

Scrutiny Streets, Environment & Homes Sub-Committee

Meeting held on Tuesday, 2 February 2021 at 6.30 pm in This meeting was held remotely via Microsoft Teams

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Leila Ben-Hassel (Chair);
Councillor Jeet Bains (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Jamie Audsley, Luke Clancy, Stephen Mann, Vidhi Mohan and Caragh Skipper

Also Present: Councillor Stuart King, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Croydon Renewal
Councillor Oliver Lewis, Cabinet Member for Culture and Regeneration
Councillor Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children Young People and Learning
Councillor Jane Avis, Cabinet Member for Homes and Gateway Services
Councillor Manju Shahul-Hameed, Cabinet Member for Economic Recovery and Skills
Councillor David Wood, Cabinet Member for Communities Safety and Skills
Councillor Muhammed Ali , Cabinet Member for Sustainable Croydon
Councillor Sean Fitzsimons
Shifa Mustapha, Executive Director of Place
Heather Cheesbrough, Director of Planning and Strategic Transport
Sarah Hayward, Director Violence Reduction Unit
Steve Iles, Director of Public Realm
Stephen Tate, Director Growth Employment and Regeneration
Geetha Blood, Finance Manager

Apologies: None

PART A

1/21 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Sub-Committee agreed to defer consideration of the minutes till the next meeting.

2/21 Disclosure of Interests

There were none.

3/21 Urgent Business (if any)

There were no items of urgent business.

Staff Changes, Service Impact and Response to Budget Reductions

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member Introduced the item by highlighting the strategic context that the meeting would follow. The report in the public interest was published on 23 October 2020 which set out the seriousness of the Council's financial situation as well as its governance. Following recommendations made, work began to address emerging concerns with the commissioning of Price Waterhouse Coopers to undertake a strategic review of the Council's companies. There had also been significant work undertaken to submit a request for exceptional financial support from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government through a capitalisation v. All of the work had been undertaken under the umbrella of the Croydon Renewal Plan which includes an Improvement Plan by which the authority would be held to account. This session would detail service delivery, budget, current savings and impact on those savings

The Chair outlined briefly the scope of the meeting and it was determined that each section of the service would be presented in turn with questions taken immediately after.

Each officer outlined details of each section of the report in a [Presentation](#)

Strategic Approach and Options

Clarification was sought on what statutory and non-statutory services were as referenced in the presentation. Officers said that statutory services included building control, planning, environmental health, including others, all of which must be provided. Non statutory services were some of the activities around economic growth. Extensive work was carried out to explore how the statutory services could be delivered with a reduced budget.

It was asked how the department intended to monitor and gather data to inform the improvement journey. Officers said that they would rely on the new corporate monitoring framework's corporate tracker. There will be an opportunity to shape the tracker, including what information was needed, interaction with processes and performance as well as information needed for managers to take action.

A question was raised on what the wider departmental approach was to ensure values and outcomes were realised despite budget restrictions and strategic priorities and whether there would be a need to pursue external funding. Officers said that there were no plans in the proposals that reduced resources and policies around areas such as waste transport and the built environment that directly dealt with tackling the climate challenge. The next steps would be based on recommendations from the climate crisis, which a report would be presented before Cabinet and would detail the next steps on smarter working as well as any financial implications and opportunities to apply for additional funding.

It was asked what was being done around prioritisation of the climate crisis

which had been considered a priority of the administration. Officers said that the proposals did not in any way include a requirement for reduction in resources in the area of climate change and that a lot of the activities in the department contributed in the expected way to climate change. There was already a lot of work taking place to deal with environmental objectives to tackle climate change which would continue based on recommendations that come out of the climate crisis commission.

It was further challenged that following the meeting of the sub-committee on 29 September 2020, a commitment had been gained that the climate commission would review the financial strategy and renewal plan to ensure alignment with the Councils financial plan and the plan to get to net zero emissions by 2030.

