

EMPLOYEES' CONSULTATIVE FORUM MINUTES

13 JANUARY 2015

Chair:	* Mr G Martin	
Councillors:	* Jeff Anderson * Mrs Camilla Bath (2) * Graham Henson * Barry Kendler	* Ms Mina Parmar * Pritesh Patel * David Perry
Representatives of HTCC:	Ms L Snowdon	
Representatives of UNISON:	* Mr D Butterfield * Mr S Compton	* Mr J Royle * Mr D Searles
Representatives of GMB:	* Ms P Belgrave	
In Attendance	Sachin Shah	Minute 7

* Denotes Member present
(2) Denotes category of Reserve Member

1. Appointment of Chair

RESOLVED: To note that Gary Martin be appointed Chair of the Forum for the 2014/15 Municipal Year.

2. Attendance by Reserve Members

RESOLVED: To note the attendance of the following duly constituted Reserve Members:

Ordinary Member

Councillor Paul Osborn

Reserve Member

Councillor Camilla Bath

3. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:

Agenda Items 9 & 10 – Draft Revenue Budget 2015/16, Medium Term Financial Strategy 2015/16 to 2018/19 and Capital Programme 2015/16 to 2018/19 & Part 2 of Annual Equality in Employment Report for 1 April 2013 – 31 March 2014

Councillor Jeff Anderson declared a non-pecuniary interest in that he was a member of Unison. He would remain in the room whilst the matters were considered and voted upon.

Councillor Graham Henson declared a non-pecuniary interest in that he was a member of the Communication Workers' Union, Unison and his cousin was an employee of the Council. He would remain in the room whilst the matters were considered and voted upon.

Councillor Barry Kendler declared a non-pecuniary interest in that he was a retired member of GMB and was sponsored by GMB. He would remain in the room whilst the matters were considered and voted upon.

4. Appointment of Vice Chair

RESOLVED: To note the appointment of Councillor Graham Henson as Vice-Chair of the Forum for the Municipal Year 2014/15.

5. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 28 January 2014 be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

6. Petitions, Deputations & Public Questions

RESOLVED: To note that no petitions, deputations or public questions were received.

RESOLVED ITEMS

7. INFORMATION REPORT - Draft Revenue Budget 2015/16, Medium Term Financial Strategy 2015/16 to 2018/19 and Capital Programme 2015/16 to 2018/19

The Forum received a report of the Director of Finance and Assurance which set out the Council's proposals for the draft Revenue Budget and Medium

Term Financial Strategy 2015/16 to 2018/19 and the Draft Capital Programme 2015/16 to 2018/19.

Following a question from a Representative regarding the Council Tax Freeze Grant of £1.068m, an officer advised that the current Medium Term Financial Strategy was based on the implementation of a Council Tax increase of 1.99% in 2015/16 which would generate an estimated income of £1.922m and therefore the Freeze Grant would no longer be applicable.

A Representative commented that charging residents for the disposal of organic waste would deter residents from recycling, which would impact on the landfill charges the Council paid. He added that the new 23 litre caddies supplied to households had caused injuries to staff and would lead to increased sickness absence and personal injury claims. He suggested that households should be charged for additional residual bins. Another Representative asked whether residents had been consulted about the charge and stated that those residents who chose not to pay for this service would still need to dispose of their waste. The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Major Contracts stated that the introduction of a charge for organic waste had been a difficult decision, made only after extensive discussions and was part of the overall savings the Council was required to make over coming years. It was anticipated that the scheme would require a 40% take up rate to make it viable and those residents who did not pay the charge had the alternative of composting or taking their waste to the Civic Amenity Site (CAS). Savings could be made by separating organic waste from dry waste and disposing of them separately and officers would continue to monitor the situation. He added that he would welcome further discussions with the Representative regarding the supply of a second bin to all households.

The Director of Finance and Assurance stated that comparable London boroughs had a similar 40% target and that, in his view, this was achievable and would deliver savings. A Representative added that the CAS saw a high volume of use by residents at weekends, often with long queues building up.

The Chair asked what plans were in place to reduce the funding gap and how this fitted into the Council's overall commercialisation agenda. The Director of Finance and Assurance stated that he anticipated that savings planned for future years would help reduce the funding gap and he would be working closely with the Portfolio for Finance and Major Contracts on this issue.

