
REPORT OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD ON 25 NOVEMBER 2003

Chair: * Councillor Jean Lammiman

Councillors: * Blann * Marie-Louise Nolan
 * Mitzi Green * Osborn
 * Ann Groves * Pinkus
 * Ingram * Thammaiah
 * John Nickolay (5) * Versallion

* Denotes Member present
 (5) Denote category of Reserve Member

PART I – RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL - NIL
PART II - MINUTES
109. Attendance by Reserve Members:

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

<u>Ordinary Member</u>	<u>Reserve Member</u>
Councillor Seymour	Councillor John Nickolay

110. Declarations of Interest:

Councillor Jean Lammiman declared a personal interest by virtue of being a member of the Harrow Strategic Partnership Board in agenda items 12 and 13, "ICT Strategy" and "Implementing Electronic Government Return 2003 (IEG3)", in that they referred to the Harrow Strategic Partnership.

RESOLVED: To note the declarations of interest made by Councillor Jean Lammiman in respect of agenda items 12 and 13, and that the Member participated in the discussions and decisions on those items.

111. Arrangement of Agenda:

The Chair advised that one of the officers who was due to present agenda 9, "National Development Team Review of Harrow Learning Disability Team – Update", was coming directly from another meeting and had been delayed. It was therefore

RESOLVED: That (1) agenda item 17, "Statement of Accounts 2002-2003 Report of the External Auditor", be taken after agenda item 10, "Medium Term Budget Strategy 2004/05-2006/07, and both these items be taken before agenda item 9;

(2) in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, the following item be admitted late to the agenda by virtue of the special circumstances and grounds for urgency listed below:-

<u>Agenda Item</u>	<u>Special Circumstances/Grounds for Urgency</u>
17. Statement of Accounts 2002-2003 Report of the External Auditor	There has been recent clarification of Regulations such that the report of the External Auditor on the Statement of Accounts needs to be dealt with by a Committee of the Council, rather than by the Executive. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee needs to establish a Sub-Committee to deal with the External Auditor's report before the deadline of 31st December 2003. The next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is scheduled to take place on 27 January 2004.

(3) all items be taken with the press and public present.

112. **Minutes:**

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 September 2003, having been circulated, be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

113. **Public Questions:**

RESOLVED: To note that no public questions were put at the meeting under the provisions of Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 8.

114. **Petitions:**

RESOLVED: To note that no petitions were received at the meeting under the provisions of Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 9.

115. **Deputations:**

RESOLVED: To note that no deputations were received at the meeting under the provisions of Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 10.

116. **Medium Term Budget Strategy 2004/05-2006/07:**

The Committee received a report of the Executive Director (Business Connections) which had been submitted to Cabinet in October, and which set out a repriced Medium Term Budget Strategy for 2004/05-2006/07.

At the meeting, the Executive Director advised that, since the production of the report, the Council had received its provisional settlement for 2004/05. This indicated an increase in Government grant of approximately 5.9%, which was slightly higher than anticipated. However, officers were working through the details in order to ascertain the full implications of the settlement, and headline figures would be circulated to Members shortly.

In response to questions from Members, further information on the expected cost increases for private sector provision was provided, and the reasons for ceasing the capitalisation of highways maintenance were outlined. In addition, it was advised that the information used to calculate the projected Formula Spending Share set out in the report could be made available to Members, but this was now out of date following the receipt of the provisional settlement. It was also advised, in response to a Member's query, that setting cash limits was no longer considered a good way of drawing up a budget because it took no account of efficiencies or spending pressures.

With regard to the provisional settlement, it was reported that the amount to be passported to schools was higher than anticipated. However, the teachers' pay award of 2.5% announced by the Secretary of State was lower than had been expected. Clarification was also given of the extent to which the Government would be funding teachers' performance pay.

It was noted that the details of the settlement, together with a repriced MTBS, would be submitted to the Budget Review Working Group on 11 December, and that Cabinet on 16 December would set the Council Tax Base and agree budget options for consultation. The Chair advised of a suggestion that a representative of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be appointed as an observer on the Budget Review Working Group. This suggestion met with support from the Committee, and it was therefore agreed to approach the Chair of the Working Group, the Finance, Human Resources and Performance Management Portfolio Holder, to seek his agreement to this.

It was also noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be receiving both the budget proposals for 2004/05 and the annual report of the Portfolio Holder on Human Resources. It was therefore suggested that the Finance, Human Resources and Performance Management Portfolio Holder be invited to attend the next meeting. This was agreed.

