

**STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY
SUB-COMMITTEE****15 OCTOBER 2003**

Chair: * Councillor Thammaiah

Councillors: * Ann Groves
Ismail
* Lavingia (1)* Vina Mithani
* Osborn (2)
* Seymour* Denotes Member present
(1) & (2) Denotes category of Reserve Member**63. Attendance by Reserve Members:****RESOLVED:** To note the attendance at this meeting of the following duly appointed Reserve Member:-**Ordinary Member**Councillor J Cowan
Councillor Currie**Reserve Member**Councillor Osborn
Councillor Lavingia**64. Declarations of Interest:****RESOLVED:** To note that the following interests were declared :

<u>Agenda Item</u>	<u>Member</u>	<u>Nature of Interest</u>
8	Councillor A Groves	The Member indicated a Personal Interest as she was a magistrates on the Bench at Harrow Magistrates' Court. The Member remained in the room whilst the matter was considered and took part in the discussion relating to item 8.

65. Arrangement of Agenda:**RESOLVED:** That all items be considered with the press and public present.**66. Public Questions/ Deputations/ Petitions:****RESOLVED:** To note that there were no public questions, deputations or petitions submitted to this meeting under the provisions of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules 8, 9 and 10 respectively.**67. Minutes:****RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the meetings held 9 April 2003 and 25 June 2003, having been circulated, be taken as read and signed as correct records.**68. Harrow Magistrates' Court:**

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Borough Solicitor which detailed the Greater London Magistrates' Courts Authority's (GLMCA) decision to close Harrow Magistrates' Court moving all its criminal business to Brent and family proceedings to a regional centre.

It was explained to Members that the GLMCA had taken the decision to close the court at a private meeting held on 29 September 2003. During the discussion, Members were reminded of the Council's attempts over the last nine months to overturn the GLMCA's proposal to close Harrow Magistrates' Court. The Sub-Committee was also informed that a feasibility study was undertaken by the GLMCA to ascertain whether Harrow Council's suggestion of co-locating the criminal business of the magistrates' court with that of the Crown Court could be possible, the findings of which were thought to be a major determining factor that would influence the GLMCA's decision, had not been made available to the Council or to the public for scrutiny. The GLMCA had said the cost of co-location would be prohibitively high and would require very disruptive and considerable building works.

It was said by the officer and Councillor Groves that the decision to close the court was a devastating blow to Harrow Council, local administration of justice and for members on Harrow Bench. It was thought likely that the effect of the closure and the moving of the family business to the Marylebone Road court would result in considerable inconvenience and emotional and economic hardship for families who may already be experiencing great distress.

Members were advised by the officer of the GLMCA's plan of creating three regional family courts for London. It was suggested by Harrow Council that three centres proposed for thirty three London boroughs was not a sufficient number, which led to the idea of using Harrow Magistrates' Court for that purpose, but it was rejected by the GLMCA.

Members were advised that the next step for Harrow Council as the statutory consultee for the court would be to appeal against the decision. It was said that the formal notice was received on 3 October 2003, therefore the letter of appeal would be sent by the end of October to the Department of Constitutional Affairs (DCA), and a meeting would be sought with Christopher Leslie MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State.

At the time of the meeting, it was also stated that a fax had already been sent to the Acting Justices Chief Executive listing 10 points to which the Council was seeking information upon in relation to the GLMCA's decision to close the court, to enable preparation. It was hoped that partners and stakeholders in the borough would join forces with the Council in supporting the appeal.

Members questioned the legitimacy of the GLMCA's decision to close Harrow Magistrates' Court particularly as the meeting was held behind closed doors, however, it was agreed that the priority was to appeal against the decision. A Member asked what were the Council's chances of the decision being overturned by the Minister. Councillor Groves responded by reinforcing the sentiments of the officer who said that it was not a foregone conclusion that the courthouse would close and went on to say that Kingston had their decision reversed on appeal by Yvette Cooper MP, who was the then Minister in the Lord Chancellor's department.