The Chair asked about the Council's contribution to West London Waste (WLW). Harrow residents were actively engaged in recycling and 50% of all waste was recyclable. However, this had not led to a reduction in the £7m figure. The Portfolio Holder advised that there was a 'pay as you throw' element to the charge which meant lower charges for less waste.

A Representative queried whether there was any data regarding the gradings of the posts which would be lost as part of the efficiency and managements savings. The Director of Finance and Assurance advised that the 'management savings' would be made through a reduction in the number of posts. However, not all the 'efficiency savings' related to loss of posts and not all of these posts were lower grade posts. Some proposals were still at the

consultation stage and therefore data relating to the grading of posts identified for deletion was not available.

The Chair asked how many of the identified FTEs (full time equivalent) were senior posts and how many were agency staff. The Director of Finance and Assurance advised that the posts were a mixture of permanent, agency-filled and vacant posts.

A Representative asked why the £10m reserve was not being used to save jobs under threat. The Portfolio Holder advised that Harrow was in the lowest quartile in London in terms of its reserves and using this to save jobs would not be a permanent solution as the savings would still need to be made in subsequent years.

The Chair asked whether there was a contingency fund for the commercialisation agenda and how far it was reliant on government funding. The Portfolio Holder advised that the sum of £3m per annum had been allocated for this from the Transformation Fund. He added that the aim of the Council's commercialisation agenda was to make it less reliant on government funding.

The Chair queried whether there were robust procurement and management procedures in place for the Council's procurement contracts to ensure these were value for money and cited the recent example of issues with the timely sign-off for the dry recyclables contract. The Portfolio Holder advised that the procurement team was highly skilled in contract management and that delivering value for money was central to its function.

A Representative expressed his concern regarding the impact of reduced staff and resources on frontline services and asked how the commercialisation agenda would help mitigate against this. The Portfolio Holder advised that the Council would need to make £75m worth of savings over coming years. With this in mind, the administration had identified areas of efficiency, such as loss of posts and areas of priority, such as supporting the borough's vulnerable residents, employing more social workers and tackling homelessness.

A Representative queried the £100k savings to be made from Occupational Health Service (OHS), the review of the time and facilities afforded to the Unions and the re-tendering of the Communications contract. The Director of HRD and Shared Services advised that the OHS assessment of pre-employment health questionnaires would be replaced by a declaration of fitness by applicants and management referrals would be more tightly controlled. Staff and their family members would continue to have access to the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). The amount of administration time and facilities afforded to the Unions would be reviewed. The Director of Finance and Assurance added that the Communications contract was being re-tendered following a full review of the service area.

The Leader advised that the Communications section were responsible for producing the Harrow People and Homing In magazines, disseminated internal council communiqués, and had facilitated a number of recent consultations, for example, the Take Part initiative, the School Expansion

Programme and had encouraged resident participation and engagement with these. He added that £30k had already been invested in sports and the Council, local sports organisations, health providers and other stakeholders were working collaboratively in this area.

He further added that the council depended on its Reserves to deal with un-anticipated expenses, for example, homelessness. With regard to commercialisation, he was in close communication with the new Chief Executive regarding the Council's future challenges and priorities.

The Chair asked about the non-renewal of the Council's contract with Wiseworks printing. The Director of Finance and Assurance advised that the Council was committed to reducing its printing costs and all Councillors had been issued with IPADs as part of this drive. The Council followed a strict procurement process that was designed to be open and transparent and the bidding process was open to all.

A Representative stated that the establishment of Business Support services was a fairly recent initiative that had received a considerable start-up investment. He advised that a very large proportion of the BS workforce was female and asked about the anticipated savings from this service area the likely impact of job losses. The Director of Finance and Assurance stated that the savings in BS equated to the loss of 12 posts, and that there were changes planned to the service provided by the print unit and the mail room.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

8. INFORMATION REPORT - Part 2 of Annual Equality in Employment Report for 1 April 2013 - 31 March 2014

The Forum received a report of the Divisional Director of HRD & Shared Services which set out the key issues identified from the 2013/14 equalities in employment data, a revised Action Plan for addressing priority issues highlighted by the data and a review of the Conduct and Dignity at Work cases and equalities workforce data.

