
REPORT OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

(SPECIAL) MEETING HELD ON 12 JUNE 2007

Chairman: * Councillor Stanley Sheinwald

Councillors: * B E Gate * Paul Scott (1)
 * Mitzi Green * Anthony Seymour
 * Barry Macleod-Cullinane * Navin Shah (4)
 * Julia Merison (1) * Yogesh Teli (4)
 * Phillip O'Dell (2) * Mark Versallion

* Denotes Member present
 (1), (2) and (4) Denote category of Reserve Members

[Note: Councillors Chris Mote and David Ashton, having been invited to the meeting in their capacity as Leader and Deputy Leader respectively, also attended this meeting to speak on the item indicated at Minute 145 below. They also participated in the discussions relating to Minutes 146 and 148 below].

PART I - RECOMMENDATIONS - NIL
PART II - MINUTES
139. 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 Mrs Myra Michael	Councillor Yogesh Teli
Councillor Dinesh Solanki	Councillor Julia Merison
Councillor Jerry Miles	Councillor Philip O'Dell
Councillor Mrs Rekha Shah	Councillor Navin Shah
Councillor Christopher Noyce	Councillor Paul Scott

140. Declarations of Interest:

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:-

Agenda Item 7 – Question and Answer Session with the Leader, the Deputy Leader and the Chief Executive

The following Members indicated personal interests set out below and remained in the room to ask questions, respond to questions and listen to the responses:-

- (i) Councillor Mitzi Green stated that her relative was in receipt of disability benefit.
- (ii) Councillor Julia Merison stated that her son, who suffered from a handicap, received support from the Council.
- (iii) Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane stated that his sister taught at a school in Harrow.
- (iv) Councillor Chris Mote, who was not a Member of this Committee, stated that his brother was in receipt of disability benefit and that his wife, who was also a Councillor, taught at a school in Harrow.

141. Arrangement of Agenda:

Members referred to the tabled report on the Draft Corporate Plan 2007/10, which they considered to be inappropriate to admit late to the agenda. Some Members felt that late reports, a systematic problem in Harrow, neutralised any views they might have wished to make.

An officer explained why the report had not been available earlier and stated that the Cabinet on 21 June 2007 would have to consider the Plan in order to meet the statutory deadline of 30 June 2007 for the publication of the Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP), which was an element of the Corporate Plan.

The Chief Executive empathised with Members' comments and spoke about the need to plan ahead. He undertook to take this message back to his management team.

Members agreed to defer consideration of the report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's July 2007 meeting and refer their comments to the July Council meeting, which would approve the Plan.

RESOLVED: That (1) the Draft Corporate Plan 2007/10 be deferred to the July 2007 meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee;

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

142. **Minutes:**

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the ordinary meeting held on 24 April 2007 and the special meeting held on 14 May 2007 be deferred until the next ordinary meeting of the Committee.

143. **Deputations:**

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

144. **Membership of Call-In Sub-Committee (Education):**

RESOLVED: That the revised membership of the Call-In Sub-Committee (Education), as set out on page 1 of the agenda, be agreed.

145. **Question and Answer Session with the Leader, the Deputy Leader and the Chief Executive:**

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman welcomed the Leader, the Deputy Leader and the Chief Executive to the meeting. He stated that the Committee looked forward to hearing the experiences of the Leader and Deputy Leader during their first year in administration and from the Chief Executive on his impressions of Harrow and how the Council needed to improve. Questions had been arranged under eight themes: Finance, Recycling, Scrutiny, Olympics, Town Centre, Congestion, Planning and Improving Harrow.

Before inviting Members of the Committee to ask questions, the Chairman reminded them that the spirit of Scrutiny was to hold a robust question and answer session in a non-partisan environment. Additionally, Members should question the political and officer leadership of the Council about activity and priorities for the future.

Prior to receiving questions, the Leader and the Deputy Leader spoke about their aspirations for the Council and the range of measures already in place to improve the Council. They spoke about the financial challenges facing the Council and the difficulties they had faced in their first year in administration, which had resulted in some unpalatable decisions. The Leader and the Deputy Leader welcomed Scrutiny's contributions in improving the services provided by the Council.

The Chief Executive outlined non-political challenges facing the Council. He identified areas where improvements were necessary and congratulated Harrow on the innovative work it had undertaken. There was untapped potential in Harrow and specific measures were needed to ensure a 'can do' culture. The Chief Executive outlined his ambitions for the Council and explained how he intended to build on Harrow's infrastructure and foundations.