A Member asked what other alternatives were there should the Council lose the appeal. The officer responded by saying there might be a judicial review over the handling of Harrow's case by the GLMCA, but there would be a great deal to consider as to whether it would be proper to spend money on that. He ended by saying his attention at the moment centred upon submitting an appeal by Harrow Council.

A Member also said that it was particularly important that the retention of the family proceedings remained in Harrow for the welfare of the people who use it.

In agreeing to the officer's recommendations, the chair took the opportunity to thank the officer and Councillor Groves for their hard work on this issue and for keeping the Sub-Committee up-to-date with all the developments that were taking place.

RESOLVED: That (i) the position be noted; and

(ii) the Sub-Committee approve and support the representation attached to the officer's report concerning the family court proposal.

69. **Presentation from Harrow Council for Racial Equality (HCRE):**

The Sub-Committee received a presentation by Prem Pawar, Director of Harrow Council for Racial Equality.

The Sub-Committee heard about the HCRE's progress over the past few decades in establishing racial harmony and eliminating discrimination within the borough in accordance to the Race Relation Act 1976. It was explained that HCRE was an independent organisation but worked in conjunction with the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), Harrow Council and other statutory and voluntary agencies. It was also highlighted that it carried out a number of tasks such as lobbying elected representatives and advised and supported community organisations like the police, Home Office and hospitals in developing work policies. Members were advised that HCRE was part funded by Harrow Council and CRE, and its work was monitored and assessed by the CRE every six months.

It was said that HCRE played a vital role in the community in respect of representing minority groups' interests and offered support and advocacy where possible, it was also highlighted that HCRE worked with agencies such as the police and domestic violence

groups in helping victims of hate crimes and abuse; casework was also undertaken in areas relating to housing, education and employment.

Although HCRE mainly worked with people that live in the borough, Members noted that people from outside of Harrow such as – Hillingdon, Watford and Brent were also helped under section 66 of the Racial Equality Act. Members were advised that during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars people from those areas experienced heightened hostility from members of the public, therefore the workload of HCRE during those periods increased as it was seen as a medium for advice and support.

Many of HCRE achievements to date included: successfully representing individuals at tribunals, helping Harrow Council achieve Beacon Council status, assisting with Harrow Council's plans for Black History Month annually and established policies within Harrow Council departments.

Currently HCRE had 9 projects which were running simultaneously, a few were highlighted: counselling service for women who suffer domestic violence; refugee service; support for children that were excluded from school; carers in need of holidays that could not otherwise afford to go away – funded through grants; sports project in conjunction with Sports England which allows Asian women and young people time and space to participate in sport; and an advisory service for disadvantage people in regards to benefit.

The Director of HCRE also said that there was much work still outstanding, particularly in relation to: recruiting a community development worker for capacity building, which Harrow Council should hopefully undertake; more help for African and Caribbean, Afghan and refugee groups; the utilisation of drugs and antisocial behaviour by young people in the borough which affect elderly Asian people; and help from Harrow Council in moving on established community groups after the contractual three-year period at Community Premises had expired.

It was also explained that HCRE was rapidly expanding its team of 10 people and accommodation was required to house them, it was said that in view of ongoing projects and impending ones for the future it was thought likely that additional resources would be required from the Council to enable projects to come into fruition.

A Member of the Sub-Committee praised the work of HCRE commending it as very helpful for Harrow community. A Member queried the issue of young people using drugs and their effect upon them. It was said by the Director of HCRE that drugs was an area of great concern because young people had started to use new drugs such as 'quat' and 'cas' and were abusing them to such an extent that it was affecting school attendance and civic responsibility, it was said that active work was being done with the police and the Harrow Council to try and stop the problem, however, difficulties exist in that some of the drugs being used were not illegal in the UK.

