
REPORT OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

(SPECIAL) MEETING HELD ON 12 SEPTEMBER 2005

Chair: * Councillor Jean Lammiman

Councillors: * Nana Asante (2) * Mark Ingram
 * Bluston * Osborn
 * Mrs Champagne (2) * Pinkus
 * Gate * Seymour
 * Mitzi Green * Thammaiah

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

PART I - RECOMMENDATIONS - NIL
PART II - MINUTES
315. Attendance by Reserve Members:

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

Ordinary Member

Councillor Blann
 Councillor Versallion

Reserve Member

Councillor Nana Asante
 Councillor Mrs Champagne

316. Declarations of Interest:

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:

Member

Councillor Bluston

Nature of Interest

Declared an interest arising from the fact that he was Chair of the Early Retirement Sub-Committee.

317. Arrangement of Agenda:

RESOLVED: That all items be considered with the press and public present.

318. Minutes:

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 July 2005 be deferred to the next ordinary meeting of the Committee.

319. Public Questions, Petitions and Deputations:

RESOLVED: To note that no public questions were put, or petitions or deputations received at this meeting under the provisions of Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules 8, 9 and 10 respectively.

320. Question and Answer Session with the Leader and the Chief Executive:

The Chair welcomed the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive to the meeting.

The Chair advised that it was being considered whether the regular question and answer sessions with the Leader and the Chief Executive should occur separately from the main Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings. The Chair noted that this meeting represented a trial of the proposed new arrangement, and invited Members to provide the Chair with their views on this arrangement.

The Chair invited Members to ask their questions of the Leader and the Chief Executive.

Question 1: What is happening to staff displaced by the Middle Management Review (MMR) process in general, and in Urban Living in particular?

The Chief Executive responded that the transition support arrangements put in place at the commencement of the MMR process had continued to be provided to staff in all directorates, including displaced staff. A total of 127 staff had attended group workshops and 140 staff had had one to one meetings with the transition support team.

The new structure was in the process of being implemented and a number of potentially displaced staff were undertaking interim roles and project work to support continuity of service delivery. The Chief Executive reported that in Urban Living the MMR process had not progressed as quickly as in other directorates, and consequently fewer staff had been identified as being potentially displaced.

The process by which the Council dealt with displaced staff was set out in the Council's Protocol for Managing Organisational Change. Cabinet would be receiving a report in October 2005 which would outline proposals for managing staff identified as displaced by the MMR, which would include:

- Providing continuing access to transition support
- Operating a 'clearing house' system to ensure that displaced staff were considered for all potentially suitable vacancies in the council.
- Building a job search network including neighbouring boroughs, job centres and partner organisations such as Eden Brown through which the Council would proactively manage job searches for suitable jobs outside of the Council.
- Considering requests from volunteers who wanted to be considered for voluntary redundancy/early retirement
- Providing additional training and development to assist in career development and job searches.
- In the event that the Council was unable to find employment for a displaced employee, then the Council would have to consider severance with enhanced payments including, where appropriate, early payment of pension benefits.

Question 2: What is the Chief Executive's assessment of staff morale across the council?

The Chief Executive responded that she continued to be heartened by the commitment of staff at all levels whether they were affected by MMR or not, but acknowledged that some pools of dissatisfaction did exist. In response to comments made by Members regarding their concerns about efficiency in areas of the organisation where morale was low, the Chief Executive stated that efforts were being redoubled to make sure that staff did not feel unhappy or disadvantaged. The reduction in levels of sickness and absence that had been reported by the Leader at the last meeting were good indicators of staff morale.

The Leader stated that, in his experience across the Council, it was not the case that staff were unhappy, although he agreed with the Chief Executive's view that there were some areas where there was work to be done.

A Member suggested that a regular staff survey at departmental level would help to identify issues. The Chief Executive confirmed that plans were underway to have a rolling programme of staff surveys. The first cycle of the new Individual Performance Appraisal and Development (IPAD) system was nearly complete and would help identify any concerns staff had.

Question 3: Could the Chief Executive explain the rationale behind the proposed new organisational structure being considered by Cabinet in July?

The Chief Executive responded that two years ago the organisation had been faced with a major programme of change in financial management and performance management. Since then, significant improvements had been made in financial management and the Council was now at the leading edge of performance management. This meant that the Council no longer needed the extra capacity and single focus from two corporate Services Departments.

Looking ahead, the Council's focus needed to be on developing a single change programme with an integrated directorate driving this change. The new directorate

allowed the Council to bring together its financial, technological and people resources through:

- Integrated financial and service planning
- A strong value for money focus
- Connecting this closely with BTP
- Bringing all our transactional services together

In response to concerns raised at the last meeting of the Committee that the newsletter informing staff of the proposed new directorate had been issued before Cabinet had approved the change, the Chief Executive stated that she had felt it appropriate to keep staff informed of the proposed changes before a decision was made by Cabinet.

Question 4: Councillors are becoming increasingly aware that customer service standards at the point of first contact, especially with regard to customer complaints and Member enquiries, are deteriorating. What is being done to improve this?

