre; reopening of Purley Pool and Leisure Centre; street cleaning; restoration of the Graffiti Removal Service and tackling youth and violent crime by working in partnership with the police, community and schools. The Committee heard that as plans for these priorities were developed, they would be added to the Forward Plan.

The first set of questions focused on 'strengthening our democracy'. The Committee raised the first Report in the Public Interest Action Plan and asked whether this was still Council Policy. It was confirmed that this was the case; further questions were asked about recommendations to provide additional resources to Scrutiny Committees and whether there were any updates in progressing this. The Executive Mayor explained that this was the case but that it was in the context of significant cuts and savings that needed to be found across the Council and that any additional resource would need to be found from within existing budgets. The Director of Resources, Jane West, added that growth had been built into the Democratic Services budget for this year that would support additional resource in Scrutiny; the Committee welcomed this and suggested that this could be used to increase scrutiny of the Housing Directorate. The Executive Mayor welcomed a greater focus on housing issues and commented that additional resource needed to be used wisely. The Chair informed Members of plans for a separate scrutiny Housing Sub-Committee that would be discussed at the next meeting.

Members asked how an enhanced role for residents in the borough would be used to ensure that their voices were heard and how they would be able to influence the decisions of the Executive Mayor. In response the Committee heard that there were plans for a 'Cabinet Roadshow' to meet with members of the public to ensure the Cabinet was aware of their views; in addition to this there would be some form of 'Mayoral Surgeries' to engage on a more personal level with individuals. There were plans for greater community involvement with the decision-making process to ensure input from residents, local businesses, faith groups and the voluntary sector. Members heard that this had started with the recently implemented Resident's Charter to put residents at the heart of decisions in the Housing Directorate. These initiatives were welcomed by the Committee and the Executive Mayor explained that a form of 'Community Cabinet' was envisaged and would be developed. In response to how residents in hard to reach groups would be listened to equally, the Committee heard that wide publication of meetings would take place as well as through promotion by Councillors to ensure as wide an audience was reached as possible. The Chair asked how the timeline for community involvement would progress and the Executive Mayor reconfirmed his commitment to Scrutiny, including providing as much time as possible for pre-decision scrutiny. It was flagged that ideally Scrutiny would be involved in scrutinising a decision six months before the decision was due to be made, in order to have the biggest impact.

The Committee enquired about the new People and Cultural Transformation Strategy and the timelines for its implementation and completion. Members heard that the Executive Mayor felt that the Council's staff were vital to the work of the authority and that they had been through a tough period; this

needed to be recognised alongside their hard work, and the Executive Mayor had held three webinars to engage with officers since May 2022. The perception of Croydon's brand needed to be remedied to ensure staff could be recruited and retained; staff surveys had been undertaken and would be repeated going forward to provide benchmarking and ensure that officers were rewarded and recognised. The Committee heard that there needed to be a cultural change to ensure that residents were treated as valuable customers and that the organisation was outward looking; this work was still in early development and Members asked to have advanced sight of any documentation. The Committee stated the importance of staff in the future success of Croydon. The Assistant Chief Executive, Elaine Jackson, agreed that staff were the most valuable asset of the council and explained that a cultural change programme was being launched around improvements to be made and work being done to put customers at the heart of all the Council did; a paper on the People Strategy would be brought to Cabinet in late 2022 and it was hoped that this would also be reviewed by Scrutiny. Staff had fed back that they wanted to provide good service to residents with many officers living in Croydon and keen to show pride in their borough.

Members asked if there were plans to retain the Young Mayor and for elaboration regarding the 'co-production' of services. The Committee heard that the role of the Young Mayor was to be retained but was currently ill-defined and it was hoped that the role could be utilised to develop the Youth Strategy in future. In regard to co-production, the Executive Mayor explained that the Mayoral priorities would lead the way as they had a mandate from the election, but that co-production would be used to develop the mechanisms for the implementation of these priorities. The Committee heard that the Executive Mayor was open to looking at other authorities to adopt best practise and was already meeting with Cabinet Members from other councils.

The Committee asked for an explanation for the lack of delegation by the Executive Mayor to Cabinet Members and questioned whether reduced Special Responsibility Allowances should be paid because of this. Members heard that this was the first time the borough had directly elected an Executive Mayor and that the public had entrusted him with these powers. The Committee was informed that there needed to be a greater understanding of the detail of how the authority was running before powers were delegated. Cabinet Members were working on the detail of their relevant responsibilities with the Corporate Management Team (CMT) and meeting weekly to report back. The Committee asked who should be invited to scrutiny committees as this was normally the decision maker and initially this would always be the Executive Mayor; it was explained that the Executive Mayor and Cabinet were working collectively, and Cabinet Members were expected to attend relevant Sub-Committees with recommendations from scrutiny reported to Cabinet in the normal way. In the view of the Executive Mayor, Cabinet Members were performing their full role and should not receive reduced allowances.

