

Scrutiny Streets & Environment Sub-Committee

Meeting held on Tuesday, 31 January 2023 at 6.30 pm in Council Chamber, Town Hall,
Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Ria Patel (Chair), Councillor Amy Foster (Vice-Chair), Simon Brew, Danielle Denton, Christopher Herman, Mohammed Islam and Luke Shortland

Also Present: Councillor Scott Roche (Cabinet Member for Streets and Environment)
Councillor Jeet Bains (Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration)

PART A

1/23 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Part A and Part B minutes of the meeting held on 8 November 2022 were agreed as an accurate record.

2/23 Disclosure of Interests

Councillor Foster explained to the Sub-Committee that they worked for a charity that campaigned for 'everyday walking', and that this was already included in their register entry.

3/23 Urgent Business (if any)

There were no items of urgent business.

4/23 Budget Scrutiny Challenge

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 17 to 26 of the agenda, which provided specific proposals on the following 2023/24 budget areas: Parking Services; Planning Services; and Building Control. The Sub-Committee went on to review these proposals to determine whether they were resilient and sustainable, and whether they had been fairly prioritised. The Corporate Director of Sustainable Communities, Regeneration and Economic Recovery (SCRER) introduced the item and summarised the report.

Parking Services

Members noted the revised 23/24 budget figures for parking and asked how these had been calculated. The Director for Sustainable Communities informed Members that analysis had been carried out, alongside benchmarking activities on income streams with neighbouring boroughs, to ascertain the correct figures to right size the budget. The Sub-Committee asked specifically about Automatic Number Plate Recognitions (ANPR) cameras and Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs), and the possibility that residents were better complying with regulations in the current economic environment. Members heard that resident behaviour had changed significantly over COVID and this had been studied to identify trends, which had been fed into the budget setting process. The Director of Sustainable Communities explained that there was a detailed model to track the issuing of PCNs across the borough; this had identified a downturn in numbers, which had informed the revised budget figures. The Vice-Chair asked about the numbers of residents visiting the Town Centre, and whether this had reduced or if travel habits had changed. The Director of Sustainable Communities explained that this was difficult to track but what had been seen was a downturn in income from Pay and Display with a similar amount of transactions, but for shorter parking periods. The Corporate Director of SCRER explained that differences in working trends, with an increased prevalence of hybrid working, had also contributed to a downturn in commuter traffic and related parking income.

The Sub-Committee asked if there were currently an appropriate number of Civil Enforcement Officers to maximise parking income and enforce traffic regulations. The Director of Sustainable Communities explained that it was currently difficult to recruit to Civil Enforcement Officer posts, and agency workers were being used to fill gaps in the service; other London boroughs were being engaged to see if this was a wider trend and to ascertain if there were different options to tackle the recruitment shortfall. Members asked if this was a wider issue than just Croydon, and heard from the Head of Highways & Parking Services that some other boroughs were using different delivery models, such as outsourced enforcement companies, but these were also often resorting to the use of agency staff to fill vacancies.

Members asked if ANPR schemes were working as predicted and if they were making predicted income targets. The Corporate Director of SCRER explained that there had been delays to the implementation of these schemes over the last 18 months that had affected income collections; there had been two elections over this period that had caused delays to decision making, in addition there has been some delays in the mobilisation of the contracts and with getting the functionality of the cameras in place. The Director of Sustainable Communities added that Transport for London (TfL) funding arrangements had been chaotic over the COVID period, which had caused delays to delivery of the Local Implementation Plan (LIP) programme; it was stated that confirmation of funding for 2022/23 had only been received in October 2022. The Sub-Committee asked if established schemes were collecting income and the Director of Sustainable Communities explained that

there are number of sites that are working but not all of the sites are live. There was a programme of delivery in place for ANPR schemes with the contract, and this was reviewed weekly with the contractor.

