

BEST VALUE ADVISORY PANEL**25 MARCH 2004**

Chair: * Councillor Bluston

Councillors: * Arnold (2) * Idaikkadar
* Burchell * Vina Mithani
* Currie * Osborn (1)

* Denotes Member present
(1), (2) Denote category of Reserve Member

[Note: Councillors Margaret Davine and Stephenson attended the meeting in a backbenching role].

PART I - RECOMMENDATIONS**RECOMMENDATION 1: Harrow Teachers' Centre - Best Value Interim Report**

The Panel received a report from the Director of Learning and Community Development, which outlined the progress of the Best Value Review of Harrow Teachers' Centre (HTC) and made interim recommendations. The Panel were reminded that the Best Value Review of HTC began in 2002. Members were asked to note that the Manager of HTC had been in post since September 2003, whilst the Director of Learning and Community Development had been in post since January 2004. The meeting heard that in February 2004 HTC had made a successful bid to the West London Learning & Skills Council for the establishment of a Professional Development Centre as part of the Skills for Life initiative. The Manager of HTC distributed a copy of a press release and a paper providing background to the Skills for Life Strategy. It was noted that young people had been the focus of the learning agenda but the Skills for Life initiative was aimed at improving the levels of adult literacy, numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The Manager of HTC further reported that 2.4 million people across the country were not fully proficient in their jobs. It was therefore decided to carry out a feasibility study to establish whether HTC could become a Work Based Learning provider. Members were advised that an external consultant on behalf of Harrow Council was undertaking the feasibility study. The Manager of HTC read out the Centre's mission statement. The Portfolio Holder for Education felt it was important that HTC be used as a focus for the provision of Work Based Learning in order to increase the literacy, numeracy and overall competence of the Council workforce in accordance with the Council's Human Resources Strategy.

The Panel discussed the financial arrangements of HTC. Members were informed that HTC received income through Service Level Agreements (SLA) with the Borough's schools as well as room hire, catering, equipment and office charging. The software with which HTC operated its room bookings system had caused a number of problems. New software was due to be installed by August 2004. In 2002/03 HTC received 4,440 room bookings, amounting to 16,286 hours of usage. Of this the former Education Department, schools and other Council departments used 11,549 hours. During school term-times the occupancy rate of rooms at HTC by the Education Department and other Council departments was 65.8%. The Manager of HTC explained that efforts would be made to increase the use of the facilities. A publicity campaign was proposed, to raise awareness and increase the occupancy rate, whilst the new computer software was designed to enable bookings to be monitored and managed more effectively. The Manager of HTC distributed an advertisement featured in a recent edition of the Harrow People Magazine and a leaflet to highlight the services available at the HTC. The Manager of HTC was asked to update the Panel on these figures in 6 months time.

The meeting heard that the SLA, undertaken with First, Middle and High schools, could provide up to £173,000 for the 2003/04 financial year. However the Borough's High Schools had decided to opt-out of the SLA for 2003/04, which had contributed to a budget shortfall of £71,000. Members were informed that instead of the SLA, income would be provided through a new 'pay-as-you-go' system for room hire from 1st April 2004. The Manager of HTC argued that this new system would remove the hidden subsidies of the old system, which was deemed unfair as it often placed a heavy burden on users who were not frequent customers of HTC. It was explained that under the previous system schools had to pay through the SLA regardless of how much use they made of the facilities at HTC. Under the proposed 'pay-as-you-go' system schools would be paying for their actual use of the facilities. Members were referred to Appendix A but were warned to be cautious of the figures, given that School Development Services, Early Years and other sections of the former Education Department were not previously charged on a 'pay-as-you-go' system but were rather

given access to the facilities through the SLA. It was added that non-priority users would face a large increase, primarily because they were being heavily subsidised beforehand by the SLAs. It was made clear that in future non-priority users would have to pay the market price for facilities at HTC. The Panel noted that the figures in Appendix A detailing the charges for non-priority users were incorrect. The Manager of HTC confirmed that the appropriate amendments would be made. Members were also advised that HTC had decided to change the phrases 'priority' and 'non priority' users and instead categorised users as 'Harrow Council' and 'external.'

