

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes

13 February 2024

Present:

Chair: Councillor Amir Moshenson

Councillors: Dan Anderson
June Baxter
Govind Bharadia
Graham Henson
Maxine Henson
Eden Kulig
Samir Sumaria

**In attendance
(Councillors):** David Ashton
Paul Osborn
For Minute 81
For Minute 81

**Apologies
received:** Councillor Vipin Mithani

Absent: Harrow Youth Parliament
Representative
Reverend P Reece
Ms M Trivedi

Recommended Item

- 81. Corporate Plan 2023-26: Review of first year and Flagship Actions 2024/25 & Final Revenue Budget 2024/25 and final Medium Term Financial Strategy to 2026/27**

The Chair welcomed the Leader of the Council, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Human Resources, the Managing Director, and the Interim Director of Finance and Assurance to the meeting.

The Leader requested that the Corporate Plan 2023-26: Review of first year and Flagship Actions 2024/25, and the Final Revenue Budget 2024/25 and final Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) to 2026/27, be presented in tandem.

The Leader informed the Committee that Harrow was in a comparatively strong financial position, compared to the rest of London. The Council had delivered a number of savings, but had also invested in adults and children's services over the last financial year and the MTFS for the coming three financial years. The corporate report set out another series of flagship actions.

However, Harrow had low level of reserves, which made the borough vulnerable to pressures or other shocks. Nonetheless, it was proposed to replenish those reserves and give the Council some resilience to deal with the pressures that could come through, particularly in children's and adult social care.

On providing better access to Council services to residents, the Council had launched a new pilot for customer service kiosks in one of the libraries. This would address some of the concerns that residents had about being able to contact the Council. There was a need to work within budgetary constraints to achieve this.

The Council would move forward with regeneration plans across the borough and submit a planning application for the Bryon Quarter site and the Poets Corner at the Civic Centre site. These had been on the local plan as part of the Cabinet papers that were published last week, including a new draft local plan.

The current local plan was out of date and had been overtaken by both the London Plan and also national planning frameworks. This would go out to consultation and be brought back later in the year with a revised plan, taking into account all comments from the consultation. The next stage would be to go to a public inspection and other stages. It was hoped the local plan would be agreed and adopted by mid-2026.

On traffic, the Council would seek to install a dedicated cycle lane in Harrow. The consultation has just closed on that. There was need to review that consultation and take account of any concerns that had been raised. It would be the first cycle lane to be introduced in Harrow, other than some that were introduced, and then removed during restrictions around the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Council would be launching a pothole squad with funding from the Government, which was £240,000 a year alongside a contribution from the insurance money that was recently received.

There were plans to purchase up to 25 further homes to increase the Council's provision to deal with homelessness challenges, which were also experienced across London.

The Care Quality Commission had announced that they would be coming to inspect the borough's adult social services in April, and there would be an Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspection as well, in the coming months. Therefore, it was imperative that there was capacity to deal with those inspections.

In the discussion that ensued, Members asked questions and made comments on the two reports.

Members asked about reserves, citing appendix 9 of the Final Revenue Budget 2024/25 and final Medium Term Financial Strategy to 2026/27. The starting balance was about £71 million as at 31 March 2023, which was reduced to around £58 million, as at 31 March 2024. Part of that showed a reduction in the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) by nearly £7 million.

The Committee were advised that reserves had been split into true revenue reserves against budget overruns and other specific or earmarked reserves. Work had been done to increase the reserves to just under £20 million, which was better than it was before. Some of the amount in the reserves were historic and were not required.

Members inquired about placements and accommodation, which had a budget saving of £500,000, however, social care staffing showed a reduction of £1 million through the reduction of management posts and the associated risks.

The Committee were advised that the implementation of both the children's new model and the adult's new model, which came into effect on 1 December 2023, had broadly delivered the in-year saving of the current year and next year's saving. On assessments, on the children's side, the Council had set up a Children's Improvement Board, alongside the quality performance boards. This was in order to ensure that the organisation remained on track across a whole range of management information, and that the service was delivering what it was intended to do. This took into account how to improve the front door service. This would have an impact then on how assessments were conducted, within timelines and targets. Over the last month, the target was met within the internal aim of 40 days.

Members were concerned about rising costs to adult social care given the increased longevity of residents and whether there were enough reserves or funds to support this. This had increased demand, leading to higher costs.