The Sub-Committee asked how much of the borough was covered by Controlled Parking Zones (CPZs), and how this compared with other London boroughs. The Head of Highways & Parking Services explained that around 34% of the borough was covered by CPZs; data on this was submitted to TfL on an annual basis, but data from 2021/21 covering other boroughs had not yet been collated by TfL and provided for analysis. Members heard that the Parking Transformation policy would be looking at how effectively CPZs were managing the kerbside and whether further measures were needed in areas of intensified development. In response to questions about where CPZs featured most prominently, the Sub-Committee heard that CPZs were established in areas, such as the Town Centre and District Centres, where parking demand was most in conflict with parking stress. Members asked what consideration was given to the establishment of CPZs linked to public transport accessibility levels; the Head of Highways & Parking Services explained that they did not have this information to hand, but could provide it outside of the meeting.

The Vice-Chair asked about the lack of adjustment for figures on 'Suspension Payments' and whether there had been consideration of opportunities for extra income that could be earned through provision of street markets. The Director of Sustainable Communities explained that there was uncertainty about the levels of income that could be generated through these kind of special events, and that this income was generally collected through utility company infrastructure work. Members heard that the Director of Sustainable Communities was comfortable that the provided figure was sustainable, and that any additional income would be fed back into the parking budget.

The Chair asked how confident officers were that the adjusted budget figures for 2023/24 were resilient. The Corporate Director of SCRER explained that they felt the figures were based on strong analysis of data, but that there were always risks with parking budgets, as they needed to reflect resident behaviours, which had changed and could change again, and macro-economic conditions. There had previously been assumptions that parking accounts could be increased with inflation year-on-year, but this had been dispelled across all local authorities. The Chair asked about any other specific risks to delivery of the budget, and the Corporate Director of SCRER explained that the biggest risk mitigation was the upcoming review of Parking Policy, which would ensure the Council was adjusting the way it thought about the various parking elements in line with changing trends. The Director of Sustainable Communities explained that increased compliance was a risk that could lead to reduced income, in addition to the difficulties in recruiting Civil Enforcement Officers that may mean different operating models needed to be considered.

The Chair asked about consultation on the new Parking Policy, and the Head of Highways & Parking Services explained that specialist consultants had

been contracted to write the policy with collaboration from internal stakeholders on project boards. A draft of the Parking Policy would be reported to Cabinet in summer 2023, and following this residents would be engaged and consulted. Members raised concerns that raising parking fees too much could drive residents to district centres outside of Croydon, or to travel by public transport, which could reduce income further. The Director of Sustainable Communities explained that Parking Policy was meant to manage road space, and cover its own costs, but was not intended as a 'cash cow'; any surplus income from parking charges were used for traffic related activities.

The Chair asked about objectives around innovation and technology in the current Parking Policy, and what current data collection methods were being used. The Director of Sustainable Communities explained that the industry was looking at open data through a single platform; the Council currently used 'RingGo' for parking payments, but there were pilots to use one national platform for this, which would produce consistent national data and a simplified and standardised payment method for customers.

The Vice-Chair commented that they felt robust resident engagement was absent in the current Parking Policy, and asked what was being done to embed this in the new policy. The Director of Sustainable Communities stated that consultation with communities was important, and that consultation and engagement on the new policy would take place. Members heard that there was a clear requirement in the Road Traffic Act for consultation and engagement on any new Parking Policy. The Vice-Chair asked about wider communications with residents, for example on Healthy Neighbourhoods, and how this could be done better. The Corporate Director of SCRER explained that often the pace of implementation as directed by other organisations, such as the Department for Transport and TfL, often made conducting the expected level of engagement difficult, but it was understood how important this was for any future schemes. Members heard that the Executive Mayor and Cabinet Members had been clear that good consultation and engagement on any future schemes were very important, with significant resource for 'Active Travel' schemes directed toward feasibility studies in 2022/23.

The Chair asked about the adjustment of £13.986m in the 2023/24 budget, and the Corporate Director of SCRER explained that this was covered in detail in the report and the Medium Term Financial Strategy update that had been submitted to Cabinet in November 2022.

Planning Service

Members asked if the fall in major planning applications was a local or national issue. The Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration explained that there were some suggestions that this was a national issue, but it was currently hard to say and depended on Inner or Outer London location; it was suggested that this likely was a result of the economic environment and rising construction costs. Members raised concerns that recent major planning applications could be fuelling rising house prices in the borough, and

suggested anecdotally that they were aware of rental prices rising as much as 20%, due to a large number of new one and two bed developments; it was asked if the Council should consider increasing the balance of three and four bed homes in Croydon. The Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration explained that there was not clear data to substantiate this, and that the Local Plan set out clear requirements for a mix of development; there was some degree of influence that Local Planning Authority had on this, but this was limited, and policy was intended to bring about a range of different applications.

The Sub-Committee asked how the Planning Service would tackle the backlog of applications, and heard that work on this had been ongoing for 12 months. Members heard that resources had been increased with additional officers and increased productivity through 'clearance weeks'. Officers had been refocussed on determining applications over and above other duties, as this was a statutory function, and this had been effective in significantly reducing the backlog and officer caseloads. As the backlog was reduced, a careful balance would be struck between determination of applications and engagement with the wider public and applicants.

Members asked why the 2022/23 fee income target had been set at a level that was unlikely to be achieved. The Corporate Director of SCRER explained that budgets were set before year-end, and often required adjustment. The Sub-Committee heard that there was often the inclination to increase fee income targets based on inflation that could lead to a mismatch between the target set and income achieved. Members asked what work was being done to ensure that fee income targets for 2023/24 were achievable, and the Corporate Director of SCRER explained that a piece of work, looking at current fee income, was being undertaken and was finding that that income was continuing to decrease due to reduced applications; work was being done to ascertain if further adjustments to budgets would be necessary.

The Sub-Committee asked if there was a staffing shortage in Planning Services. The Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration explained that this was a difficult question to answer, as application quantum changed all the time, and this was why the department was staffed by a balance of agency and permanent workers to respond to changes in demand. The backlog of applications was being tackled, but additional officers were always welcome as more time could be devoted to working on planning policy as well as engaging with applicants, the public and customers. The Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration stated that they felt the department currently had the correct number of case officers in light of the downward trajectory of applications, but that this would be kept under constant review. The Corporate Director of SCRER explained that there had been cuts to the service during the first Section 114 notice in 2020, but that it was often hard to justify increasing staff numbers in a department that was not meeting income targets and this did impact on other areas; for example, it was acknowledged that the Planning Enforcement team was significantly under resourced. The Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration explained that additional staff would always be welcomed, but efficiency, improvements to processes and IT

resources also needed to be correct and would be addressed through the Planning Transformation Programme to ensure the department was effective.

The Vice-Chair asked how the unstable national construction environment would affect the resiliency of the budget for 2023/24. The Corporate Director of SCRER explained that this would affect the appetite of developers, and minor applications from people wishing to improve/extend their homes. The upside of this was this it would mean the backlog of applications would be easier to clear, however, it was likely that income would continue to decrease.

Members commended the work done to reduce the backlog, and asked how applications had been prioritised. The Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration explained that the department tried to determine these in the order received, but different applications could take longer than others if processes were not followed correctly during submission or if not all information was provided. The Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration stated that they empathised with any cases left without determination a long period, and would look into any cases Members were concerned about.

The Chair asked how decisions were made on spending Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) income. The Corporate Director of SCRER explained that decisions on CIL went through an officer governance process where it was decided what the CIL funding would be spent on, and following this, bids were submitted to an officer governance board to decide on individual projects; an annual statement was published detailing how CIL had been allocated and spent. The Sub-Committee asked how CIL unit prices were decided and measured, and the Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration explained that the CIL levy had been decided in 2013 through a viability appraisal in conjunction with other policy objectives. Members heard that the Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration felt this had been successful, but would be reviewed alongside the review of the Local Plan to ensure it continued to meet current policy objectives. The Sub-Committee asked if it would be considered that the CIL levy was used to encourage affordable housing, and any other housing stock the Council wished to encourage. The Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration stated that they were looking at how this was done in other boroughs to determine the best course of action for Croydon, and that a number of options were on the table. It was confirmed that reviewing the CIL levy sat under the Planning Transformation Programme.

The Chair asked about the timeline of the workstreams in the Planning Transformation Programme. The Corporate Director of SCRER explained that there would be a detailed Cabinet report on this and on the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) review of the service; the workstreams were identified in the paper at 4.21 and the Cabinet Report would include an action plan and timeframes. The Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration explained that the Transformation Plan did not sit in isolation, and ran alongside the rest of the transformation work in the Council. Members heard that the PAS review was extremely helpful as it gave specific points of improvement that were

needed in the Planning Service. Much of the transformation programme would be delivered over the next 12-24 months with the aim to deliver savings from 2024/25

The Vice-Chair asked about opportunities for regeneration and the development of brownfield sites in the review of the Local Plan. The Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration explained that changes to the spatial strategy included in the Local Plan would be consulted on with Members and residents; this also looked at regeneration. The Sub-Committee heard that regeneration priorities had been identified, taking into account the Mayor's Business Plan and the focus on district centres, the Town Centre and brownfield sites.

The Chair asked about any other key risks in the Planning Service and what mitigations were planned, or in place. The Corporate Director of SCRER explained that an uncertain external environment could lead to a further decline in applications and reduced income; work to ensure income targets and budgets were aligned to demand were ongoing to ensure that these remained achievable, but still presented risk. The Planning Transformation Programme was highlighted as a big opportunity for operational and reputational improvement, but it was explained that the possibility that this failed was a risk. The Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration explained that planning was highly political at both a local and national level; there was a changing national policy and legislative environment, and failure to adapt and respond to this was a key risk. Members heard that planning was becoming increasingly litigious, with increasing numbers of Judicial Reviews, which also presented reputational and financial risks.

Building Control

Members asked if private Building Control firms could be licensed in the borough to provide additional income revenue to the Council. The Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration explained that this was not possible and that the Building Safety Act meant the Building Safety Regulator would do this on a national level for surveyors and organisations; this would also include the Council's own service and surveyors.

The Sub-Committee asked how pan-London collaboration could impact the borough if other authorities turned to Croydon, who was already struggling. The Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration explained that Croydon was one of the few boroughs who was engaging neighbours to understand their resiliency as new proposals would likely require more collaboration. Members heard that it was important this was also done at a pan-London level through London Councils, to ensure there was resilience and collaboration across London in light of new proposals. The Sub-Committee were informed that there were proposals through the Local Authority Building Control and London District Surveyors' Association to ensure that London rose to the challenges of the Building Safety Act, but it was too early to say if the right pan-London approach would be put in place. A number of final proposals were still awaited from the Building Safety Regulator to see how

this would work. Croydon was seeking to position itself to ensure it had the correct level of surveyors and expertise in place.

The Chair asked how vacancies in the service would be filled, and whether the three new trainee staff would be sufficient, given they were not qualified surveyors. The Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration explained that the Council was always looking for surveyors, but this was very difficult given the disparity in pay and conditions between the public and private sector; market supplements, flexible working and strong training and development offers were being used to make Building Control positions attractive. Members learned there would now be five trainees instead of five, who would effectively be undertaking an apprenticeship; this was seen as a very positive effort to bring new people into the industry and rise to the challenge of the Building Safety Act.

The Vice-Chair asked about corporate risks of not having a resilient Building Control service. The Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration explained not having a resilient Building Control service was a key risk that commissioning of the iESE study and the Transformation work sought to manage and mitigate. The Chair asked about the three options considered in the report and whether one had been chosen. The Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration explained that these were all still being considered in more detail to decide on the most appropriate option for Building Control in the context of current restraints to recruitment and the new responsibilities in the Building Safety Act.

Members asked how the £300k savings figure from transformation had been calculated. The Corporate Director of SCRER explained that this was a target and was difficult to estimate as a delivery model had not yet been chosen; these figures would not be built in to budgets until a model had been decided, and were for 2024/25.

The Chair asked about the Resident Voice Internal Control Board, and heard from the Corporate Director of SCRER that this was one of a number of internal control boards set up in the Council to ensure good governance in response to the Reports in the Public Interest. The Resident Voice Internal Control Board was formed of officers and met to ensure good practise and processes were in place when engaging with customers.

The Chair asked if Equality and Diversity Impacts had been considered across three of the service areas considered. The Director of SCRER explained that where there were changes to budgets that impacted on groups with protected characteristics, Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) were undertaken, but the three areas in the report did not propose budget changes, and instead were about Transformation Programmes, and where this led to changes, then EQIAs would be conducted.

The Chair asked how the workloads, resiliency and wellbeing of officers was being considered. The Director of Planning & Sustainable Regeneration explained that considerations of these aspects was a core workstream in the

Planning Service Transformation. The Corporate Director of SCRER highlighted that the People Strategy had been approved at Cabinet in January 2023 and included detail on how all staff were supported through their employment at the Council. It was highlighted to Members that senior officers were conscious of the challenging environment for local government officers, with long days and high workloads. The Corporate Director of SCRER stated that a number of ways to support officers were in place, but this did not mean that it was not still a challenging environment.

Conclusions

The Sub-Committee thanked officers for the detailed report and responses to Members questions in the meeting.

The Sub-Committee acknowledged that adequate staffing and resourcing in all three department areas covered in the report was vital to ensure that there was sufficient capacity to deliver transformation plans alongside statutory duties.

The Sub-Committee were of the view that officers and Cabinet Members had a good understanding the risks in delivering the 2023/24 budget and that sufficient mitigations and risk management was in place.

The Sub-Committee acknowledged that difficulty in recruiting to posts across all three service areas impacted on service delivery.

The Sub-Committee were of the view that they would like to scrutinise how fee income targets were calculated at a future meeting.

Recommendations

The Sub-Committee recommended that recruitment and retention formed a key workstream in the transformation work taking place in all three areas, as it was felt this would be key to ensuring this could be delivered with sufficient capacity to also successfully engage with residents and stakeholders.

5/23

Period 7 Financial Performance Report

The Sub-Committee considered a report set out on pages 27 to 72 of the agenda that provided an upcoming Cabinet Report on Period 7 Financial Performance for Members to ascertain whether they are reassured about the delivery of the 2022-23 Sustainable Communities, Regeneration & Economic Recovery Budget. The Corporate Director for SCRER introduced the item.

Members asked about any new risks to delivering the 2022/23 budget since the Sub-Committee looked at the Period 5 report. The Director for Sustainable Communities explained that pressures in the budget and potential risks were

reviewed. Members heard that where risks were highlighted, these were monitored and adjusted as appropriate.

The Chair asked about the 'other risks' identified, and what these were. The Corporate Director of SCRER explained that these were contained in Appendices 4 and 5.

The Vice-Chair asked about the underspend projected for the Cycle Parking Capital programme; the Corporate Director of SCRER explained that they did not have this detail but would be able to provide it outside of the meeting.

The Chair asked about 'CIL substitution for General Fund expenditure' listed on page 35, and asked how this worked and what it covered. The Corporate Director of SCRER explained that this looked at using the Meaningful Local Proportion element of CIL; as part of this process, the infrastructure funding governance structure would be used to find services that were eligible.

The Chair comments on TfL stating that they were keen to fund capital projects that had a record of successful delivery; it was asked whether the Council pausing new project delivery created a risk that future bids would not be successful or that skilled staff would not be retained. The Corporate Director of SCRER stated that the DfT, Mayor of London and TfL had all been clear that when they funded travel schemes, that these must follow the guidance that they set out on engagement, scheme delivery and the circumstances on whether schemes could be delivered differently. Members heard that there was a risk that funding could be withheld if guidance was not followed or if schemes did not support the relevant transport strategy; as a result, there needed to be a balance between meeting local need and supporting these strategies.

6/23 Cabinet Response to Scrutiny Recommendations

On Recommendation 4, Page 76, the Vice-Chair asked why this had been partially accepted. The Director of Sustainable Communities explained that they were currently looking at the specifications for the new Waste Contract, which was using significant resource, and it was difficult to confirm whether budget would be available to fund a pilot scheme at this time.

7/23 Scrutiny Work Programme 2022-23

The Sub-Committee noted the report.

The meeting ended at 8.13 pm

Signed:

Date:

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