The Panel were referred to page 26 of the agenda, which concluded that higher charges were required in order for HTC to avoid serious financial difficulties. The fees agreed at Cabinet were due to cover the period from 1st April to 31st August. It was argued that fees for the remaining two-thirds of the financial year would have to be higher than those agreed at Cabinet.

The Panel discussed the competition that HTC would face if higher charges were introduced. The Manager of HTC made clear that it was not a level playing field particularly as some Council sections including the Central Training Unit, paid no fees for booking training events in rooms at the Civic Centre. The meeting went on to hear that the Best Value Group at HTC had made comparisons against local competitors, including the Watford Hilton, Cumberland Hotel and Grimsdyke Hotel. It was concluded that on the basis of the appraisal undertaken, HTC would remain competitive. Members noted a number of benefits of using HTC including free parking, which many of its competitors could not boast. The Panel also agreed that HTC needed a number of improvements in order to make it a user-friendly environment and in turn enhance its appeal to customers. A Member asked whether the demand for rooms remained high. It was reported that competition for rooms was very high, particularly in the internal market. Whereas demand for rooms had been high under the SLA the Panel agreed that it would be difficult to establish whether this was down to the low charges previously applied. Enquiries were also made in relation to the catering provision at HTC. It was noted that eight extra places in the restaurant had already been introduced.

Members enquired as to why the High Schools had decided to opt-out of the SLA. The Manager of HTC could not answer for the High Schools but suggested that they felt they were not getting value for money. It was noted that if the High schools had opted-out of the SLA due to a lack of funds then they would be unlikely to enter the pay-as-you-go scheme. However if High schools were booking facilities at HTC under the 'pay-as-you-go' system then it would be apparent that they felt the SLA did not provide value for money. It was reported that discussions with the High Schools would take place with the hope of seeing them re-enter the SLA. The Manager of HTC would report back on any developments at a future meeting of the Panel.

Members discussed the competition HTC faced with the Committee Rooms at the Civic Centre. Although the Central Training Unit often favoured the facilities at the HTC, they received free accommodation at the Civic Centre. The need for a level playing field in terms of providing facilities was recognised by the Panel. Members noted that this issue would be discussed at a future meeting of the Grants Advisory Panel. It was further suggested that the Panel add to its recommendations, a review of the internal charging system for committee rooms.

Resolved to RECOMMEND: (To Cabinet)

That (1) the Best Value Report of Harrow Teachers' Centre be incorporated into and superseded by the feasibility study into the potential development of Harrow Council as a Work Based Learning provider;

REASON: Important changes, including the potential development of Harrow as a Work Based Learning Provider may significantly affect the outcome of the recommendations of the Best Value Review report.

(2) there be a change to the rate of fees and charges for using the Teachers' Centre above the rate of approximately 2.8% agreed at Cabinet;

REASON: The Service Level Agreement with schools for using the Teachers' Centre will cease on 31st March 2004. Use of the Teachers' Centre (e.g. attendance at INSET sessions by school staff) will instead be on a pay-as-you-go basis for all users from 1st April 2004. An interim rate of fees and charges was approved by Cabinet based on an inflationary increase of 2.8% pending the recommendations from the Best Value Report.

(3) a review of the Civic Centre committee room booking system be undertaken.

REASON: In order to determine the impact of free use of the Council committee rooms and other facilities upon the demand for facilities at the Harrow Teachers' Centre.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Best Value Review Programme

The Panel received a report from the Director of Organisational Performance outlining the position of the Council's Best Value Review Programme. The Panel was reminded that there had been a significant change in Government guidance since the inception of Best Value: councils were now expected to focus reviews on key areas of weakness or need, identified either externally (for instance by inspecting bodies) or internally. This contrasted with the earlier approach whereby a review programme was expected to encompass the entire range of council activities. Major internal change through the New Harrow Project had also had a profound effect on reviews. Revised criteria for identifying reviews were set out in the report. Members were informed that following consultation with the Service Departments, the Panel would receive a draft programme focusing on key issues.