The Cabinet Member for Sustainable Croydon stated that the Commission had aligned its work prior to the economic challenges and in particular since the Covid crisis. Having had a clear view on the current financial situation of the Council, it was expected that the recommendations to be made would take a holistic view and application of the Sustainable Development Principle.

In response to a question on which savings that had been budgeted to be achieved carried the most risk or were the most challenging, officers said that this was something that would become clearer as the department moved into the next stages of its plan which was feasibility. In some areas of service this would become apparent following any planned consultations or further understanding of demands for a particular service. The process in place was that when risks became apparent, proposals would be shared with Members for feedback and then a final decision would be made. In order to deliver an affordable budget, feasibility assessments would have to take place to determine which processes or service could go ahead and which could not. The performance monitoring process that had been put in place as well as the risk register would provide better information and awareness of risks.

It was further asked what was being done strategically to ensure creative ways of working and identified opportunities for change to service delivery. Officers responded that they had to refocus on vision by exploring different ways of doing things that would lead to improved alignment of services and minimisation of duplication which could ultimately lead to some savings of efficiencies.

Members challenged why it had taken a crisis, in particular in other departments and not Place which had not been overspending, for some of these measures which could have been implemented to be considered. Officers acknowledged that on reflection it was evident that the structures in some areas should have been designed more efficiently and that going forward, whilst structures were designed for lengthy periods such as three or five years, increased and frequent review of those structures must take place to ensure that investments were making the intended progress and if not swift action to be taken.

A Member asked for an outline of any cultural changes that may have

occurred or were underway which would instil confidence in deliverability of the saving outlined as concerns had been raised about this at both organisational and individual departmental level. Officers said that the concerns around deliverability was expected due to what had occurred in the past but Members were reminded that most of the savings proposals within the Place department over the last few years had indeed been delivered. It was evident that in other departments there had been different challenges, for example in children and adult services which had experienced increasing demand over the last few years and had contributed to savings not being delivered. There was confidence in the commitment of senior managers in the Place department and it was not felt that culture needed to change drastically, especially in the way savings were delivered. It was however recognised that there were some cultural changes that needed to be made around monitoring in order for the budget to be met and for proposals to be delivered unless consultation or statutory processes indicated otherwise.

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Croydon Renewal added that culture was very much set and influenced by behaviours at the top of an organisation. The new leadership at political and organisational level was committed to changing of the culture of the Council where needed to ensure ability to tackle the failings that has been laid out by the Report in the Public Interest. Change had and was already being seen in terms of challenge and scrutiny from councillors as well as challenging conversations taking place within the Labour group and Cabinet.

Planning and Strategic Transport

A question was raised on what was being done to ensure that the proposals included in the MTFs and this year's budget do not impede on maximisation of income or expectation for staff to increase work for the same or less pay. Officers acknowledged that this was a challenge as the proposed savings would result in reduction in a number of posts in the local plan spatial planning team. It was anticipated that the local plan would have been delivered to adoption state and then the work would stop. The proposals would also affect the policy team but there would however be retention of a core team that would allow for bids for grant funding and would focus external grant funding opportunities. In the past the department had worked hard on generating income internally and were now looking at external clients such as other local authorities to see what new work and income could be attracted.

Discussions took place on promoting cycling and walking by addressing issues with the road network in the borough which was sometimes dangerous to walk and cycle in due to potholes in the street. Officers said that strategic transport team were working closely with colleagues in the highways team as well as partners to deliver more cycle ways. This work in terms of low traffic and health neighbourhoods was still proceeding as it was funded through the Local Implementation Plan (LIP) and funding from Transport for London (TFL) and was integral to improving air quality in the borough.

It was challenged that a recent health streets map which brought together data of all London boroughs presented a picture that Croydon performed badly in comparison to neighbouring boroughs. It was asked how we begin or continue to tackle the reality of the boroughs infrastructure in terms of poor street quality. Officers responded that the teams were committed to bringing the schemes forward which in themselves were challenging due to lack of support from some residents. It was important to work with colleagues to communicate the benefits of the work that was being undertaken by highlighting the long term benefits of improved air quality for all. The Council had adopted a corporate approach by bringing colleagues together from a number of teams to ensure that communication was spread far and wide and at every opportunity. There were also opportunities through the Local Plan that was being utilised such as the requirement for developers to pay sustainable transport contributions to help fund schemes and work hard to limit the number of parking spaces that were provided in suburban areas. As part of the new local plan, there was a review underway for it to focus more intensified development to areas that were more sustainable and with better transport and local services.