Following comments from a Representative, an officer advised that lack of IT facilities available to staff at the Depot was a long standing issue, which management were seeking to address. This included plans to develop a staff Extranet, which would enable staff to access employment information online.

Following a question from the Chair, an officer advised that it was important to build up a more complete picture of the workforce profile and often staff with disabilities did not declare this on monitoring forms. The Council's recruitment process was designed to be open and transparent and it had an adjustments policy in relation to disabled staff.

Following a question from a Member, the Divisional Director of HRD and Shared Services advised that the Council was increasingly moving to online modes of communication but would ensure alternative modes of access for those residents without access to IT.

A Representative stated that, in his view, there was a social divide in Britain that had been increasing steadily as a result of policies implemented by successive administrations on both a national and local level. Efficiencies and cuts implemented by the council in recent years inevitably had a greater impact on those staff on lower grades. These efficiencies and cuts had not been implemented in an open and transparent manner and their implications had not been fully explored. Furthermore, the Council operated a covert pay structure, in that highly paid interims and agency staff received higher salaries than those on permanent contracts. This was not an isolated incident and these discrepancies impacted on Council services. The officer report should therefore have included a socio-economic impact assessment. The only way to address these issues would be to instigate a change in culture and institutional behaviours at the Council.

The Divisional Director stated that the report concerned itself with the protected characteristics set out in Equalities legislation and did not therefore include a socio-economic impact assessment. He added that he would be pleased to discuss this further with the representative outside the meeting. The Leader added that such an impact assessment would be difficult to measure and quantify, however, the issues raised by the Representative were of great concern and he would be looking into this further and would welcome further discussions with the Representative.

A Representative asked why a review of the Conduct and Dignity at Work cases in 2013/14 had not been carried out as in the previous year. The Divisional Director advised that his service would continue to record and report on employment procedures on the basis of protected characteristics, to both the Corporate Equalities Group and to the Forum. However, it would not be in a position to resource an annual, in-depth review as in 2012/13.

A Representative asked why large sums of money were being spent on engaging agency staff, when permanent jobs were being cut. The Leader stated that the numbers of temps and interims had been significantly reduced following a review. However, some difficult to fill posts providing essential services, such as social workers and staff in Public Realm, had been retained.

A Member stated that the Council was moving away from duplication of services and silo management and advised that since 2012, a total of 212 posts had been lost and 68 new posts filled. There were benefits associated with the use of agency workers. The number of agency staff in Access Harrow and Business Support, and the number of interims and consultants generally had been reduced. However, those with specialist skill sets, such as IT contract negotiation, the Corporate Director of Children and Families had been engaged. The Council was focussing on staff training and development to build up the skills sets of staff.

Following a question from a Member, the Divisional Director advised that schools were able to advertise posts through using the Council's recruitment service but that they carried out the applicant administration, short listing and interview process themselves, and data relating to the schools workforce was reported separately from data relating to the rest of the workforce.

A Member emphasised the importance of helping staff to understand the importance of completing monitoring forms and providing personal data and how this data would be used to plan the future workforce strategy and support disabled staff. He added that cultural and linguistic differences may be the reason why a high proportion of BAME staff were involved in employment procedures.

The Chair requested that the next Equalities report should provide data about the number of retirements due to ill health. The Divisional Director undertook to provide this information and stated that retirement on the grounds of ill health was likely to increase as the Council had an ageing workforce.

Following a question from a Representative regarding apprenticeships, an officer advised that this initiative was in its early stages and that there was a strategy and action plan in place. Eight directly employed apprentices had been appointed under the scheme. The Council was working with organisations undertaking work for the Council to encourage them to take on apprentices, and with colleges, to increase the number of apprentices across Harrow. The Chair advised that 3 previous apprentices, had now secured full-time positions in the Housing section.

A Representative asked why the Council did not attract applications from younger people. The Divisional Director advised that this was a long-standing issue and was due to a number of factors. There was no longer a compulsory retirement age and recruitment had slowed. The recruitment process put an emphasis on qualifications and experience, as there was a legislative requirement to appoint staff on the basis of merit, which potentially disadvantaged younger applicants and discouraged younger people from applying. He added that Harrow had one of the lowest numbers of NEETs in London (young people not in employment or education).

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.22 pm).

(Signed) GARY MARTIN
Chair