It was added that a review was required of the identifiable links and relationship between scrutiny and Best Value. The meeting also discussed the dangers of duplicating work at the Best Value and scrutiny level. Members were advised that a review of scrutiny was about to commence and could be extended to cover these issues.

The Chair noted that many of the reviews had taken a long time to report to the Panel and that there remained too many reports that were 'incomplete.' The Chair also felt that the Panel should be regularly updated on the progress of reviews after it had presented its final report.

Resolved to RECOMMEND: (To the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Development, Housing and Best Value)

That the approach outlined in the formulation of a new review programme be agreed.

REASON: To enable a targeted and sustainable review programme to be re-established.

(See also Minute 97).

PART II - MINUTES

88. **Attendance by Reserve Members:**

RESOLVED: To note the attendance at this meeting of the following duly appointed Reserve Members:-

<u>Ordinary Member</u>	<u>Reserve Member</u>
Councillor D Ashton	Councillor Osborn
Councillor Pinkus	Councillor Arnold

89. **Declarations of Interest:**

RESOLVED: To note that there were no declarations of personal or prejudicial interests made by Members of the Panel arising from the business transacted at this meeting.

90. **Arrangement of Agenda:**

The Chair proposed that an amendment be made to the running order of the substantive items of business. It was decided that item 8 would be followed by item 10, by which time the Manager of Harrow Teachers' Centre would be in attendance at the meeting. Item 9 would conclude the substantive items of business.

RESOLVED: That (1) the above be noted; and

(2) all items be considered with the press and public present.

91. **Minutes:**

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meetings held on 16 July and 11 September

2003, having been circulated, be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

92. **Public Questions:**

RESOLVED: To note that no public questions were put at this meeting under the provisions of Advisory Panel and Consultative Forum Procedure Rule 15 (Part 4E of the Constitution).

93. **Petitions:**

RESOLVED: To note that no petitions were received at this meeting under the provisions of the Advisory Panel and Consultative Forum Procedure Rule 13 (Part 4E of the Constitution).

94. **Deputations:**

RESOLVED: To note that no deputations were received at this meeting under the provisions of Advisory Panel and Consultative Forum Procedure Rule 14 (Part 4E of the Constitution).

95. **Cross-Cutting Review 'Safer Harrow' - Improvement Plan Progress:**

The Panel received a progress against improvement plan report from the Interim Head of the Crime Reduction Unit. Members were referred to page 2 of the agenda, which listed the four main areas that the Review had identified for further development. In respect of co-location the Crime Reduction Manager reported that the Metropolitan Police Authority was selling off assets in order to support its revenue accounts. It was noted that the business case submitted to the Metropolitan Police Property Services Division had proved unsuccessful and that Wealdstone Police Station would be sold in 2-3 years time. It was recognised that alternative provision would be made in Wealdstone. Members questioned whether Wealdstone Police Station, a listed building, could be sold on the open market.

Positive progress was noted in relation to the establishment of a Joint Anti-Social Behaviour Unit, which was being carried out in accordance with new legislation (Crime and Disorder Act). The Crime Reduction Manager noted that two staff from the Local Authority had recently moved to the Intelligence Unit in South Harrow Police Station. It was hoped that this would provide a greater degree of co-operation between the Police and the Council in order to help achieve the objectives in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour. It was added that these objectives were closely linked to the 'liveability' agenda of the New Harrow Project, particularly in tackling persistent low-level offenders.

The Panel heard that efforts were being made to share information between the Police and the Council. Fortnightly meetings of the Police Tasking Group were noted as an integral part of this process and were seen as important in helping to tackle specific crime issues in the Borough. Members were informed of a Community Involvement Officer, managed jointly by Harrow Council and South Harrow Police Station. The purpose of this role was to support and develop Harrow Neighbourhood Watch. The Crime Reduction Manager concluded his presentation by commenting that good progress had been made on majority of aspects of the improvement plan.

