
REPORT OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

(SPECIAL) MEETING HELD ON 10 JUNE 2008

Chairman:	* Councillor Stanley Sheinwald	
Councillors:	* B E Gate * Mitzi Green * Manji Kara * Ashok Kulkarni (2) * Jerry Miles * Mrs Vina Mithani	* Janet Mote * Mrs Rekha Shah (4) * Dinesh Solanki * Yogesh Teli * Mark Versallion
Voting	(Voluntary Aided)	(Parent Governors)
Co-opted:	† Mrs J Rammelt Reverend P Reece	* Mr R Chauhan † Mrs D Speel

* Denotes Member present
(2) and (4) Denote category of Reserve Members
† Denotes apologies received

[Note: Councillor David Ashton also attended this meeting to speak on the item indicated at Minute 337 below].

PART I - RECOMMENDATIONS
RECOMMENDATION I - Committee Terms of Reference

The Committee considered the report of the Director of Legal and Governance Services, which proposed changes to the existing terms of reference of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to reflect its role as the body holding the responsibility for the Borough's statutory health scrutiny function since its reconfiguration. It also recognised the duty of scrutiny in addressing local government and local crime and disorder matters, as part of the government's drive for 'responsive services and empowered communities'. These matters were addressed in the Health and Social Care Act 2001, Police and Justice Act 2006 and Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

In considering the report, the Committee was informed that the terms of reference would be further revisited at a future date, as part of the review of the reconfiguration. The proposals before the Committee were to ensure that arrangements were in place to meet the provisions in the Acts.

Resolved to RECOMMEND: (to Council)

That the proposed amendments to the terms of reference of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as set out in bold text at Appendix 1 to these minutes, be approved.

PART II - MINUTES331. **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 Margaret Davine	Councillor Rekha Shah
Councillor Anthony Seymour	Councillor Ashok Kulkarni

332. **Declarations of Interest:**

RESOLVED: To note that there were no declarations of interests made by Members in relation to the business transacted at this meeting.

333. **Arrangement of Agenda:**

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

334. **Minutes:**

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 April 2008 and the special meetings held on 12 May 2008 be deferred until the next ordinary meeting of the Committee.

335. **Deputations:**

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

336. **Committee Terms of Reference:**
(See Recommendation I)337. **Question and Answer Session with the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive:**

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman welcomed the Leader of the Council to his first meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as Leader. He also welcomed the Chief Executive to the meeting, and stated that the Committee looked forward to hearing from the new Leader and the Chief Executive about their experiences and aspirations for the Council.

The Chairman took this opportunity to welcome a new Member of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to her first Question and Answer Session with the Leader and the Chief Executive. He emphasised that the Session was intended to question the political and officer leadership of the Council about activity and priorities during the last year(s) and on future issues. Additionally, the spirit of scrutiny was to hold a robust question and answer session but to do so in a non-partisan environment.

It was noted that the Leader and Chief Executive had been advised of the following subject areas but not of any specific issues, other than where there had been a request for specific information. The Chairman then invited the Leader and Chief Executive to make introductory comments prior to the asking of specific questions under the following themes:-

- the Council's Corporate Assessment Score
- the IDeA Peer Review
- resident satisfaction
- Council budget.

Introductory comments by the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive

The Leader of the Council stated that one of his aspirations was to improve customer satisfaction levels and the attitude of the Council towards its residents who were the main customers of the Council. It was important that communication from the Council to its residents was good, that residents were treated with respect and that they enjoyed their experience when dealing with the Council.

The Chief Executive referred to his 9-point Plan, which had laid down the foundations for the organisation to realise its vision of becoming an 'excellent' authority. Progress was being made on each of the elements of the Plan. He intended to accelerate

improvements within the Council with a view to achieving results in all aspects of the Council's work.

