

Performance and Finance Scrutiny Sub-Committee

Minutes

22 March 2021

Present:

Chair: Councillor Kiran
Ramchandani

Councillors: Ghazanfar Ali Pritesh Patel
Nitesh Hirani

**In attendance
(Councillors):** Adam Swersky For Minute 68 and 69

Absent: Councillor Honey Jamie

62. Attendance by Reserve Members

RESOLVED: To note that there were none.

63. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that the Declarations of Interests published in advance of the meeting on the Council's website were taken as read.

64. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 December 2020, be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

65. Public Questions

RESOLVED: To note that no public questions were received at the meeting.

66. Petitions

RESOLVED: To note that no petitions were received.

67. References from Council and Other Committees/Panels

RESOLVED: To note that there were none.

Resolved Items

68. Responding to the Recommendations from the Universal Credit Commission

Members received the Report on Responding to the Recommendations from the Universal Credit Commission that had been presented to Cabinet in November 2019.

The report set out the Council's response to the Member-led Commission on Universal Credit in Harrow. As this was a Member-led commission, there was a need for an Officer report to Cabinet to endorse the recommendations and the resulting action plan.

The Member-led commission was set up outside of the current Non-Executive arrangements of the Council. Thus, it had no constitutional basis – the report allowed a reporting route through to Cabinet in order to endorse the recommendations from the review and to sign up to the draft action plan.

The national roll-out of Universal Credit commenced in Harrow in 2017. The Commission was set up as a mechanism for driving practical and coordinated action for the benefit of Harrow residents. The Commission included the Councillors from both Political Groups in the Council.

Universal Credit remained of great concern to Housing Benefit. As of October 2019, 63% of the General Needs Council tenants who claimed Universal Credit were in rent arrears with an average debt of £562. For comparison 24% of the General Needs Council tenants on Housing Benefit were in arrears with an average debt of £257. Housing staff continued to spend a lot of time responding to the Department of Work and Pensions and also helping tenants, without any additional funding.

Rent arrears had a negative impact on the revenue generated for the Housing Revenue Account. Therefore, the budget that the Council had to spend on related services to the tenants and leaseholders across all Council housing was impacted.

The Chair invited questions from Members of the Sub-Committee on the report.

The following question was raised and discussed:

- 1) Referring to Annex 2 of the Report, was the timescale of March 2020 for the completion of recommendations going to met?

The Director of Strategy and Partnerships advised that each recommendation was being taken in turn, notwithstanding the current challenges around the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic in the country. This had impacted on some recommendations.

The broad-based digital inclusion programme “No One Left Offline” was particularly challenging, notably holding digital skills workshops which engaged residents on non-Universal Credit topics. It was important to understand how services could be digital by design and, therefore, fully accessible, rather than digital by default.

A cross Council working group had been set up to take this forward. This was initially agreed to outline all of the Council touchpoints for residents, for example through Libraries, Community Centres and Children’s Centres.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources added that the circumstances caused by the Covid-19 pandemic had necessitated support to vulnerable residents and had exposed inequalities to digital access.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

69. Channel Migration Presentation

Members received the presentation on Channel Migration. There had been an increase in self-service online (excluding web visits) transactions by residents of 60.2% to 85.6% in 2015/16 to between 85.6% and 95.7% in 2020/21.

The aim of the digital migration was to make it easier for residents to interact with the Council. Certain features of the system included: anonymised monitoring software; feedback forms; and an improved website.

Furthermore, the “MyHarrow account” was enhanced to provide greater access to sites such as, Electoral Services, Business Portal, Bookings, Progress checking, Alerts, Registration Services, Commercial Services, Revenues and Benefits.

Challenges had been identified in closing the digital divide among residents. These included deprivation, confidence and digital skills, age and language. These would be mitigated by a face-to-face or telephone service where appropriate, provision of “Digital Assistants”, Adult Learning courses, and the Roll out of 5G infrastructure. Initial discussions to retain and re-purpose the staff were underway, following the proposed closure of the Civic Centre, and some libraries.

The Chair invited questions from Members of the Sub-Committee on the report.

The following questions were raised and discussed:

- 1) Based on the feedback from residents, how many were interacting with the Council using online services?

It was advised that based on a project carried out three years ago, approximately 50% to 55% of the households in Harrow made contact with the Council in a calendar year. An estimated 600 000 separate logins would have been made to the MyHarrow account by the end of March 2021 along with 620,000 web forms being completed compared to 170,000 telephone calls and 70,000 emails. Calls were particularly high when Council Tax bills were mailed out although low in comparison to those making contact via the Council website.

- 2) How many staff would be re-purposed as a result of the digital migration?

It was advised that the positions of a total of 13 staff were at risk.

- 3) Was it possible to use a mobile phone to access the fly-tipping app?

It was advised that mobiles phones with android software could be used. The fly-tipping form on the website worked well on mobile devices and allowed photographs to be uploaded.

- 4) Which online services were frequently used by residents?

It was advised that Planning Services, Environmental Services, and Council Tax were the most popular. However, some services were seasonal, such as School Admissions.

- 5) How would the roll out of the 5G infrastructure affect services in the borough?

It was advised that with the right suppliers, the 5G network could increase access to a number of digitally-excluded residents through reducing the cost of an internet connection.

- 6) Given residents' hesitancy to download some Council applications on their mobile phones, how would they report some concerns, such as fly tipping?

It was advised that all Council applications were replicated on the website, and residents could still report such incidents, without revealing their location by marking the area on a map.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

70. Revenue and Capital Monitoring 2020/21 - As At Quarter 3 (31 December 2020)

RESOLVED: That the report be deferred.

71. Final Revenue Budget 2021/22 and final Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2021/22 to 2023/24

RESOLVED: That the report be deferred.

The video recording of this meeting can be found at the following link:

<https://www.harrow.gov.uk/virtualmeeting>.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 6.00 pm, closed at 7.40 pm).

(Signed) Councillor Kiran Ramchandani
Chair