Members discussed measures that could be taken against individuals who dropped litter. The Crime Reduction Manager informed Members that enforcement powers were restricted to the Police and had not been extended to Street Wardens or Police Community Support Officers, although this was noted as being under review. Discussion turned to the possibility of making use of signs in appropriate positions in the Town Centre, warning members of the public not to drop litter. The Crime Reduction Manager advised that the Council had submitted a bid to receive funding for electronic signboards to use for this purpose. This would provide the added benefit of being able to change the text of the message.

The Panel agreed that educating people was an integral part of solving the problem. It was reported that Street wardens and Police Community Support Officers had given citizenship talks in schools, part of which deals with the consequences of dropping litter. In terms of the wider community, it was noted that Street Wardens and Police Community Support Officers had endeavoured to use their powers of persuasion when confronting members of the public that had dropped litter. Positive responses had generally been received. It was added that the local press had provided extensive coverage on the subject.

Discussion turned to the subject of graffiti. The Crime Reduction Manager noted that external funding would be sought for the purpose of removing graffiti. The Government

Office of London and the Probation Service were identified as possible sources of funding for tackling and removing graffiti. It was added that future anti-graffiti projects would have to be implemented within the parameters of the Medium-Term Budget Strategy. A Member raised a concern that although the ambition to tackle graffiti was admirable, it was not always followed through in practice. The Member's own ward had reportedly suffered from this problem for a number of years. Graffiti problems at the St John's Ambulance building in North Harrow and the areas surrounding Nower Hill School were noted as examples. The Panel agreed that the presence of Police Officers and Street Wardens had had a noticeable impact on reducing litter and graffiti. Members agreed that the element of deterrence had played an important part in tackling this problem but that much work was still to be done.

Members discussed tools for tackling the problem of anti-social behaviour. Anti-social behaviour orders (ASBO) were noted as one such tool. Other options included Acceptable Behaviour Orders and Parenting Orders. It was explained that these were less serious and required no formal court action but were rather progressive steps that could be made before taking out an ASBO.

The Crime Reduction Manager noted that tackling alcohol abuse formed an integral part of the Safer Harrow Action Plan. Indeed alcohol was noted as particularly relevant in relation to violent behaviour. The proposed alcohol treatment centre in Harrow was discussed. A police station was not deemed as the best location for such a centre. The treatment centre was noted as being in the early stages of the planning process.

A Member noted that there had been a lack of progress in the Young Persons Centre. Despite a service being provided, it was felt that it had not been sufficiently expanded. Further co-operation with Connexions, particularly in relation to the funding, was sought. The Chair requested that the Crime Reduction Manager establish the associated costs of running the project and finding a suitable location.

A Member of the Panel enquired as to the success of the Mobile Unit. The Panel heard that the reduced crime levels in Harrow Town Centre were partly attributable to the contribution of the Mobile Unit together with CCTV. It was added that the Town Centre traders had been supportive of this initiative. The cost of the scheme was noted as £165,000 and the Crime Reduction Manager felt that this was a valuable initiative.

The Chair informed the meeting that he had received a letter advising that the Safer Neighbourhood scheme is being introduced in a number of wards, with the aim of having all wards participating in this scheme by the next 2-3 years. It was added that every ward in the scheme would hold meetings every three months and would include up to five Community representatives. The Chair thanked the Crime Reduction Manager for his report.

RESOLVED: That (1) the report and progress made in relation to the Improvement Plan be noted; and

(2) the Crime Reduction Manager send the Chair information relating to the costs associated with the Young Persons Centre.

96. **Harrow Teachers' Centre - Best Value Interim Report:**
(See Recommendation 1)

97. **Best Value Review Programme:**
Further to Recommendation 2 above, it was:

RESOLVED: That (1) a further report, with proposals on this basis and including the curtailment of existing reviews where appropriate, is brought to the next meeting of the Panel (subject to prior receipt of the finalised Audit and Inspection Programme); and

(2) the Panel concurs with the inclusion of the relationship of this Panel with scrutiny bodies within the scope of the forthcoming review of the scrutiny function.

(Note: The meeting having commenced at 7.32 pm, closed at 10.00 pm)

(Signed) COUNCILLOR HOWARD BLUSTON
Chair