Homes and Social Investment

Officers advised that there were no proposals in this area as there had already been funding removed from the service in the past and to include the department in the savings proposal would result in an inability to meet statutory responsibilities.

Public Realm

In response to a question on what lessons had been learnt from other LA's that had experienced financial pressure difficulties, officers said that they had looked at how to deliver services in a different way. In arrears such as recycling, prior to the Councils current financial difficulties, work had begun on overhauling of the waste management system. The cost of taking waste to residual site for disposal had been identified as significantly higher than it would be if put into recycling streams and as a result, heavy emphasis had been put on curb side recycling capacity which had positively increased recycling statistics. There was however still a lot of work to be done to improve and maximise on getting residents to recycle more. In the highways department, it was acknowledged that it had been operating as a reactive and not a preventative service which was more costly as it was more expensive to repair a failed highway than it was to maintain it. Lessons had been learnt and changes made to build on a more preventative approach which would result in saving and better quality of highways in the borough.

Officers were asked to outline how the spending profile demonstrated prioritisation for cycling and walking. Officers said that investment in highways had a significant impact on the savings proposals. In order to encourage

walking and cycling, the footway and carriageway needed to be fit for purpose. The deterioration of the highway was exceeding the money invested as the potholes along the edge of carriageways were increasingly prevalent. In order to tackle the issues, the department had been working on introduction of a proactive maintenance programme to address surface issues before they become big issues. There had also been lot of work with schools in the borough through the school streets programme which had resulted in high uptake and participation on encouragement of walking and cycling and reduction in number of vehicle journeys. This has also had its own challenge and there has had to be a balance in ensuring that local residents as well as those that were vulnerable or disabled that lived within the school were still able to enter and exit freely.

It was asked what plan was in place to cover any potential shortfall in the event of the delay in the decisions for renewal of the landlord licensing scheme. Officers said that the application was made in July 2020 and the response has possibly been impacted by the events of Covid. There was regular contact being made to try to get a decision sooner rather than later. There had as a result in delayed response been cash flow issues and in order to mitigate there had been a reduction in resource to the team. Once a decision had been given, resources would be put back into the team to meet demand.

Culture and Leisure

A Member commented that all Councillors were actively promoting the libraries consultation amongst community groups and residents and asked what steps the Council was taking to maximise participation in the current climate. Additionally what reassurances could be given that serious consideration would be given to responses received, in particular those in opposition of a library closure. The Cabinet Member for Culture and Regeneration thanked Councillors for promoting the consultation due to the importance of high levels of participation. The library team had been working hard to encourage those on the library's database to be active and participate. Community groups were being encouraged to share any ideas on models of operation, community ownership which would be cost neutral to the Council. Officers were readily available to work in partnership with groups and individuals on feasibility of ideas. Officers further acknowledged that there had been dramatic changes as a result of Covid as to steps that usually would have been taken to maximise participation such as public meetings and roadshows. Alternative method such as leafletting, regular emails via the Council's Comms and through the voluntary sector was being utilised to generate as much participation as possible. Councillors were also being actively encouraged at every opportunity to publicise the consultation through their networks.

It was highlighted that staffing attributed to two third of the overall running costs for libraries and officers confirmed that staffing amounted to 75% of running costs although a lot of libraries operated with a volunteer model.

Croydon's staff proportion was well within the normal range for library services.

It was further asked what choices such as those adopted by other borough had been considered when the library service was brought back in house to offset budget costs. The Cabinet Member for Culture and Regeneration said that the hope was to continue to maintain library services in the same number of locations whilst delivering financial savings. In order to do this there will be a need for volunteer groups running the libraries and potentially the group would have to find significant funds to maintain buildings or look at alternative. The Council would work with communities and support them to realise keeping libraries services in each location whilst delivering savings. The decision to bring the service back in house at the time was in the best interest of Croydon.