The Committee was informed that the structures to reflect the needs and priorities of the organisation and ensure excellence in the eyes of the customer had been re-visited. As a result, a number of changes had been proposed and agreed by Cabinet. A key ingredient of the change to drive the organisation forward and focus on the customer had been the creation of an Assistant Chief Executive with the post holder reporting directly to the Chief Executive. The Assistant Chief Executive would be responsible for managing relationships with the Council's partners and enhancing and building on their capacity.

The Chief Executive stated that, in addition, a 'champion' for the environment was important to the organisation and as a result, an appointment had been made to the post of the Divisional Director of Environment.

The reputation of the Council was also fundamental to how the organisation was perceived and, as a result, he had held meetings with various interested parties, including the regulators, with a view to demonstrating the Council's strong leadership and ambition.

In summary, the Council had stability, foundations were in place, acceleration was necessary to bring about further changes quickly and there was a need to ensure a positive customer experience.

Members were invited to put their questions to the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive under the various themes mentioned above and on their introductory comments.

9-point Plan

In responding to questions on the 9-point plan and the need for committed and efficient managers to allow the sentiments of the Plan to permeate through the organisation, the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council stated that:-

- significant progress had been made towards stabilising the Council's finances, work was being done to ensure that the organisation had staff with the right skills and expertise to ensure that the Council 'got the most out of people', cultural change was essential as there was need to move away from the traditional and hierarchical nature of the organisation where innovation and taking risks had been lacking;
- both internal and external communication had been improved to ensure that residents and staff were kept informed. Various processes had been established to ensure effective communication;
- there had been step changes to services, and that the 9-point Plan was being delivered although some aspects of the Plan had been delayed;
- it was essential that Members were kept informed of any delays in established programmes;
- a 42% customer satisfaction level was low and it was intended to improve this by ensuring that customer went away with a good impression of the Council. Therefore a post of Customer Care Champion was intended and whose role would be to set minimum standards when dealing with queries, deliver services through the use of technology and ensure that the Members, who were the interface between the Council and its residents, were 'armed' with the information to respond effectively and in a positive manner. It was important to ensure that residents and Members were not ignored by staff;
- a factor that contributed to the perception that the public had of the Council was the visible improvements on their 'doorstep'. To achieve this, it was essential that the Council's finances were stable so that spend on public facing services could be realised and the reserves held by the Council increased. Recently £10m of efficiency savings had been spent on improving key front line services;
- flagship actions were determined by the administration and the goals against which the administration intended to deliver and to be appraised against. The 9-point Plan was a series of steps that the organisation needed to have in place to improve, irrespective of the administration in control, and would

underpin the work of the Council now as well as that of any future administration.

Cultural Change

The Chief Executive responded to a question on the resistance that he was meeting in bringing about a cultural change in the organisation. He replied as follows:-

- the organisation had accepted that to achieve its vision, the values and behaviour needed improving. As a result, an event, to be fronted by the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive, would take place on 20 June 2008 to articulate this message to staff. Resistance to change was a natural behaviour in organisations going through change, and hierarchical structures were seen as a 'comfort' by some staff;
- cultural change was a long-term process and needed to be demonstrated by actions;
- Middle Managers were a critical part of the organisation and, when used in the 'correct way', would provide considerable benefits for the Council and implement the changes needed for a successful organisation. It appeared that due to historical reasons, ideas and innovations from staff at various levels, particularly from front line staff, had been somewhat stifled. Expectations and investment in staff needed to be raised and any blockages would be removed.

In response to specific questions the following replies were given:

Achievements

The Chief Executive spoke about his journey to date and that there was a great deal of potential in the Council that needed to be unleashed. Accelerating progress was key, and that it was intended to put Harrow on the map by seeking an award during 2009, as the most improved Council. The Chief Executive stated that his objective was to achieve a 3-star Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) rating by autumn 2009. One of the noticeable changes that the CAA would glean was the improved partnership working arrangements between the Council and its partners.