In response to questions on the importance of access to information and the lack of detail and range in the Forward Plan, the Committee heard that the six-month Forward Plan was available to Members through the Council

Intranet and that there were plans to publish this for residents in future. The Executive Mayor explained that access to information was important, with papers having been shared with MPs and committee chairs ahead of meetings, and a commitment to pre-decision scrutiny was reaffirmed. The Chair stated that best practise on pre-decision scrutiny meant that papers were received as far in advance as possible and asked what planned timescales were for the Committee to receive papers; Members heard that this would be varied based on the content but that the commitment to publishing an extended Forward Plan covering at least six months should help with this.

Members asked whether the Executive Mayor's priorities would be measured and judged by Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and heard that this would be the case wherever possible, but that discussions on how these should be formulated still needed to take place. The Chair thanked the Executive Mayor for this and stated that there may be recommendations forthcoming to be involved in setting those KPIs. The Chair asked what plans there were for broadening and improving communications with residents and specifically in regard to grass cutting which had been a recent issue. The Executive Mayor stated that communication and listening to residents was important and that the grass cutting services was being rebuilt; it had been hoped that grass cutting would have been completed by June 2022, but this was now likely to overrun. Work was being undertaken to establish a four-to-six-week cycle of cutting and a spreadsheet on timelines was under development. The Committee welcomed confirmation that this would be published but that communications needed to be flexible and responsive to make sure incorrect information was not promoted. The Committee heard that the Streets, Environment & Homes Sub-Committee had requested a briefing on Grounds Maintenance this week which would be shared at the 5th July 2022 Sub-Committee meeting.

The next set of questions addressed budgets. Members asked questions on how priorities would be paid for from existing budgets, the use of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and costings for the reopening of Purley Pool, the forthcoming new Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), and how the reintroduction of the Graffiti Removal Team would be funded. The Executive Mayor explained that currently resource from within existing budgets was all that was possible whilst savings were sought; this had influenced the Executive Mayor's manifesto pledges, and these had been made within the backdrop of the financial situation. The Chair asked about the possible redirection of budget from 'lower priority services' and heard that it was not currently known what these were as nothing had been prioritised. An update on this, once further work had been provided was requested. The Committee heard that sources for external funding were being investigated including 'Levelling Up' funding and government funding to address fly tipping. The Purley Pool reopening had been fully costed by the former Section 151 Officer, using CIL funding, and a paper on this would be heard at the July 2022 Cabinet meeting; it was explained that there were possibilities to bring in extra income once the site reopened. The Executive Mayor explained that they felt the spread of graffiti had contributed to increased levels of anti-social

behaviour and that he would be looking at the best way to reintroduce the Graffiti Removal Service with it suggested that areas were tackled one at a time to set an initial high standard. The Committee welcomed confirmation that the Graffiti Removal Team would bring in income through hire by external clients. Members asked questions about the increased scope of provision planned in reopening Purley Pool and it was confirmed by the Director of Resources that CIL could be used to fund ongoing revenue costs as well as initial refurbishment if required.

The Chair asked about mechanisms built into the budget to deal with inflationary pressures and heard that the effects of the cost-of-living crisis were anticipated, and work was being done to ensure budgets were resilient to increased demand alongside the availability of government funding for the household support grant. The Director of Resources confirmed this and explained that the current high levels of inflation had not been anticipated and that this was being monitored closely; £20 million had been built into this year's budget to account for inflation. The number of commitments the Executive Mayor had made were highlighted and it was asked if the Director of Resources was confident these could be met from existing budgets. The Committee heard that each of these needed to be examined to decide what year priorities would be enacted and how budgets would need to be changed or reallocated to make sure there was sufficient funding reflected in the MTFs; it was highlighted by the Executive Mayor that this was a four-year programme of commitments which included better management of contracts to help better deliver for residents. It was clarified that to increase spending in one area, savings would need to be made elsewhere and that this was normal practise for local authorities; the Chair requested that any work on this was brought to the Committee. The Executive Mayor stated that whilst it was not yet known what would be prioritised and de-prioritised, conversations with partners to transform and deliver services in different and improved ways were ongoing.

