

PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE MINUTES

18 JANUARY 2011

Chair: * Councillor Sue Anderson

Councillors: * Tony Ferrari * Jerry Miles
* Barry Macleod-Cullinane * Sachin Shah

* Denotes Member present

17. Attendance by Reserve Members

RESOLVED: To note that there were no Reserve Members in attendance at this meeting.

18. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that the following interest was declared:

Agenda Item 12 – Project Update – Narrowing the Gap

Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane declared a personal interest in the above item in that his sister was employed as a teacher. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

19. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 September 2010 be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

20. Public Questions, Petitions and Deputations

RESOLVED: To note that no public questions were put, or petitions or deputations received, at this meeting.

21. References from Council and Other Committees/Panels

RESOLVED: To note that there were no references.

RESOLVED ITEMS

22. Chair's Report

The Sub-Committee received a report that set out issues considered by the Chair since the last meeting of the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Sub-Committee.

The Chair advised that the Capital Programme Report, anticipated at this meeting, would now be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 27 January 2011 as part of the committee's work programme report.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

23. Progress on Housing Ambition Plan and Resident Involvement in delivery of the plan

An officer introduced a report which detailed the progress made with delivery of the Housing Ambition Plan (HAP) in relation to asset management and resident involvement.

Officers advised that:

- the HAP was introduced in May 2010 as a consequence of a review of the Housing Service. There were 456 actions identified as an outcome of the survey;
- the aim of the HAP was to be recognised by customers as one of the best Housing Services in London by 2012. Preliminary results from a resident satisfactory survey were positive, indicating a top quartile position. These results suggested that it was possible for the HAP to be achieved before its target of 2012;
- policies being proposed by the coalition Government would radically reform elements of the Housing Service, including welfare benefits and guaranteed tenancies. The impact of the potential measures on local residents would be gauged via resident engagement exercises in 2011;
- the housing repairs and maintenance element of the Property Services Team would now form part of the Asset Management Team as part of the restructure of the service;

- improvements had been made in the area of Health and Safety. Performance Indicators demonstrated a 99.9% compliance rate for gas servicing, a rate that was among the best in the country;
- the Harrow Federation of Tenants' and Residents' Association, the Tenants' and Leaseholders' Consultative Forum (TLCF) and the Housing Improvement Group included freeholders, tenants and home owners, whose involvement was essential in helping to shape the service;
- Cabinet had granted approval to seek the short term procurement of elemental planned maintenance contracts to replace the current Major Works contract with Kier, which was due to expire in June 2011;
- the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) had launched new standards in April 2010 which highlighted a responsibility to increase resident involvement within the borough;
- there were currently 14 active Tenant and Resident Associations (TRA) within Harrow. These Associations, in addition to estate representatives in areas without a TRA, fed into the formal consultative mechanisms for the Council;
- some residents did not feel comfortable engaging with the formal Council procedures. Providing a variety of options for engagement was key. Offering these individuals responsibilities such as becoming a 'Secret Shopper' ensured that their involvement was meaningful at a level they felt comfortable with;
- a Complaints Panel had been established with the purpose of improving the quality of responses by reviewing cases that had been resolved in the past nine months.

In response to questions, officers advised that:

- two managers were in place with a third due to join the Asset Management team in February 2011 as part of the re-structure;
- twenty four members of staff, formerly from the Major and Minor Works Teams, would now form part of the Asset Management Team as part of the re-structure;
- it was intended for the replacement of the planned maintenance contract to be sourced as locally as possible;
- 70% of the total asset survey had been completed. A further tranche was due to start in April with completion in June 2011. A stock condition surveyor was expected to join the Asset Management Team to continue the surveying process;
- lots of parties had shown a desire to feed into the review of the Terms of Reference for TLCF. No decisions had been made;

- an example of a secret shopper would be a resident with a sample script either telephoning or visiting the Council seeking a service. The results would then be given to a resident evaluator to monitor the standard of the service.

The Sub-Committee agreed that the planned scrutiny challenge panel on the subject of resident engagement was not now required.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

24. Budget Holder Forecasting Compliance

Members considered a report of the Corporate Director of Finance which provided an update on the performance of revenue budget holders forecasting on SAP.

An officer advised that:

- compliance rates had significantly increased from rates below 50% to rates ranging between 70 and 100%. This percentage rate and the performance of each directorate would vary each month;
- finance business partners ensured that all areas in each Directorate had been looked at to determine an appropriate risk category. A new measure of robustly challenging management teams on any identified risk areas prior to going to the Corporate Strategy Board was now in place.

Members expressed concern that areas currently highlighted as being in a low risk category could still harbour the potential to have a detrimental impact on the Council's finances. Members reiterated the need to receive accurate data to enable the budget setting process to be as precise as possible.

In response to questions, the officer advised that:

- the possibility of providing details of budget holders not entering forecasts in SAP to the Panel, together with the size of the budget they were responsible for, would be investigated;
- it was hoped the SAP training scheduled for April 2011 would be made mandatory for all budget holders;
- the majority of budget holders performed well using SAP. Capita had reported on good work from managers on finance reports. A profile of managers who had not consistently performed well in using SAP would be identified;
- the finance manager would scrutinise any discrepancies within financial reports. This process of checking reports would prevent any negative impact on forecast budgets;

- an average of the total revenue spend not entered into SAP would be calculated;
- the possibility of revenue figures that were submitted quarterly to Cabinet being presented to Members of the Sub-Committee on a monthly basis, would be looked into.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the report be noted;
- (2) officers seek to identify managers who had not consistently performed well in using SAP;
- (3) the possibility of providing details of budget holders not entering forecasts in SAP to the chair and vice-chairman, together with the size of the budget be investigated;
- (4) the total revenue spend not entered into SAP be calculated and provided to the Chair and Vice-Chairman to determine whether a further report to the sub-committee was required;
- (5) the submission of the revenue figures that were submitted quarterly to Cabinet to Sub-Committee Members on a monthly basis be investigated.