Staffing

Although some staff turnover was good for any organisation, the turnover of staff in Harrow was above the London average. The Chief Executive stated that he intended to address this situation. The 9-point Plan also focused on staff, their development and career progression. Investment in staff was essential to allow them to realise their full potential whilst achieving a work/life balance. Harrow Council ought to be seen as an 'employer of choice' rather than a place for a 'quiet life'. The Council was moving in the right direction and attracting the 'right' people.

The Chief Executive acknowledged that sickness levels were high and that it was of concern that some managers were not aware of the whereabouts of their staff. He was personally leading on this issue and, as a first step, recording of absence had been improved. He reiterated proposals for a 'carrot and stick' approach and work/life balance. The Chief Executive assured Members that action would be taken where staff were not meeting expectations and distanced themselves from his message and a common desire to succeed.

The Chief Executive gave assurance that the suggestions from a recent Scrutiny Challenge Panel on the Council's Improvement Programme would be taken forward. He had appreciated the value of the process, input and ideas put forward. It would be helpful for the scrutiny to monitor the progress made in this area.

Communication

The Chief Executive was disappointed that the issue of improved communication, one of the components of his 9-step Plan, had not been met in an instance indicated by a Member at the meeting. He was of the view that established protocol(s) ought to work effectively. In addition, it was important that that information supplied was not selective. Effective communication was vital to allow Members to perform their role. He would ensure that checks and balances existed in the organisation.

In response to additional comments from Members in this regard, the Chief Executive accepted that facts ought to be checked before press releases were issued so that they were not misleading. Due processes ought to be followed and protocols adhered to.

Risk to Budget

The Leader of the Council stated that the economy, having been battered by the credit crunch, wage inflation, care packages/social needs of adults and children would pose

the biggest risks to the budget. Other areas, such as a gradual decline in Council Tax collection rate and the impact on land charges as a result of the problems in the property market, would also impact adversely on the budget. The reserves held by the Council were still low.

The Chief Executive stated that the reserves held by the Council were an important factor in the budget, which was demand-led and affected by various factors, such as cost shunting between the Council and its health partner(s), interest rates and pay awards. The Council started from a low base and received a poor settlement from the government, although the Council's apportionment in relation to freedom passes would improve the budget situation.

Post Office Closures

The Leader of the Council confirmed that discussions had been held with Post Offices Ltd with a view to the Council taking over the running of a sub-post office in Harrow, as part of the post office closure programme. He identified the problems associated with such a venture and the need to take account of the footfall. Essex County Council was the most advanced in this regard. However, there were a number of issues that Harrow would need to consider before any decisions were taken. The Council might explore a joint venture in this regard.

Independence of Scrutiny

In response to a question about the independence of scrutiny, particularly in relation to its proposed review of the Town Centre, the Chief Executive stated that scrutiny contributed to policy development and was an advocate for residents. The Council valued scrutiny but stressed that there was always room for improvement; scrutiny would be part of the remit of the Assistant Chief Executive when appointed.

The Chief Executive stated that scrutiny had a right to look at all processes but it was essential that there was an established protocol when agreeing the terms of reference of all proposed reviews. It was essential that the reviews were constructive.

The Leader of the Council agreed with the sentiments expressed by the Chief Executive and added that the Executive wanted a positive 'muscular' relationship with scrutiny, which provided valuable guidance.

When questioned about the lack of desire of officers to submit reports to scrutiny, the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive acknowledged that there was an issue about Member/officer relationship. Whilst both had different roles, the aims were the same - an appreciation of a common desire to be successful. However, this desire did not appear to permeate through the organisation. A softer and supportive approach of managing staff was being tested across the organisation. For example, where Directorates were under budget, their budget was not reduced but each was being allowed to spend the money on other projects for staff. All staff would be appraised and invested in. However, should such methods fail to achieve results, other appropriate action would follow.