RESOLVED: That (1) the Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee approach the Chair of the Budget Review Working Group, to seek his agreement to appointing a non-Executive, non-Cabinet Assistant representative of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as an observer on the Working Group;

(2) the Finance, Human Resources and Performance Management Portfolio Holder be invited to attend the next meeting of the Committee on 27 January 2004;

(3) the report be noted.

117. **Statement of Accounts 2002-2003 Report of the External Auditor:**
 The Committee received a tabled report of the Executive Director (Business Connections), which set out the requirement for a body of the Council to receive the external auditor's report on the Statement of Accounts 2002-2003 by 31 December 2003. It was proposed that this requirement be met by establishing a Sub-Committee of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with delegation to consider and deal with the external auditor's report.
- At the meeting, assurance was given that the Sub-Committee was intended to be a temporary solution to ensure compliance with statutory requirements. Proposals would be made next year for the delegation of the approval of the accounts to a Committee.
- It was agreed that the Sub-Committee comprise 5 Members. Councillors Blann, Ingram, Pinkus, Thammaiah and Versallion offered to serve on the Sub-Committee, and Councillor Ingram offered to act as Chair. This was agreed. In addition, it was agreed that the other Members present be appointed as Reserve Members of the Sub-Committee.
- RESOLVED:** That (1) an Accounts Approval Sub-Committee be established, comprising 5 Members, and with delegation to consider and deal with the External Auditor's report on the Statement of Accounts;
- (2) that Councillors Blann Ingram, Pinkus, Thammaiah and Versallion be appointed to the membership of the Sub-Committee;
- (3) the Reserve Membership of the Committee be appointed as follows:-
- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| <u>Labour</u> | <u>Conservative</u> |
| 1. Mitzi Green | 1. Osborn |
| 2. Marie-Louise Nolan | 2. Jean Lammiman |
| 3. Ann Groves | 3. John Nickolay |
- (4) Councillor Ingram be appointed Chair of the Sub-Committee for the Municipal Year 2003/04; and
- (5) the establishment of the Sub-Committee be reported to the next meeting of Council on 22 January 2004 in accordance with Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 4.3.
118. **National Development Team Review of Harrow Learning Disability Team - Update:**
 Further to a request at the joint meeting of the Health and Social Care and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Sub-Committees on 17 September 2003, Members considered a report of the Head of Community Care which provided an update on the progress of the National Development Team (NDT) review of the Harrow Learning Disability Team (HLDT).
- It was reported that the NDT review had been commissioned by the Harrow Learning Disability Partnership Board (LDPB). The report of the review, together with an action plan, would be presented to the LDPB early in 2004. The meeting of the LDPB would be open to any Members who wished to attend.
- In response to Members' questions, it was advised that the date of the LDPB meeting was dependent upon the availability of the NDT, but it was anticipated that this would be in February 2004. The meeting would take place during the daytime. At a Member's request, officers undertook to notify all members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Health and Social Care and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Sub-Committees of the date of the LDPB meeting, and to give as much notice of this as possible.
- RESOLVED:** That (1) the report be noted and
- (2) the full report of the NDT review be brought to a future meeting.
119. **Comprehensive Performance Assessment - Progress Report:**
 The Executive Director (Organisational Development) introduced a report which provided an update on the progress of the implementation of the Council's Improvement Plan in response to the Improvement and Development Agency's (IDeA) and Comprehensive Performance Assessment reviews of last year. The report also advised the Committee of the Corporate Assessment process for 2003 and 2004.
- At the meeting, the Executive Director advised that the Council would need to score 42 points on its core services, not 39 as stated in the report, in order to be automatically

entitled to a corporate reassessment in 2004. However, if the Council did not meet the specified service score but was confident it could demonstrate improvement in services, it could apply by 31 January 2004 to have a corporate reassessment in 'exceptional circumstances'. The Cabinet had already made an in-principle decision to apply for a corporate reassessment via this route if the specified service score was not achieved, but further consultation with Members would be carried out in January.

With regard to the development of the Community Strategy, one of the key actions in the Improvement Plan which was yet to be completed, it was noted that the first draft of the Strategy was currently being consulted upon. It was agreed that officers be requested to report back to the Committee at its next meeting on the outcome of the consultation. It was also agreed to invite the Deputy Leader, in his capacity as the Partnership and Property Portfolio Holder, to the meeting to discuss this.

The Chair requested that she and the Vice Chair be sent information on the arrangements for the CPA 2005, once this became available.

RESOLVED: That (1) the progress report proforma attached as Appendix A be noted;

(2) a further report be made to the Committee in the New Year, detailing progress over the next quarter;

(3) a report on the outcome of the first phase of consultation on the Community Strategy be brought to the January meeting of the Committee;

(4) the Deputy Leader be invited to the January meeting of the Committee;

(5) the anticipated information on the new CPA arrangements for 2005 be circulated to the Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee, once received.

