**District Councillor’s Report for The Mordens Ward SCDC September 2019**

**Getting in Touch with SCDC**

I am aware that for many residents, and councillors, getting in touch with the council has been difficult over recent months, there have been IT outages that have led to issues with the emails, problems with the phones which have led to officers being unable to hear voicemails and unacceptable call waiting times. In April this year the average call answer time was 6.11 mins that is over double what it was for April 2018 and over three times what it was in April 2017. In April 5171 phone calls were abandoned. This has rightfully gathered attention from the Scrutiny and Overview committee. Calls are processed by a department at the council called the Contact Centre, they are expected to be able to support residents and answer the majority of inquires without needing to refer residents on to specific departments. This team are incredibly hardworking but there simply are not enough in the team to handle the call volume. Recruitment is an issue in many departments currently but for the contact centre given the length of time it takes to train new recruitments is in a vulnerable position when low staffing happens. While these communication issues have been occurring the Contact Centre has also been given extra responsibilities such as printing and reprographics and the administration of complaints. I recently suggested that the department be able to have a rolling advert, meaning they can constantly recruit, an option other departments had available to them but the contact centre did not, I believe this has been established and I hope is helping. But the question I and others asked in February still I believe stands, that was this budget, (set Feb 2019) really the correct time to propose a reduction in the budget for Corporate Services and in turn the contact centre.

**Ice Rink**

SCDC had recently agreed to increase its loan in relation to the ice rink following unexpected issues including unexploded bombs underground. Now that it is open and running the loan repayments can begin the interest of which, I hope will be a valued income stream for the council to reinvest in our services.

**Zero Carbon Community Grant**

I’m very pleased that community groups can now apply for this new grant. There are many imaginative schemes that can go for this grant, the deadline for applications is the 31st October 2019. Grants can be made available for £1,000 to £15,000 and it covers a wide range from energy saving in community buildings, projects tackling fuel poverty, community tree planting and list goes on. These projects are also a time for people to get more involved in their communities, and I look forward to hearing about the projects put forward from groups in The Mordens Ward.

**Planning Department**

A decision has been taken for the council to enter into a contract with a private company to perform duties that would normally be performed by our officers such as validation and assessment of some applications. For numerous reasons the planning department has been under increasing pressure and officers have been in the last months, in my opinion, under extreme pressure unable to give the service that residents rightfully expect. Some officers have at times had, individually, over 100 applications open on their work schedule. Even with extra hours this is not achievable and is unacceptable. I and others have been raising repetitively the issue of moral in the department with little meaningful reply. This drastic step taken is I am sure an attempt to relieve the pressure, however there is much surrounding this that makes myself uncomfortable with the situation we find ourselves in. Elected Councillors, elected to represent the views of their residents, were informed of this decision that had already been made via an email (14th August) a few hours before the topic appeared in a newspaper article. This decision has been made behind closed doors, doors closed to elected representatives and I strongly feel that this is highly inappropriate. The Director of Planning and Lead member for Planning were present at the Scrutiny meeting on 20th August, where they had the opportunity to explain the situation. In my view at no point has a suitable explanation given as to why councillors were not able to raise any views or have knowledge of the decision until after the event. There have been plenty of meetings in the last 18 months that have been confidential, such as the departure of Ms Agass the Former Chief-Executive. The same confidentiality arrangements could have been made to make this decision in a scrutinized and democratic way, but the administration have chosen to not do this. I am saddened that lack of transparency appears, in my view, to becoming the trend at SCDC. The Practicalities surrounding such a contract at the time of writing this are yet to be “ironed out” but I will continue to raise residents’ concerns including that it should be made clear to Parish councils, applicants and residents if an application is being dealt with by an SCDC officer or a private company, this I feel is key for transparency. It was made clear the need for the authority to ensure that the correct supervision would be required to ensure this contract works effectively, at the scrutiny meeting it was stated that this was something still being discussed and yet to be resolved. Only time will tell whether this will work, and I hope for our resident’s sake it does, but the way that this situation has been handled is unacceptable.

**Sickness Leave at SCDC**

Given the topics I have already mentioned it will be of no surprise that the sickness levels are increasing, one key area of concern is those days of leave from Stress/depression and mental health. For Q1 of the 2019/2020 year 662 days of officers sickness leave was attributed to this. This is over 93% increase from Q1 of 2018/2019. I will be looking at how as a council officers are being supported and what steps are being taken to reduce these numbers as Mental Health issues ought to be a key concern of the authority’s.

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