Members were invited to put their questions to the Leader, the Deputy Leader and the Chief Executive under the various themes set out below. Members also asked supplemental questions, which were duly answered.

FINANCE

In response to questions, the Leader and the Deputy Leader, together with the Chief Executive, briefed Members on the challenging financial situation facing the Council. Members were informed that:-

- The grant settlement for Harrow was low when compared with that received by other outer London boroughs – a differential of £76 per head on the revenue support grant alone. When coupled with the low level of reserves currently held by the Council, it did not provide flexibility to manoeuvre.

- The administration would focus on the provision of services to the needy and would evaluate the impact of the projected savings. It would welcome suggestions from Scrutiny on how savings could be achieved with minimum impact on services.
- The transferring of costs by the local PCTs continued to exacerbate the challenging financial situation and 'uncomfortable' decisions would have to be made by the Council. Incremental savings were easier to achieve.
- When setting its budget, the administration had listened to its partners and stakeholders, particularly the voluntary sector. As a result, adjustments to the budget had been made. Lessons had been learnt and consultations improved. The grant giving function of the Council would be reviewed and both parties (the Council and the Voluntary Sector) would work together on the proposal. A reduction of £100k in scrutiny's budget had not impacted on the staffing support provided to scrutiny. The robustness of a re-modelled scrutiny would have to be assessed. The situation on call-in was being investigated.
- The Prosperity Action Teams (PATs) were not a waste of resources in the current challenging financial situation. They were an excellent example of how decisions could be devolved to a more local level. In fact, the Local Government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' recommended such initiatives.
- The capital cost of re-opening Wealdstone High Street was £650k. The re-opening would help regenerate the High Street and make it attractive to investments. Transport for London's (TfL's) decision on the proposal was awaited. It would be appropriate to carry out consultations thereafter.
- The new organisational structure would lay down the foundations for improved performance and help improve efficiency. Measures that would increase productivity and change the culture of the organisation would be introduced. Joined-up working and innovation ought to pervade the organisation with priorities identified.
- Only those assets, which were surplus to requirements and costly to refurbish, would be sold to replenish the Council's capital base. There was no programme to dispose of all assets.
- Subject to the provisions in the Gambling Act, the introduction of a local lottery would be explored; the money would make a contribution to the Council's capital budget and would be ring-fenced for specific measures only.

RECYCLING

The Leader and the Deputy Leader responded to questions and provided figures on recycled waste, the number of contaminated bins and the steps being taken to reach the recycling targets set by the Government. It was not intended to introduce a 'carrot and stick' approach in Harrow. They acknowledged that the newly introduced systems had caused problems but that the systems had now bedded-in and the blue bins in particular were very popular. The use of plastic sacks instead of wheelie bins had been discounted for environmental reasons. It was intended to collect recyclables from flats and the challenge of collecting such waste from businesses would be explored.

Information on how recycled material collected was measured was provided to Members. It was noted that the bins were user-friendly, including for the visually impaired.

The Deputy Leader undertook to respond to specific queries on recycling raised during the course of the meeting.

SCRUTINY

The Chief Executive responded to Members' questions on the transparency and effectiveness of scrutiny in Harrow. He stated that it was premature to respond on its effectiveness as he had only recently joined Harrow. However, the core function of scrutiny was to provide a 'check and balance' on the Executive; a policing and an advisory role. Scrutiny ought to reflect the concerns of the community rather than those solely of the Council and it should bring partners together in a constructive way. It had a conciliatory role to play, to be inclusive and add value to processes.

The Leader stated that scrutiny should develop new policies for the Council and that the Cabinet would make such requests. He gave examples of which reviews carried out by scrutiny had been helpful and those that had been interesting but not relevant to the work of the Council. Given the limited resources available to scrutiny, it was important to use these resources constructively for the benefit of the Council and its residents.

OLYMPICS

In response to questions on the infrastructure and how Harrow could contribute towards the 2012 Olympics, the Leader briefed Members on the work carried out, to date, by the Olympic Task Force. His ambition was to build 3 leisure centres in Harrow and that those with the potential for an Olympic training status should be in operation by 2010. An integrated approach was required. The aim would be for leisure centres to be self-financing and provide training facilities for Harrow's youth who currently had to find such facilities outside Harrow. Scrutiny would be involved from the outset. A Scrutiny Member suggested a Challenge Panel on the provision of Olympic size swimming pools.