120.

ICT Strategy:

Members considered a report of the Executive Director (Business Connections) which outlined the broad themes of the ICT Strategy, approved by Cabinet on 14 October 2003. The report also set out the major actions required to implement the strategy, the next steps which would be taken, and the way in which the strategy and action plan met many of the recommendations of the scrutiny review of e-government.

Noting that the ICT Strategy highlighted the need for a business continuity plan, a Member was very concerned that the Council still lacked such a plan, despite it being a common audit criticism. In response, some of the ways in which this was being addressed were outlined. The Executive Director (Business Connections) had been appointed as a Corporate Sponsor for this, and was taking forward a project to review the Council's needs in terms of business continuity, the report of which was due to be published in the new year. Business continuity had been taken into account in all the elements of the ICT strategy. The Council was also looking at risk with its insurers. However, Members remained concerned about this and it was therefore suggested that the Executive Director (Business Connections), in his capacity as Corporate Sponsor, be invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee to report on the way in which this matter was being taken forward. This was agreed.

Members were concerned that the ICT strategy should be followed up, and not allowed to become redundant like the previous strategy. Officers outlined the arrangements for follow-up, including the role of the Corporate Strategy Programme Board, which would be responsible for overseeing the delivery of the strategy and setting priorities. There was also concern at the need to replace budgetary systems, and that these would be replaced in isolation of other systems. In response, the reasons for the proposed replacement of these systems were outlined, and the role of the Corporate Strategy Programme Board in ensuring that systems were not replaced in isolation was highlighted. Officers offered to circulate the Board's Terms of Reference, which would be agreed at its first meeting on 16 December 2003, on the Committee's January Information Circular. This was agreed.

There was some discussion of problems being experienced by schools in using the London Grid for Learning (LGfL), and of other proposed IT initiatives in schools. Officers were requested to keep the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Sub-Committee informed on these issues.

At the request of the Chair, the Director of Business Services gave an update on progress with exploring ICT strategic partnership options. The consultants appointed to carry out this work would be reporting shortly, and there would be a Member briefing on this at 5.15pm on 16 December in Committee Rooms 1&2, formal notification of which

would follow within the next couple of days.

Officers were congratulated on the production of the ICT strategy. Members felt that it was a huge step forward, and that it started from a much more solid base than the previous strategy. There was some concern as to whether all the resources required to implement the strategy would be available, and for this reason it was suggested that it was important to identify quick wins. It was acknowledged that to bring the Council's ICT provision up to the desired standard would be a very long process, but it was agreed that the ICT strategy represented a good start.

Members also felt that a good start had been made to implementing the recommendations of the scrutiny review of e-government.

RESOLVED: That (1) the Executive Director (Business Connections) be invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee to report on the way in which business continuity issues were being taken forward within the Council;

(2) the Terms of Reference of the Corporate Strategy Programme Board be circulated on the Committee's January Information Circular;

(3) the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Sub-Committee be kept informed of schools initiatives;

(4) the Committee be kept informed of the outcome of consultations on actions within the ICT strategy;

(5) the report be noted.

121. **Implementing Electronic Government Return 2003 (IEG3):**

Members considered a report of the Executive Director (Business Connections), which referred the Implementing Electronic Government Return 2003 (IEG3) to the Committee for consideration.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

122. **Housing Benefit Issues and Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's Report:**

The Committee received a report of the Director of Business Services which had been submitted to Cabinet on 14 October 2003. The report updated Members on the management issues in Housing Benefits and on the impact of the additional funding for recruitment consultants, interim management and process consultants. The report also set out the results of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's (BFI) review of the service and the action plan prepared in response.

At the meeting, the Director of Business Services provided additional information on the improvement in the performance of the Housing Benefits service. In particular, she reported that by the end of the first week in December the service was expecting to have cleared the backlog and to be dealing only with items of work received that day. Officers would then be looking at other ways to further improve the service. With regard to the BFI inspection, the Director of Business Services advised that this had been carried out in February. The inspectors' main criticisms had related to claims processing and fraud. All the high priority fraud issues had already been resolved, and the claims processing issues were scheduled to be resolved by the end of the first week in December.

It was noted that the Scrutiny Review Group on Housing Benefits had received a presentation on this report, and considered it in depth. At the request of a Review Group Member who had been unable to attend, officers undertook to make the presentation available to all Members of the Committee.