In order to be successful, the organisation needed to be 'singing from the same hymn sheet'. The Corporate Directors had been charged with managing their Directorates and their visibility was important. It was essential that their roles transcended boundaries, and good progress was being made in this area. The Chief Executive confirmed that he had the right team to bring about the changes that were needed for the benefit of the organisation.

The Leader of the Council stated that, similarly, the performance of the Portfolio Holders would also be monitored and reviewed.

In relation to a question from the Chairman about the respect that was given to scrutiny, the Chief Executive undertook to discuss this concern further and look at ways of improving this negative view. He agreed that the attitude of officers needed to be addressed. The Leader of the Council stated that officers and Members should not see scrutiny as a threat but rather a positive process that added value, as the Executive was not the oracle of all answers. Defensive attitudes and lack of respect needed to be addressed.

The Chief Executive stated that scrutiny ought not be used for political purposes by Members.

Youth

The Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive responded to questions on how the Council intended to engage with the Borough's young people. It was noted that the young people of Harrow had been involved in designing for the Council and Youth

Councils/Conferences. They both felt that the Council needed to listen to the youth, and the approach of having role models was good and constructive. It was essential that young people were seen as part of the solution rather than the problem. It was important to know what young people wanted, and the involvement of schools and parents was crucial.

It was suggested by a Member that the Council ought to set up a continuing dialogue with the young people rather than invite them to meetings only to hear their views.

Vending Machines

In response to a question about the growing problem of obesity in Harrow, the recent review carried out by scrutiny in this regard and its compatibility with the proposed introduction of vending machines in Council buildings, the Chief Executive stated that the contents of the vending machine, which the Council intended to install in several of its buildings, as a revenue earner, would be sensibly chosen. It was not intended to install these in schools, as had been reported.

The Leader of the Council stated that various items would be included and 'choice' would be given to customers.

Service Block Assessment

In acknowledging that only one service block – Children and Young People – had moved up from a score of 2 in 2006 to 3 in 2007, the Chief Executive stated that:-

- ambitious targets had been set for key service areas in this regard;
- he was confident that improvements in Children and Young People would be replicated in other service areas;
- a stable financial situation was essential together with staff who possessed the 'right' skills. It was essential to have an environment where staff were valued, moral was improved and there was a move from the 'blame' culture that currently existed;
- the Transformation Programme needed to 'bed-in' for improvements to be realised.

Summary

The Chairman thanked the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive for attending the meeting to answer questions. He thanked all Members for their contributions.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.33 pm, closed at 9.34 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR STANLEY SHEINWALD
Chairman

APPENDIX 1OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEEOVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – Terms of Reference

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has the following power and duties:

1. To oversee a more targeted and proportionate work programme that can help secured service improvement through in depth investigation of poor performance and the development of an effective strategy/policy framework for the council and partners
2. To have general oversight of the council's scrutiny function;
3. To support the executive's policy development function and the long-term strategic direction of the borough;
4. To anticipate policy changes and determine their potential impact on residents;
5. To consider the council and partners strategic approach to service delivery;
6. To undertake detailed investigation of service/financial performance in order to recommend policy changes and to commission light touch investigations by the Performance and Finance sub committee;
7. To consider items included in the Forward Plan as appropriate;
8. To consider such urgent items as are appropriate – area scrutiny.
9. To consider Councillor Call for Action in terms of
 - **Local Government Matter (Section 119, LGA 2007)**
 - **Local Crime & Disorder Matter (Section 19, Police & Justice Act 2006)**
10. ***To discharge the functions conferred by Section 21(f) of the Local Government Act 2000 of reviewing and scrutinising, in accordance with regulations under Section 7 of the Health and Social Care Act 2001, matters relating to the planning, provision and operation of health services in Harrow.***
11. ***To scrutinise matters relating to health and public health and to hear the views of local residents, with a view to improving health services, reducing health inequalities and improving the health of local residents.***
12. ***To respond to consultations from local health trusts, Department of Health and any organisation which provides health services outside the local authority's area to inhabitants within it.***