TOWN CENTRE

Members posed questions on the yield on properties in the Town Centre, empty retail units and the piecemeal re-development. In response, the Deputy Leader stated that:-

- the retail sector was being encouraged to invest in the Town Centre;
- an assessment of the yield on properties owned by the Council had been undertaken;
- the proposals for the provision of art facilities at Gayton Road could not be considered to be a piecemeal approach. It would compliment the administration's holistic vision for the Town Centre.

The Chief Executive stated that the Town Centre appeared dated and lacked distinctiveness. He would be personally involved in its development.

In terms of empty outlets, the Town Centre had a low vacancy rate and long-term vacancy rates were low. However, competition from other centres meant that this position was unlikely to be maintained without substantial modernisation. The Chief Executive agreed that a holistic approach was required and made suggestions for long-term improvements. The Council would facilitate the development of the Town Centre by encouraging businesses and freeholders to invest.

CONGESTION

Members asked what progress had been made "getting Harrow moving". In response, the Leader identified projects that would help reduce congestion in Harrow. He referred to the following projects:- provision of parking in Stanmore as a result of the new Wembley Stadium and the 2012 Olympics; opening Wealdstone High Street to through traffic and the rephrasing of the traffic signals.

PLANNING – BRIEFING ARRANGEMENTS

The Leader acknowledged that a resolution on this matter was required. He had discussed the matter with the Chief Executive.

IMPROVING HARROW

A Member requested clarification on the over-arching vision of the administration for Harrow. The Leader stated that the wider vision was set out in the Corporate Plan 2007-10 and was encapsulated as a 'Cosmopolitan, Confident and Cohesive' Harrow.

Conclusion

The Chairman thanked the Leader, the Deputy Leader and the Chief Executive for their attendance and responses.

146. **Corporate Governance:**

The Corporate Director of Finance introduced a report, which provided an update on a range of Corporate Governance matters and included an action plan for 2007/08. She responded to a number of questions from Members as follows:-

- The CIPFA/SOLACE framework was not mandatory and was intended to develop best practice in local government. In terms of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), there was an expectation that the CIPFA/SOLACE framework was adopted.
- The intention behind the value for money framework was to understand how the Council fared against its competitors and to take action to improve.
- The Communications Strategy, central to the CPA rating, had been carried forward from 2006/07 and would be presented to the Cabinet following a review conducted by Westminster recently.
- In order to manage risks, effective governance arrangements with Partners were required and it was important to manage our relationship with stakeholders.
- Training would be provided to staff at all levels.

The Committee thanked the Director for the corporate governance arrangements she had put in place.

RESOLVED: To note the progress made in 2006/07 and approve the action plans for 2007/08.

147. **Review of First Year of Partnership with Accord MP:**

An officer introduced a report of the Director of People, Performance and Policy, which outlined the proposal for a review of the lessons to be learnt from the first year of partnership with Accord MP in the delivery of public realm infrastructure services. She responded to questions and informed Members that the Cabinet had made the request for a review.

In noting the request for a review, Members were of the view that it ought to be the purview of the prospective Performance and Management Scrutiny Sub-Committee, which had been proposed as part of the reconfiguration of scrutiny. On the assumption that the Sub-Committee would be established by the July 2007 Overview and Scrutiny Committee, a meeting could be convened at the end of July. A Member suggested a light touch review with an established time frame.

The Chief Executive recommended a review of the 1-year partnership with Accord MP. He stated that the partnership was unique and that the lessons learnt could be applied to future projects for the benefit of the Council. A Member echoed these sentiments and suggested that there was a need to take a strategic view on this matter, which could have an impact on the Council's future CPA rating.

RESOLVED: That (1) a review of the Council's partnership for public realm infrastructure services be undertaken by the prospective Performance and Management Scrutiny Sub-Committee at its meeting to be set up at the end of July 2007;

(2) it be noted that the membership of the review group to undertake this project should not be restricted to Members of Scrutiny Committees only.

148. **Extension and Termination of the Meeting:**

In accordance with the provisions of Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 6.7(ii)(b), it was

RESOLVED: (1) At 10.00 pm to continue until 10.15 pm;

(2) at 10.15 pm to continue until 10.30 pm.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.35 pm, closed at 10.25 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR STANLEY SHEINWALD
Chairman