Members' questions focused on the plans to further improve the service in the future. Plans to improve accessibility were outlined. A Member expressed concern that letters sent out by the service could be confusing and upsetting for claimants in semi-dependent accommodation. Officers acknowledged that this could be the case but advised that the format of the letters was laid down by Government. Work which was on-going with the Council's IT suppliers would result in changes to the letters, but the ultimate aim would be for officers to visit vulnerable claimants and to complete their claims, produce the notification letter and explain it to them in their own homes. Plans to work more closely with other agencies were also outlined.

Members also queried the extent to which the recent industrial action by staff had affected the service. It was reported that this had had surprisingly little impact. There had been a big increase in the amount of correspondence received by post, and

claimants had also been able to send in information via the post box outside the Civic Centre reception. In addition, an emergency telephone number had been made available. It was therefore considered that, while some customers may have been inconvenienced, there had been no serious difficulties.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

123. **Housing Benefit Review Scope:**

The Committee received the draft scoping report for the scrutiny review of Housing Benefits.

The Lead Member for this review, Councillor Ingram, advised that the final review report was already in draft, and it was hoped to submit this to the January meeting of the Committee for approval.

RESOLVED: To (1) endorse the scoping report for the scrutiny review of Housing Benefits;

(2) note that the final report of the review would be submitted to the Committee at its next meeting.

124. **Progress Reports on Reviews - Members' Verbal Updates:**

(i) **Review of Budget Processes:**

The Lead Member for this review, Councillor Ingram, gave a verbal update.

He advised that the scoping report for the review was currently in draft, and would be circulated to the Review Group shortly. Once approved by the Review Group, it would be submitted to the Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee for approval via the non-executive decision procedure, prior to the next meeting of the Committee.

(ii) **Review of the New Harrow Project:**

The Chair, who was leading this review, reported that the Review Group had met and had identified three workstreams.

The workstreams would review the roll-out of the People First community schools pilot, the next phase of the public realm roll-outs, and the organisational structure, and would be led by Councillors Mitzi Green, Blann and Osborn (with the assistance of the Chair) respectively. A meeting of the Review Group with an IDeA consultant was due to be held at the end of the week. In light of Member commitments, the Review Group would be seeking to phase this review around others currently on-going. It was therefore intended that the scoping report be submitted to the Committee for approval at its meeting in January.

The Chair also stated that she had been advised that Cabinet Assistants should not serve on Scrutiny Review Groups. Although she understood the reason for this, it limited the pool of members able to participate in reviews. She and the Vice-Chair were therefore seeking definitive advice on this from the Borough Solicitor.

RESOLVED: That the verbal updates be noted.

125. **Communications Management Strategy:**

The Chair reminded Members that they should indicate if there were any items on the Information Circular which they would like brought onto the agenda.

The Communications Management Strategy, which was on the information circular, having been raised as an item of any other business, the Chair reported that it had been considered at the last meeting of the Publications Advisory Panel. The Strategy included a section on press releases and publicity for scrutiny. The Chair also reported that work was currently on-going on a scrutiny page on the Council website.

RESOLVED: That the Communications Management Strategy be noted.

126. **Structure Charts for the new Directorates:**

This item having been raised under any other business, it was agreed that the structure charts circulated on the Information Circular, together with the structure chart for the Business Connections Directorate which was yet to be produced, be circulated to all Members of Council for information.

RESOLVED: That the structure charts for the new Directorates be circulated to all Members of Council.

127. **Extension of the Meeting:**

At 9.58 pm, during discussion of the above item, the Chair drew the attention of the meeting to the time.

RESOLVED: That, under the provisions of Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 6.7(ii)(b), the meeting be extended to 10.05 pm.

128. **Inlogov Seminar on Chairing Scrutiny:**

This having been raised as an item of any other business, three Members, Councillors Blann, Mitzi Green and Thammaiah, reported on a seminar they had attended on chairing scrutiny.

RESOLVED: That the verbal reports be noted.

129. **Brent Scrutiny Seminar:**

The Chair, having raised this as an item of any other business, reminded the Committee of the invitation to attend a scrutiny seminar in Brent on 1 December 2003. The seminar would examine the role of the Centre for Public Scrutiny, the working of Parliamentary Select Committees, and scrutiny in the Greater London Assembly. There were still places available at the seminar and any Member interested in attending was requested to contact the Scrutiny Support Officer.

RESOLVED: That any Member interested in attending the Brent Scrutiny Seminar on 1 December, who had not already advised the Scrutiny Support Officer of their wish to attend, do so.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.33 pm, closed at 10.02 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR JEAN LAMMIMAN
Chair