The Chair and Members of the Sub-Committee thanked the Director of HCRE for attending the meeting and said the Sub-Committee was aware of some of the issues raised but not all, which was very informative, they also took the opportunity to commend the work of HCRE.

RESOLVED: That the presentation be noted.

70. **Update on Community Issues Raised:**

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Executive Director for Organisational Development Manager, presented by the Manager of the Strategic Partnerships Section outlining the progress made from the last meeting where members were informed of issues raised by community groups.

The officer explained the progress made in eradicating or improving issues, Members were reminded that the newly formed strategic partnership and the Council's organisational changes would resolve many concerns highlighted. However, there were still a number of issues that required solving, therefore, it was proposed by the officer to send the issues to relevant portfolio holders and to service areas in order to draw their attention to them, which was agreed by Members.

RESOLVED: That (i) the work being done in relevant areas be noted;

(ii) the Sub-Committee agreed to inform relevant portfolio holders and service areas of community issues raised; and

(iii) the Manager of Strategic Partnerships Section would inform community groups of the progression of their issues after speaking with service areas.

71. **Update on the Development of the Harrow Community Strategy:**

The Manager of the Strategic Partnerships Section presented a report of the Executive Director for Organisational Development detailing the development of Harrow's Community Strategy. Members were reminded that one of the key tasks of the Harrow Strategic Partnerships (HSP) was the development and delivery of a Community Strategy.

The officer stated under section 4 of the Local Government Act 2000, Harrow Council was responsible for the development of a Community Strategy for the borough, however, the HSP would be responsible for the delivery and monitoring of it.

The officer outlined the timetable for the draft strategy and consultation arrangements that was featured in the report.

The Chair and Members thanked the officer for her work in this area.

RESOLVED: That the Community Strategy development timetable and consultation arrangements be noted.

72. **Current Work Programme for Strengthening Communities Scrutiny Sub-Committee 2003/04:**

RESOLVED: That the work programme be noted.

73. **Post Office Review:**

Further to this issue being raised as an item under any other business the Manager of the Strategic Partnerships Section advised Members of a potential review based upon the closure of Post Offices in the borough, she advised that in recent months there had been a number of closures which affects Harrow community; Members present agreed to undertake the review. The officer advised that at this stage only a couple of Members were required for scoping purposes, however, at a later stage other Members could join the group. Councillor Thammaiah and Councillor Seymour agreed to take part in the review and to meet on a separate date to discuss the issue with the Manager of the Strategic Partnerships Section and Heather Smith, Assistant Scrutiny Officer. It was also suggested that Kay Dixon, Chairman of Postwatch Greater London, be invited to a future review group meeting.

RESOLVED: That a review of Post Office closures be undertaken by the Sub-Committee.

74. **Community Attendance at Future Sub-Committee meetings:**

Further to this issue being raised as an item under any other business the Chair suggested that Harrow's Citizen Advice Bureau attends a future meeting of the Sub-Committee to talk about their work carried out.

It was also mentioned that the new chief executive of Harrow Association for Voluntary Service be invited to attend a future Sub-Committee meeting; Members were informed that Margaret Nun, former chief executive of the Association had retired.

75. **Housing Benefit Review:**

Further to this issue being raised as an item under any other business, the Chair explained that he was involved in the Housing Benefit Review, which was part of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Members were advised of the objective of the review, which was to look at the performance of the Housing Benefit department, particularly the backlog of claims that exists, which had undermined the department's performance. It was said that training had been given to councillors demonstrating how a Housing Benefit claim was entered onto the IT system, it was described to be a very complex and time consuming process. The Chair indicated that the present status of the review was that it was still on-going and that a Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report for Harrow Council had been published and despatched to review group members, which explained whether Housing Benefit was being delivered effectively and securely, it was hoped that a meeting would be called to discuss the report in more detail.

(Note: The meeting having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.45 pm)

(Signed) COUNCILLOR KEEKIRA THAMMAIAH
Chair