The Leader responded that he was not aware of these concerns, as they not been drawn to his attention by Members. There was evidence that customer satisfaction with the Council was increasing; a recent MORI 'quality of life' survey had shown that fifty-four per cent of residents were satisfied with the overall service provided by the Council. This represented a substantial increase from 2003/4 when forty-five per cent had expressed satisfaction. This overall level of satisfaction compared with an average of fifty-two per cent across London, which placed Harrow twelfth in London. Residents had identified collection of household waste, recycling, litter clearance and libraries as having improved in particular. A significant increase had been identified in public satisfaction in key council services, particularly Planning and Environmental Services.

Seventy per cent of respondents had indicated that, when they last contacted the Council, they found staff to be helpful. Only seventeen per cent had replied that they found Council staff to be unhelpful. The Business Transformation Partnership would aim to increase satisfaction rates to eighty per cent.

The Chief Executive stated that the Council did not have up to date equipment or facilities. If the proposed Business Transformation Partnership was agreed by Cabinet, it was proposed that more effective call centre and reception facilities would be installed by May 2006. This would also allow instant surveying to take place which would enable the Council to collect timely and accurate information on customer satisfaction.

Question 5: How is the council's ambition to be rated as 'good' under the next Comprehensive Performance Assessment refresh progressing? What are the council's improvement priorities for achieving the 'good' rating?

The Chief Executive responded that in 2002 the Council had been rated as 'weak'. In the assessment due to take place in December 2005 it was likely that the Council would be assessed as 'fair'. This assessment would be carried out using new, more stringent, guidelines, that had not yet been finalised. The Council was carrying a very poor score in its corporate assessment from 2002. Since then, the Council had made significant progress in financial management, performance management and service improvement which meant that this score was likely to have improved if the Council had a corporate assessment in 2005. Unfortunately, the Audit Commission had changed its programme of Corporate Assessments to the Council's disadvantage, and this made it very difficult to progress to 'good'. The Audit Commission had recently published its new CPA framework, which 'raised the bar', and the Council had been promised a corporate assessment 2006/7 against this new framework. The priority areas for improvement to reach 'good' were:

- Strengthening the Harrow Strategic Partnership (HSP)
- Further improvements in Value for Money
- Children's and adults services

Further reports to Members on the implications of the new CPA framework were being prepared.

Question 6: How is the council responding to the Children Act?

The Chief Executive responded that significant progress had been made in the arrangements to implement fully the Children's Act in 2006. These included:

- the establishment of the Safeguarding Board to replace the Area Child Protection Committee;

- the establishment of the Children and Young People Strategic Partnership as part of the Harrow Strategic Partnership;
- the agreement with the Primary Care Trust (PCT) on Joint Governance Arrangements relating to Children and Adults' Services in the development of a Children's Trust;
- the grouping together of, and co-location of, a number of teams to improve service delivery for Children including Children with Special Needs and Children with disabilities;
- the establishment of a transition team including the Youth and Connexions Service, the Youth Offending Team and the Leaving Care Team;
- in line with the spirit of the Children's Act, considerable resource had been put into schools to develop extended schools and community provision in schools;
- a strategy for the development of nine Children's Centres would be brought to Cabinet in October enabling multi-disciplinary arrangements at an area level in the support of children and families;
- joint work was being undertaken by Children's Services, Community and Learning Development and Schools in relation to exclusions and behaviour management;
- the Early Years and Childcare Partnership was working closely with the private and voluntary sector providers of nursery provision across the Borough and had close working relationships with the foundations stage advisers in the Inclusion and Achievement division.

In response to a question from a Member regarding the report into exclusions that had recently been made available, the Chief Executive stated that she had not yet seen a copy, but would be taking a keen interest as the current level of exclusions was unsatisfactory.

Question 7: How is the Harrow Strategic Partnership (HSP) performing? In particular, how can the HSP contribute toward the development and delivery of the Local Area Agreement (LAA)?

The Leader responded that the HSP had made progress since it was established. A Community Strategy had been published and Management Groups had been established in each area of the Partnership's work. The work of the Safer Harrow Management group has been commended by Government and the Council had made significant progress in delivering its requirements in response to the Children's Act. Agreement had been reached on improvements to partnership working with the health service and the Council had successfully participated in the West London Community Cohesion Pathfinder. There was more work to be done in mainstream partnership working and, to this end, one of the Council's new corporate priorities was 'impact through partnership working'.

The Council would be a part of the next phase of Local Area Agreement Pilots, which would give further opportunity to agree joint priorities with partners and back them with new resources. The HSP was leading on the development of the LAA.

The Chief Executive added that the HSP Summit Meeting with partners and stakeholders had taken place and the outcome of this would be submitted to the Government Office for London by the end of September 2005. The Chief Executive commended those involved with the HSP on their energetic and committed work.

Question 8: How do you see the open budget process working?

The Leader responded that the commitment of the Council to the effectiveness of the process was important. The new initiative had been well-received locally and nationally, and the Leader looked forward to open involvement and participation with stakeholders. The process presented an opportunity for real dialogue with the local community.

The Chief Executive added that the open budget process would run alongside internal budget processes. A greater emphasis would be put on value for money. The central event in the process would be the Assembly which was being planned for 23 October 2005. A discussion document would be produced giving key information about Council policy and spending levels and this would inform both the Assembly and other

stakeholders. The process would enable the Council to receive improved feedback to inform Members of what the public felt were spending priorities.

321. **Question and Answer Session with the Leader and the Chief Executive:**
The Chair invited Members to ask confidential questions, which were answered by the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 6.30 pm, closed at 7.45 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR JEAN LAMMIMAN
Chair