In response to a question regarding cuts to the book fund. Officers made it clear that there were no proposals to cut the fund again next year. It had been cut this year as it could not be spent due to the libraries being shut as a result of the pandemic. In November 2019 Croydon joined the libraries consortium which provided access to millions of books.

The Director of the Violence Reduction Unit responded to a question on the opening of the reading room attached to the library archives and stated that they would reopen when COVID restrictions allowed.

Parks

It was asked what reassurance could be provided on the ability of securing the level of investment needed, in particular through external investment by staging events in order to make significant improvements to the boroughs parks which were considerably lower in numbers by London average. Although there had been a significant contract signed with Live Nation, it was questioned whether there was the ability to develop strategies that can attract further increased levels of investment. Officers responded that the evolving strategy intended to underpin aspirations that would attract high level investments. The 128 parks and open spaces in the borough was a significant amount which continued to be a lifeline for residents. In the short term due to the financial constraints that the Council was under, there would be reduction in terms of the investment that the Council could make on its Parks but in the middle and longer term, the strategy would focus on encouraging where possible, external investment through bidding mechanisms.

The Cabinet Member for Sustainable Croydon further added that a key element would be continuing to build on the partnership with friends of park groups and strengthening that relationship. Focus would also be on drawing on external funding to allow for enhancement of existing facilities that would be linked to the climate change commitment.

A Member asked how the Council would build a lasting legacy for London Borough of Culture amidst the financial landscape and proposed cuts to services. The Cabinet Member for Culture and Regeneration said that culture

was an important part of people's lives and part of that included access to jobs. A lot of funding was coming in externally with over a million pounds from the GLA which will be used to start investing in some of the young people and local artists in the borough. Part of the legacy of borough of culture was developing local talent and providing pathways to employment in creative and cultural industries through positive experiences and pathways to a positive future. There would be reshaping of what Croydon's culture would look like but there would be physical reminders and lasting legacy of aspirations.

Growth Employment and Regeneration

Members discussed and raised questions regarding the Growth Zone and what would occur in the event that investment was stopped which would mean a lack of business opportunities. This would impact on income from business rates which would further impact the budget. Officers said that the proposal was not to stop investment in the Growth Zone as it was vital to keep investing in the town centre and driving growth in order to reap the longer term benefits. The proposal however was to reduce the amount of investment due to budget constraints. Officers further said that it was important to remain flexible to change in light of the current circumstances and be able to respond to current issues as necessary

A further question was raised on whether in light of the unprecedented economic climate if it was realistic to be reliant on income from business rates. Officers responded that they had been reassured by the findings from PWC that the department's trajectory was in the right direction and that they would continue to conduct strategic reviews based on the current economic circumstances. The key point to remember was that a 16year model gave plenty of opportunities to review the model as necessary.

In response to a question on Croydon Works and decommissioning of the service, officers said that they had been exploring decommissioning the service initially but had been working with partners to look at ways to continue the good work produced by the service. Alongside that there was still ongoing work with other partnerships to assist residents back into employment. The key at present was to think very differently about the way some of the services were run and explore different options on using some of the anchor institutions in the borough as aspirations for residents into different pathways to employment.

It was commented that looking at the Place budget, it would appear that strategic planning had been prioritised over regeneration, in particular cuts to numbers of staff. It was asked if this was considered risky given the need to have strategies in place to support businesses post Covid by having clear strategies of diversification of offers for high streets and local district centres. Officers said that across the board they needed to think carefully about exploring different ways to deliver services but that planning and regeneration had always worked extremely close together on all matters. It was

acknowledged that across regeneration and economic development there was larger staffing but proposed – however it the main thing to focus on was the partnership working of the departments and across the economic field there was scope to pull together partnership particularly around some of the larger anchor institutions through some of the departmental bids and the ability to look for and attract funding as it becomes available in Covid recovery.