The Committee were advised that there was increased demand for adult social services, and that £10 million had been earmarked for that. It was hoped that more funding would be forthcoming from Central Government. However, it was acknowledged that the Council was expected to deliver other services as well, which could be squeezed out if all the Council's resources were spent on adults and children services. There were 6,000 residents who utilised children and adults services, against a population of 250,000 in Harrow. Two-thirds of the Council's budget was already being used to contain the pressures of children and adult services, whilst at the same time still providing adequate services across the borough. It was a delicate balancing

act, and it was imperative that departments across the organisation strove to find alternative savings because there were not enough reserves to sustain continuing pressure on those budgets. This situation was not unique to Harrow but was replicated across the country.

Members asked about the amount being spent on the West London Waste Alliance (WLWA) of nearly £700,000, and whether an assessment was conducted about reducing costs, given improvements in recycling. This should have reduced the tonnage of waste, and the overall contribution to the WLWA.

The Committee were advised that the amount was set by the WLWA, and it was not certain if Councils got any credit for having less waste being sent to dumpsites. Though the current contribution to WLWA was around £610 000, it was still high.

Members inquired about the Council's website and accessibility of information and services, and in particular the personalisation of the website and the plan to services by launching a new pilot Customer Services access kiosk at one of our libraries.

The Committee were advised the new housing system would go live shortly, and residents would be able to do much more online than at the moment. This would be transformative for residents who are able to use online technology. This would enable them have a much better visibility of the status of their requests for services, for instance, repair works. The personalisation of other services, such as parking permits and virtual permits, would also be performed better. The website would be clearer about what services the Council was offering residents, for example, reporting missed bin collections.

Members queried when the housing system would actually go live, as it was meant to three years ago.

The Committee were advised that the end of March 2024 was the current time frame. The bulk of the work had been done. What remained was billing as there had been changes in rates.

Members asked about the Council's target of building 50 affordable homes on Council sites.

The Committee were advised that the building of the 50 affordable homes would be multimodal in a few other sites as well, with the aim of completion by the end of the year. The bulk of the 50 affordable homes would be from the Milton Road development, which would be 100% affordable housing.

Members inquired about the proposal to put in a bid for funding to buy 50 Council properties back with a grant of £80,000 per property, and purchase of up to 25 further homes to provide temporary accommodation to homeless families in Harrow.

The Committee were advised that the Council had applied to the Greater London Authority and the application was submitted a couple of weeks ago, which was worth about £4 million.

Members expressed concern about families in Harrow being homeless or facing homelessness.

The Committee were advised that the figures were stark in London, with one child in every single classroom being in a family that was either homeless or facing homelessness. Nonetheless, the homelessness prevention in Harrow was much better than a lot of places across London. This was why the Council had plans to purchase up to 25 further homes to provide temporary accommodation to homeless families in Harrow.

Members asked about residents accessing online platforms at libraries for customer services and whether the Council's telephone answering system be increased for residents that could not access the library but needed to get in touch with the Council.

The Committee were advised that there were no plans to increase the telephone answering service. However, the revenue and benefits telephone lines would remain open. The Council had made savings by limiting telephone calls for services. It had been a cost overrun built into every year's budget for a number of years. With the use of modern technology, it was possible to use a kiosk in a library to enable people to directly speak to Council staff. It would have an appointment based system where appointments could be made, and speak to the relevant Council officer virtually.

Members asked about the progress on pot-hole mending in Harrow, and expressed concern on the state of roads in the borough.

The Committee were advised that there was a backlog of £100 million in road maintenance across the borough. However, there was technology currently being demonstrated and tested in Harrow, which was effective in mending pot-holes, and resurfacing roads, at a lower cost. If officers found it suitable for use, this could be used to maintain roads effectively, and reduce the backlog. This new technology was also being experimented in other parts of the country.

Members also expressed concern about fly-tipping in the borough, and particularly in South Harrow.

The Committee were advised that closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras had been installed in some of the worst affected areas as a preventative measure, as well as to identify perpetrators. However, the majority of fly-tipping incidents was from household waste, particularly residents in unlicensed houses of multiple occupancy (HMOs). Such residents had limited bin capacity, and were prone to fly tipping of residual waste. The Council's licensing and enforcement teams were working proactively to clamp down on unlicensed HMOs, as well as issue fines for fly-tipping, where these are identified.

The Chair thanked the Leader of the Council, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Human Resources, the Managing Director, and the Interim Director of Finance and Assurance for their attendance and responses to questions.

Resolved to RECOMMEND: (to Council)

That the comments of the Committee be considered.

RESOLVED: To bring the strategy on the progress of the purchase of up to 25 properties, under the Corporate Plan 2023-26: Review of first year and Flagship Actions 2024/25 to the Scrutiny Lead Members or the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as appropriate, for update.