25. Payment to Suppliers

The Sub-Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Finance which provided an update on Harrow's performance in relation to invoice payments to suppliers.

An officer advised that:

- there was a number of reasons why the target for Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI) were not being met. One reason for the delay was due to invoices being sent to other departments such as Highways for example, rather than being sent directly to the Corporate Accounts Payable team to process;
- from December 2010, Corporate Directors received a monthly report providing details of the service areas that did not appear to be following the correct procedures.

In response to questions, the officer advised that:

- at Quarter 3, approximately 29% of invoices had been raised without a purchase order number. Invoices would be held in the system and only processed once all the necessary information was received. The Corporate Strategy Board (CSB) were investigating this matter. The monetary value of the 29% would be calculated;

- the forecast on Quarter 4 would look at the percentage of unpaid invoices;
- approximately 29% of invoices been raised without a purchase order number.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the report be noted;
- (2) the percentage of unpaid invoices from Quarter 4 be provided to the Chair and Vice-Chairman of the Sub-Committee;
- (3) officers calculate the monetary value of the 29% of invoices where the purchase order was raised after the invoice date;
- (4) the Chair and Vice-Chairman decide whether the Sub-Committee should receive a further report on payment of invoices once the requested information had been reviewed;
- (5) once appointed, the new Corporate Director of Finance be requested to meet with Members of the Sub-Committee.

26. Project Update - Narrowing the Gap

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Divisional Director of Children's Services which provided an update on the work to narrow the gap in academic achievement between the highest achieving young people and vulnerable groups.

An officer advised that:

- the performance of Black African pupils had increased at Key Stages 2 and 4, with 45% of pupils achieving five or more A* - C in GCSE's including English and Mathematics;
- the performance of White British pupils eligible for free school meals at Key Stage 4 had also significantly improved over the last two years, with approximately 33% achieving five or more A* - C in GCSEs including English and Mathematics;
- the Weekend School project currently catered for approximately one hundred students for whom English was an additional language. Initial results from the Weekend School project demonstrated that the vast majority of children had made good progress during the 2010 autumn term;
- from the 2008/09 to 2009/10 academic years, the number of permanent exclusions had reduced by 28%. This was a reduction from 47 to 34 permanent exclusions;

- in partnership with Brent, Hillingdon and Hounslow, Children's Services had successfully received funding from London Challenge to begin a project focussing on the achievement of children on Free School Meals. The project commenced in the spring term of 2010;
- as part of the Dads Project, schools targeted dads of children who were underachieving. Results for 2009/10 showed a dramatic improvement in progress for children involved with the Dads Project, with 73% achieving the expected progress compared with 15% on the previous year;
- the Narrowing the Gap initiatives had mostly been funded by the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG). The 2011/12 School Funding Settlement confirmed that as of April 2011 EMAG would cease as a ring fenced grant. The Schools Forum would consider the allocation of this funding as part of the 2011/12 school budgets.

In response to questions, the officer advised that:

- the Narrowing the Gap initiative cost approximately £150,000 to fund, which included staffing costs. This equated to approximately £3,000 per school;
- schools are being encouraged to consider how such initiatives can be continued through the development of the Harrow Schools Improvement Partnership, involving almost all primary schools and two special schools.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

27. Performance Update on National Indicators (NI) used in Children's Social Care Assessments (NI59 and NI60)

An officer introduced a report which provided an update on the action taken to improve performance on initial and core assessment indicators.

The officer advised that:

- due to factors surrounding staffing and budget constraints, it had taken a number of months to improve the performance of the service. However, if current performance was maintained the target for core assessments should be met, with the performance on the new assessment timescale likely to rise to 85%;
- provisional performance data from December 2010 looked positive, suggesting that the remedial actions put in place were taking effect;
- a second unannounced Ofsted inspection of Children's Services social care contact, referral and assessment arrangements had taken place in November 2010. Ofsted had identified a significant number of strengths with no priority actions. The lead inspector had described the child protection practice as 'exemplary'.

- in response to the pressures on the service, an additional £84,000 was allocated during 2010/11 to fund additional social workers.

In response to questions, officers advised that:

- there were between 500 and 700 front door contacts per month, of which approximately 150 became active referrals requiring allocation to a social worker for an assessment to be undertaken. All contacts were screened to gauge the level of risk attached to them however, in some instances the level of risk to a child may not be apparent from scrutinising the referral circumstances alone;
- there were currently nine qualified and registered social workers employed within the Duty & Assessment Team;
- £84,000 was the whole time equivalent salaries for two social workers;
- there were many varied reasons for delays in completing assessments. Occasionally, the quality of the original referral was poor, including gaps or unclear information. The completion of statutory checks with other agencies, such as the police, GP's, school teachers and health visitors, could also be a factor when professionals were unable to contact each other. Social workers also needed to see and communicate with each child on their own, they were also required to interview parents, some of whom may not have lived together at the same address. When children and or their parents required interpreters these had to be arranged. Some families may have avoided the best endeavours of social workers. The combination of all of these factors could result in assessments taking longer to complete;
- it was desirable for a child subject to a Child Protection Plans (CPP) to have the identified risk issues resolved within two years. CPPs that remained in place for a longer period were scrutinised. An approximate average of completed CPP in Harrow was twenty months.

Officers would attempt to see whether any comparisons could be drawn from the impact of the last recession to aid the service.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.55 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR SUE ANDERSON
Chair