Violence Reduction

A Member asked if there had been any work done on estimating the human impact and costs of pausing the scheme and what monitoring of the impact of not having the scheme in place would take place. It would be useful to be presented with data when reviewing the scheme for restart. Officers said that the proposals that were developed in order to rebuild community safety, violence reduction capacity presented some potential options in the short term for keeping a violence reduction approach. It was however vital to think about other services across the Council and thinking differently about how those services operate. Officers were working closely with the Leader and Councillor David Wood to develop proposals that would deliberately avoid cuts to frontline services where possible. There has been a dramatic increase in domestic abuse throughout the Pandemic and lockdown and it was essential to protect key services such as the Family Justice Centre which was why the domestic violence service which is non statutory had not been cut at all. Retaining the domestic violence service held to avoid costs that could impact other services in particular children's social care.

In terms of antisocial behaviour, landlords were being reminded of their responsibilities to tackle antisocial behaviour as the antisocial behaviour team should only get involved when they are unable to deal or cases escalate and this was currently not the practice in Croydon. It was important to change practices and still deliver some antisocial behaviour outcomes that help to tackle violence in the borough. Regular monitoring does take place with monthly data collated to identify trend in order to take mitigating actions to the safer neighbourhood partnership.

The Chair thanked all in attendance for their engagement with the meeting.

Information request by the Sub-Committee

1. A briefing on lessons learnt and things that could have been done better
2. List of Statutory and Non Statutory services
3. A detailed briefing on the Parks revenue projection
4. Data on the increased contacts received due to the temporary suspension of the Landlord Licensing Scheme.

Staff Changes, Budget Reduction and Service Impact

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

1. It was vital that the department continued to monitor all areas to ensure that in the midst of cuts being made that the impact to provision of services was minimal.
2. Whilst there has been reassurance of continued monitoring of statutory services that has received cuts by senior officers and cabinet members, the sub-committee must ensure that they continue to monitor services and hold officers to account where necessary.
3. The Sub-Committee was reassured by the approach taken in the decision making behind the cuts made. The department must continue to explore more detailed engagement plans on its partnerships in order to drive the economic recovery needed.
4. It was reassuring that the Sub-Committee has been able to get a commitment from Cabinet Member for Culture and Regeneration that the Libraries consultation responses would be brought before the Sub-Committee for discussion and scrutiny.
5. Members were heartened by the aspiration of the Cabinet Member for Culture and Regeneration of keeping all Libraries open but in a different format where possible.
6. It was disappointing that income generation from Parks, aside from the impact from Covid has not been as strong as it could be.
7. The lack of a Parks Strategy was concerning given the fact that the services was brought back in house in terms of maintenance.
8. It was reassuring that further cuts would not be made to the CCTV department due to the vital services they provide in the safety of the community.
9. It was important that the department continue to build on how to manage risks in the event that application for the renewal of the Landlord Licencing scheme is rejected.
10. It was concerning that the Councils Highways department was in a position of reactive response instead of responsive approach to the deterioration of the boroughs highways.
11. More clarity on the proposals of activities and works as borough of culture was required.

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

1. That the responses from the Libraries Consultation be brought before the Sub-Committee for scrutiny.

-
2. That officers include in their presentation at the March meeting how they intend to align the plans of the Climate Action plan with the Budget.
 3. That the Sub-Committee include in the work programme an item on the Parks Strategy.
 4. That the proposed Parks Strategy include a Play Policy and for the policy to not be limited to play equipment.
 5. That a mitigation plan be brought to a future meeting of the committee in the event of rejected by MHCLG of the extension of the Landlord Licensing Scheme.
 6. That the asset investment strategy on the prevention of further deterioration to the Borough's highways be brought before the Sub-Committee prior to its Presentation at Cabinet in May 2021
 7. That a detailed legacy plan inclusive of timelines be brought before the Sub-Committee prior to the commencement of the prior to the commencement of activities as borough of culture

5/21 Exclusion of the Press and Public

This was not required.

The meeting ended at 10.24 am

Signed:

Date: