

Scrutiny & Overview Committee

Meeting held on Tuesday 5 September 2017 at 6:30pm in The Council Chamber, The Town Hall, Katharine Street, Croydon CR0 1NX

DRAFT MINUTES - PART A

Present: Councillor C Bonner, Councillor J Buttinger, Councillor S Fitzsimons, Councillor S Mann, Councillor V Mohan, Councillor A Butler(Also In attendance), Councillor T Newman(Also In attendance)

Also present: Jo Negrini (Chief Executive Officer), Barbara Peacock (Executive Director of People), Edwina Grant (Improvement Board Chair), Stephen Tate (Director of District Centres and Regeneration).

Apologies: Apologies were received from Jon Robbins and Keeley Smith from the London Fire Brigade Croydon Station.

MINUTES - PART A

A1 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 27 June 2017 were approved as a correct record of that meeting.

A2 Disclosure of Interest

There were none.

A3 Urgent Business (if any)

There was no urgent business to consider.

A4 Exempt Items

The allocation of business between Part A and Part B was agreed as stated in the agenda.

A5 Question Time: Leader of the Council

The item began with a presentation by the Leader of the Council. It was stated that the case needed to be made to central government for fair funding for Croydon. Economic growth had been fundamental to what the administration had been focussing on – from housing development through Brick by Brick to Westfield Hammerson in the

town centre. Housing standards had been driven up through the landlord licensing scheme and the Don't Mess With Croydon campaign was improving the cleanliness of the borough's streets. Croydon was playing a key role in delivering on the Mayor of London's agenda such as 20mph zones. The administration was also working with the Greater London Authority (GLA) to be designated the borough of culture for 2018/19 year. There had been significant investment in Croydon's cultural offer, including the development of Fairfield Halls, the new leisure centre in New Addington, the launch of Boxpark and the revamped Surrey Street market.

The successes were illustrated by large companies moving their offices to Croydon, and the Council were coupling this with being London Living Wage employers to ensure the jobs coming to the borough were quality well-paid opportunities.

The Leader stated he was proud to be a white ribbon borough campaigning against domestic violence. The July Youth Congress was highlighted as a successful example of engagement with young people in the borough, and it was announced that the Youth Zone had received planning permission and work would start in January 2018 to build the facility. Exam results were also going in the right direction.

The Leader stated that the difficult news had been the recent Ofsted inspection. The service needed to be improved urgently – particularly to impact the front line of the service. The final slide of the presentation detailed the short term steps being undertaken in response to the report.

The Chief Executive noted that officers from Ofsted were worked with whilst still on site at Croydon, to contribute to the transitional plan in place to deal with the shortcomings identified by the inspection. This included the creation of the improvement board. The independent chair of the board had been appointed after careful consideration in identifying someone with experience of working with local authorities on improving their children's services.

The Chair of the improvement board introduced herself to the Committee and stated that there had been a focussed effort to respond effectively to the inspection findings. An encouraging sign was the Council's response to accept the findings and work with the inspectors, rather than in other authorities where the response had been to deny the findings. The Chair stated that her role would be to create an environment where officers and partners reflected on what needed to be done and to create a performance framework. There would be challenges and setbacks along the improvement journey however the Chair stated that she had witnessed a good attitude amongst Council officers to improve and take the steps necessary.

The Committee first moved to questions specifically relating to the Ofsted report. In response to questions from the Committee, the following responses were provided:

- The Chair of the improvement board stated that there would be clear communication to ensure that Members and the wider public were kept updated on the board's progress. The Chair stated that she would rigorously maintain her independence, and intended to stay in post until clear signs of improvement within service were in place.
- The Chair of the improvement board explained that the commissioner appointed by the Department for Education (DfE) would review progress by the Council and determine whether it was capable of delivering the improvement journey of its own accord. The commissioner would then write to the Minister to determine whether central government intervention was required.
- The Chief Executive stated that press statements had reported the situation with the commissioner incorrectly; Croydon was still delivering its children's services and the commissioner was reviewing whether the Council could implement the changes. The entire executive leadership were on the improvement board as it was being treated a corporate-wide issue; senior Members from both parties sat on the board as well. A key partner brought into the process was the Achieving for Children organisation, who would work alongside officers and sit on the board.
- The Leader stated that a key challenge to social worker recruitment was the higher salaries available at neighbouring "inner London" boroughs. Recruitment had been discussed with the Ofsted inspectors and while funds had been allocated to cover recruitment in the short term, a longer-term sustainable plan was required.
- The Executive Director for People stated that retention of social workers was the key issue, and that it was important to highlight the excellent work of existing staff members. A vision for a strong workforce strategy was required, that looked at salary options but also career progression structures. A significant amount of staff engagement had been undertaken and would feed into the future plans.
- The Executive Director for People stated that there was a push to convert the excellent agency staff to permanent contracts. Caseloads had been identified as a key issue and another social work team had been established to ease the pressure.
- The Leader stated that a large number of inspected authorities across the country had received poor ratings for their children's services and it was a challenging service to performance manage. The data provided needed to be reviewed and absolute assurance of the data's accuracy was

needed. The improvement board would be essential in ensuring this. Councillor Gatland was thanked for her role on the improvement board, and the need for cross party cooperation on the issue was crucial.

- The Chief Executive stated that assurance on the data provided was crucial to ensure proper performance management, particularly of front line services. The Ofsted report was critical of the data quality and the improvement board had already considered the issue in considerable detail and it would be a big piece of work to get the data up to the standards required. The lessons learned through this process could be rolled out across the Council at large.
- The Executive Director for People stated a culture shift within the service was an important aspect of the improvement plan. A culture of openness and confidence to challenge needed to be fostered within the department. This attitude should embrace partnerships as well, such as the safeguarding board.
- The Leader stated that the issue identified by the Ofsted report stretched over two administrations in Croydon. The borough also suffered unique pressures such as per head of population underfunding from central government and a high number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children. The overriding focus was ensuring the safety of the borough's children. It was stated that good leadership was displayed by working with Ofsted and not disputing the findings; cross-party support was crucial.
- The Leader stated that the data received had to be robust, and Members needed additional training sessions to support their role as corporate parents.
- The Executive Director for People stated that a large number of looked after children were placed in Croydon from other boroughs, in addition to a large number of Croydon's own looked after children. It was important to ensure that the strengths of the service not be overlooked – with areas of the service recognised nationally and internationally. The shortcomings with missing young people identified in the report would be properly analysed and addressed. However, prior to the Ofsted report, a head of service role looking at targeted groups such as vulnerable teenagers had already been created and the officer appointed to that role was due to start in the forthcoming month. The issue was being treated on a partnership basis alongside the Police and the new Chair of the safeguarding board had been consulted.
- The Chief Executive stated that an important lesson had been learnt to foster a cultural change towards openness particularly in a department like children's services that relied

on trust to performance manage effectively. Officers had received a clear steer from the administration to be upfront about the Ofsted report, such as being proactive with the press and publicly apologising to the affected families. Confidence was expressed that the Council would deliver on the improvement journey.

- The Executive Director for People stated that it had been a painful experience to be publicly informed that the service had let children down, and sincere apologies had been proffered for the failings. The response, however, has been to learn lessons and a determination to fix the service. A culture change was one of the most important changes moving forward, to create a climate of passion for the service as well as openness and a confidence to challenge.
- The Leader stated that it was accepted that changes should have been implemented more rapidly in the service. Since the report the issues identified had been tackled head-on and quickly.
- The Executive Director for People stated that the new IT roll-out in the service would include tablets and smart phones to allow for enhanced mobile working for social workers. It was a hardware, not software, upgrade.
- The Leader stated that the safeguarding board had to rely on data and input from a range of partners and these bodies had also been criticised in the Ofsted report.
- The Chief Executive stated that the new chair of the safeguarding board had previously been the chair of an improvement board at another local authority and therefore held the skill sets needed to shape the safeguarding board to be effective during the improvement journey.

The Committee **CONCLUDED** that the Ofsted findings were a corporate issue that would affect not only all Council departments, but would also impact on the work of all Scrutiny Committees.

The Committee **RESOLVED** that:

1. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee lead on scrutinising the progress of the overarching improvement plan;
2. The Children and Young People's Scrutiny Sub-Committee hold a standing item to focus on key themes in the improvement plan;
3. The Streets, Homes and Environment Sub-Committee and Health and Social Care Sub-Committee both receive reports detailing their roles in scrutinising the delivery of aspects on the improvement plan and what lessons can be learned in support of their areas of work.

The Chair of the Committee stated that scrutiny Members would

need to work hard outside of formal meetings to rise to the challenge of properly scrutinising the improvement plan. As part of this process, the Chair committed to working with officers to:

- Identify training for Scrutiny Members on both Children's and Adults' social care;
- Identify improved performance reporting on both of those areas;
- Identify how Members could access expert advice

At the conclusion of this section of questioning, the Committee moved to questions to the Leader's broader portfolio. In response to Committee questions, the Leader responded with the following:

- The new Surrey Street market pitches were now 81% booked, and the investment into the area had been a success with the market becoming a place to be at the evenings and weekends.
- The Westfield Hammerson development was currently in negotiation with the GLA and would then move to the Council's Planning Committee.
- Looking over the previous four years, the administration had fulfilled many of its manifesto pledges which had made a real impact to residents' lives and attracted businesses to the borough. There had been a resurgence of confidence in Croydon.

The Chair closed the item and thanked the Leader and officers present for attending the meeting.

A6 Fire Safety in Croydon Homes

The Director of District Centres and Regeneration introduced the item with a presentation that provided an overview of the work the Council had undertaken since the Grenfell Fire. It was noted that Croydon was the first borough to announce the installation of sprinklers in all its tower blocks. Stronger action was also being taken to enforce fire safety and a good relationship with private landlords had been fostered to ensure unsafe cladding was replaced. All of the borough's schools were also being reviewed to ensure proper fire safety measures were in place.

In response to questions from the Committee, the Director stated the following:

- Emergency evacuation plans had been put in place for vulnerable residents living in tall buildings.
- All communal areas in blocks were being reviewed to identify potential risks, for example communal furniture and parked

mobility scooters.

- Fire prevention of advice was produced by the Council and the Fire Brigade and organisations such as residents' associations were used to help distribute the information to tenants.
- The electrical wiring in the Council's housing stock was being reviewed and where necessary it would be updated to ensure it was secure and safe. However tenants were responsible for the wiring in their own properties.
- Officers were looking at other local authorities to consider how best to fund schemes such as sprinkler systems. All possible funding options were being considered.
- Officers acknowledged that a fine balance was needed between the need for clear evacuation routes in tower blocks and the need to securely park mobility scooters near flats. There was no clear answer to the issue and Members were reassured that the issue was being looked at carefully.
- The Council worked with housing associations to ensure that high standards of safety were being upheld in properties they managed. In the rented private sector there was close cooperation with the Fire Brigade to review safety measures. However there was grey area in duties towards privately owned (non-rental) residential properties.
- There was a good working relationship between the Council and the Fire Brigade and close cooperation in challenging areas. The Landlord Licensing Scheme was a good example of cooperation between the two parties where concerns are raised by tenants.
- There was currently an independent review of the fire safety regulations nationally, and a preliminary report from the review was due in the autumn of 2017.

The Cabinet Member for Homes, Regeneration and Planning added that where residents in privately rented accommodation raised concerns, the Council would liaise with the Fire Brigade to ensure the matter is dealt with appropriately. Whilst short term safety measures had been implemented, it was stated that a longer-term plan would need additional central government funding to be sustainable.

The Cabinet Member and officers present were thanked for the presentation and responding to questions from the Committee.

A7 Cabinet responses to scrutiny recommendations

The Committee **NOTED** the Cabinet responses.

A8 Work Programme 2017/18

The Head of Democratic Services and Scrutiny guided the Committee through the proposed work programme for the municipal year. It was noted that the schedule would be subject to change in light of the Ofsted report.

The Committee **NOTED** the work programme.

A9 [The following motion is to be moved and seconded as the “camera resolution” where it is proposed to move into part B of a meeting]

Not required.

MINUTES - PART B

None

The meeting finished at 8.56pm.