Members asked whether a bidding unit would be created to apply for government funding and heard that, whilst the Executive Mayor would like this, it would need to be investigated as part of ongoing budgetary work, however, this was on the radar and featured in regular discussions with CMT. The Committee commented on past cross-party work to try to achieve a fairer funding deal for Croydon in the context of the upcoming Census. Members heard that the Executive Mayor felt that the current funding deal was unfair and had already been in touch with government ministers on the issue as well as on Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) funding. The Committee heard that a formal letter to the Secretary of State on funding would be sent soon and that this could develop into a campaign depending on the response. Members asked about the possibilities of a fairer allocation of UASC in the borough and the Executive Mayor highlighted the use of the mandatory National Transfer Scheme to share the financial cost and numbers of UASC across the country. The Chair affirmed that the Council was proud of the role it played regarding UASC but that this should be properly funded.

The next questions were on the revocation of SPD2 and planning. The Committee asked whether the plans to revoke this were centred on only a small section of the guidance and whether a review of the SPD2 would have been more proportionate and would use less resource. The Executive Mayor explained that, in their opinion, the SPD2 had been objected to upon its initial adoption, was not popular with residents and had led to direct harm of areas of the borough; legal advice provided had been that the best way to address changes to the document was by full revocation followed by adoption of a new supplementary guidance document. Members heard officers had been directed to see if there could be a House of Multiple Occupation (HMO) Policy and Conversions Policy introduced as a part of the new document as these were currently lacking in the Local Plan; consultation on new guidance would seek to engage with residents and the community to ensure that it was widely supported. Members questioned whether any new guidance could stop backland development and questioned the desire not to be density or intensification led to meet housing targets at the expense of character; it was further asked if the Executive Mayor should wait for the implementation of the Levelling Up Bill before adopting any new guidance to ensure there was sufficient resource in the planning service and that further changes would not be required. The Executive Mayor explained that, in their opinion, the previous planning system had been too focussed on developers and delivery of units over and above the character of an area. The Committee heard that there was an appetite for change of the Local Plan by residents, and the Executive Mayor stated that they wanted to deliver this.

The Committee discussed the requirement for a design code in the context of revoking SPD2 and the likelihood that developers may opt for cheaper options compliant with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and emerging London Plan without legal powers in place for the Council to challenge poor design for an extended period. The Executive Mayor explained that they felt many residents felt as if this was already the reality and that a new design code and Local Plan would be fit for purpose. The Committee pressed the Executive Mayor on how design would be evaluated without design codes and if this would just be against national standards; the Committee heard that this was a supplementary document and that the Local Plan would remain in place for the time being. Members heard that conversations with residents and developers would be taken forward to ensure that guidance was produced to work for everybody although this would take time.

The following questions concerned climate change. Members asked how the target of achieving Carbon Neutrality would be achieved given that extension of the Low Emission Zone had been ruled out. The Executive Mayor explained that planning would be used as well as some of the recommendations of the Climate Change Commission. Close work with government on this would help to inform further initiatives as well as green energy, on which conversations with green energy groups had already begun. The Committee queried the governments promotion of green transport initiatives, active travel and Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs); it was asked how carbon reduction could be achieved through the reduction of motor cars on the road. Members heard that the Executive Mayor was happy to disagree

with the government if it was not right for Croydon; active travel was supported but the Committee heard that there were issues generated by LTNs in respect of congestion and pollution in some areas. The benefits of school streets were expounded as well as engagement with local residents and businesses before introducing measures that could be detrimental to communities and local economies. The Committee asked if new polices on active travel would be forthcoming and it was explained that policies on this would be approached in a way that 'brought residents with' the Council.

The Chair asked if there would be a concrete strategy that contained more numerical data on how carbon neutrality would be achieved and the Committee heard that this would be the case. Members asked about high levels of pollution and resultant asthma cases in the borough and whether there were plans to address this. The Executive Mayor responded increased adoption of electric cars would help to tackle this but that this was not attainable for more vulnerable residents and policies which led to these residents driving further and using more petrol were not conducive to positive outcomes. The Committee highlighted that particulate matter in the air was an issue of vehicle density and would not be addressed by wholesale adoption of electric cars; the Executive Mayor responded that a holistic response addressing public transport infrastructure and planning would help to reduce the volume of cars on the road alongside adoption of some of the recommendations of the Climate Change Commission. The Chair asked whether the Council would include the Pension Fund in its carbon neutrality targets and the committee heard that this was not an Executive function and fell under the responsibility of the Pension Committee.

Members asked about planned intensification around Kenley Railway Station contained in the SPD2 and whether development near railway stations would promote a greener future. The Executive Mayor explained that they did not feel this was a good idea as Kenley station hosted only reduced services as compared to larger transport hubs and that intensification areas needed to be better considered against available infrastructure.

The Chair thanked the Executive Mayor and Committee for attending the meeting and the constructive discussions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Strengthening our democracy

The Committee were of the view that more detail was required to effectively scrutinise the plans resulting from the Executive Mayor's priorities. Members were encouraged that the Executive Mayor was supportive of scrutiny and the planned addition of a Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee as well as the planned adoption of a published six-month Forward Plan.

Members welcomed plans on co-production of services and community engagement but felt that this lacked detail.

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the SRAs of Cabinet Members are revisited, in consultation with London Councils' Independent Panel on the Remuneration of Members in London, in light of the reduced responsibilities of Cabinet Members and the financial position of the Council and the need to protect public finances.

RECOMMENDATION 2: To meet the Executive Mayors central priority of creating a Council that listens to residents, there needs to be an overarching Community Engagement Strategy to guide when and how the Council will engage with the local community. This should set out the Executive Mayor's vision for community engagement in the design of services and strategies and how the Council will actively look to engage with hard-to-reach groups.

RECOMMENDATION 3: That consideration is given to the utilisation of citizen's assemblies to engage with residents on contentious topics such as carbon reduction and healthy neighbourhoods, alongside recommendations on resident engagement in the Independent Governance Review from 2020.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Given the Mayor's acknowledgment that there was greater value for KPIs to be independently tested, the Committee would request to be involved in developing the KPIs which will monitor and evaluate the performance of implementing the Executive Mayor's priorities.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The role of Youth Mayor should be reviewed to ensure that it can be an effective mechanism for youth engagement and be involved in developing the Youth Safety Strategy.

Budget

The Committee were of the view that there was insufficient detail on how the Executive Mayor's priorities would be funded. As the Section 151 Officer confirmed that other areas would need to be deprioritised make way for new spending, the Committee agreed that further information was needed to understand the risk of deprioritising services. The Committee welcomed plans to introduce a 'bidding unit' to bring in more external funds for Croydon.

Members supported a fairer funding campaign dependent on the Secretary of State's response to the Executive Mayor's letter on the matter. The Committee felt that there were risks in seeking additional income that addressed Capital but not Revenue funding which did not alleviate budgetary pressures which were compounded by inflationary pressures.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That work to create a Bidding Unit to lever external funding into the Borough is prioritised.

RECOMMENDATION 7: That more detail on budgets, the new MTFS and prioritisation of services were required for the September 2022 Committee meeting.

RECOMMENDATION 8: That it was essential to launch a campaign for fairer funding if the Secretary of State does not respond satisfactorily to the initial letter from the Executive Mayor.

RECOMMENDATION 9: That there is engagement with the Committee as early as possible on the setting of the new MTFS in line with best practise.

Planning

The Committee was concerned that the risks of revoking SPD2 and the timescales of implementing replacement documentation had not been well considered and that legal advice on the revocation had not been provided in advance of the meeting. Members were concerned that the level of resource in the planning service had not been considered and that work would need to be duplicated once the Levelling Up Bill came into effect.

Members were of the view that the Local Plan itself did not provide sufficient protections in the absence of a design code once SPD2 was revoked.

RECOMMENDATION 10: That a paper on the number of properties built by area, and application approval rates alongside appeal outcomes information should be requested to inform the meeting of the Streets, Environment & Homes Sub-Committee.

RECOMMENDATION 11: That a risk analysis on the revocation of SPD2 was provided to the Streets, Environment & Homes Sub-Committee including timescales for the replacement guidance to be enacted.

Climate change

The Committee welcomed the revisitation of Croydon's Carbon Reduction Plan, as there was concern that current plan was inadequate for meeting the Council's net zero targets. It was hoped that this would lead to the Plan being strengthened, made more strategic and with a clear road map for delivery.

Members felt that there was little detail on the reduction of private vehicle usage and road traffic and hoped that more explicit proposals on this were forthcoming.

RECOMMENDATION 12: That a revised strategy for achieving carbon neutrality by 2030 is delivered as a priority, setting out a clear roadmap for how the target will be achieved and explaining the rationale for the measure that have not been included.

RECOMMENDATION 13: For more information to be provided on how future revisions to the Local Plan will help to achieve climate change targets.

36/22 **Exclusion of the Press and Public**

This motion was not required.

The meeting ended at 9.02 pm

Signed:

Date:

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