

PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE MINUTES

11 JULY 2013

Chairman: * Councillor Tony Ferrari

Councillors: * Husain Akhtar (1) * Graham Henson
* Sue Anderson * Paul Osborn

In attendance: Zarina Khalid Minute 140
(Councillors)

* Denotes Member present
(1) Denotes category of Reserve Member

131. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Reserve Member

Councillor Mano Dharmarajah

Councillor Husain Akhtar

132. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:

Agenda Item 8 – Chair’s Report & Agenda Item 10 – Progress Report on Scrutiny Review of Private rented sector housing in Harrow

Councillor Graham Henson declared a non-pecuniary interest in that he was the former Portfolio Holder for Performance, Customer Services and Corporate Services and had been involved in the Corporate Scorecard and had been a Member of Cabinet when the Housing Strategy had been

approved in 2012. He would remain in the room whilst the matters were considered and voted upon.

133. Appointment of Vice-Chairman

RESOLVED: That Councillor Sue Anderson be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Sub-Committee for the 2013/14 Municipal Year.

134. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the Special meeting held on 4 March 2013 and the meeting of 23 April 2013 be taken as read and signed as correct records.

135. Public Questions, Petitions and References from Council and Other Committees/Panels

RESOLVED: To note that no public questions were put, or petitions or references received.

RESOLVED ITEMS

136. Chair's Report

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

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

137. Revenue and Capital Outturn 2012-13

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Director of Finance and Assurance, which had been previously considered at Cabinet on 20 June 2013. The report set out the Council's revenue and capital outturn position for 2012/13. An officer highlighted the following areas of the report:

- the council's outturn at the end of the year was showing a net under spend of approximately £1m, which was a significant achievement for the Council. This was mainly due to the implementation of a number of spending protocols;
- there were budget pressures as a result of long-term social care, staffing issues, the leisure centre contract and the recyclables contract;
- there were favourable variances in parking income, rental properties, and investment income;
- approximately £1m contribution had been made to the Insurance provision, which had not been budgeted for;

- there was a £0.4m surplus in the Housing Revenue Account, which was lower than budgeted for and the HRA balance stood at £3.18m;
- there had been a total spend of £31.8m in the Capital Programme and £65m in the revised Programme. There was a minor under spend of £2.4m in the Capital programme due to some slippage in the School Expansion programme, IT projects and projects in the Environment and Enterprise Directorate. This level of under spend was not uncommon and was due to delays in the granting of planning consent and in the area of procurement.

A Member stated that some aspects of the report did not contain sufficiently detailed information, for example, the figures relating to Whitmore school sports pitch were not easy to understand. The officer advised that the Capital monitoring figures highlighted changes that had occurred in quarter 4. The carry forward figures were from 2011/12 and would not show up in the original budget figures. The Capital Programme was agreed at the February Cabinet meeting each year, whereas the carry forwards were approved at year end. The officer undertook to provide Members with more detailed information regarding carry forwards from quarter one.

A Member stated that the figures relating to the Neighbourhood Investment Scheme (NIS) erroneously showed an under spend because projects funded by the NIS often took some time to complete and for funds to be disbursed. In his view, the monies had been spent but this was not reflected in the data. The officer advised that both revenue and capital expenditure were accounted for on an accruals basis and if works were carried out, then the expenditure is accrued and would have been included in the figures.

A Member sought clarification as to the difference between slippage and under spends and why these figures were listed separately in the Capital Monitoring data. For example, CCTV and Car parks were listed as zero in the slippage column and as 715 in the under spend column, furthermore, the commentary relating to these items contradicted the figures listed. The officer accepted that the commentary was at odds with the figures and would investigate and provide details to members.

A Member expressed the view that Members needed a better understanding of finance issues and their impact on performance. The Chairman requested that, in the future, officers should give greater consideration to how financial data was presented to Members of the Sub-Committee, and requested that live data regarding actual expenditure in relation to the NIS be provided to Members.

The Chairman requested information as to the actual level of the shortfall arising from social care, parking and recycling and whether these had been incorporated into the current year's budget. An officer advised that this was due to the ongoing issue of recruitment and retention of staff and the use of temporary agency staff in social care. The targets set for Recyclables had been high and had not been achieved. The officer undertook to advise Members whether these pressures had been addressed in the 2013/14

MTFS. There were no budget pressures on parking income as it had exceeded targets set.

A Member questioned why and how the overspend of £0.162m in the Children and Families Directorate was offset by an under spend in the Troubled Families ringfenced grant of £0.408m. An officer advised that this had been possible by carrying forward the ring fenced grant to 2013/14.

The Chairman queried why the £31m under spend in relation to building projects was deemed to be a common occurrence. He added that in his view, 60% of the Capital budget remaining unspent in the year it was allocated was an unacceptably high figure. The officer advised that there had been a number of issues in relation to the procurement activity. There were also additional delays due to the granting of planning permission for these projects and delays with IT projects. The Chairman stated that, in his view, this situation was indicative of a high level of error in the Capital forecasting process. A Member added that the Sub-Committee's comments regarding this matter should be referred back to the Improvement Boards, which were responsible for providing the forecasting data.

A Member stated that he was concerned that large sums of money would be carried forward in 2013/14 and that officers and Members might lose sight of these amounts. An officer stated that she would take on board Members' feedback regarding the format and content of the Revenue and Capital Outturn report when drafting future reports.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

138. Progress Report on Scrutiny Review of Private rented sector housing in Harrow

The Sub-Committee received a report which provided an update on progress of the recommendations made in the scrutiny review of private rented sector housing in Harrow in July 2012, and which had been incorporated in full in the Private Sector Housing Strategy approved by Cabinet on 11 April 2013.

An officer highlighted the following areas of the report:

- the Private Rented Sector Housing Strategy focused on improving quality and standards and partnership working with private landlords;
- twice as many people lived in private rented accommodation than in social housing in Harrow. In March 2013, there were 69 families in bed and breakfast (B&B) and this figure was rising;
- the Council had increased its stock of affordable homes and had exceeded targets set in this area;
- key areas of the Private Rented Sector Housing Strategy Action Plan were as follows:

1. increasing the supply of properties through the Help2Let Scheme, which was a social letting agency, providing cash incentives for landlords and investigating other sources of private rented accommodation;
 2. improving standards through promotion of the London Landlord Scheme, under which 120 landlords had received training to date;
 3. accessing additional grant funding from the Greater London Authority (GLA) through a successful West London Housing Partnership bid and the provision of information and advice sessions for tenants;
- the impact of new proposals such as selective licensing, would need to consider the potential impact on supply in the lower quartile of the private rented sector and the knock on impact this may have on homelessness demand;
 - inspection of B&B premises would be undertaken by the Environmental Health team when they had capacity;
 - landlords were being encouraged to increase the length of tenancies, which would offer greater security to tenants;
 - provision of additional support to vulnerable households and the 300 or so families which had been identified as likely to be adversely affected by the benefits cap;
 - the implementation of a number of energy efficiency measures such as the reduction of CO2 emissions in all housing tenures;
 - increased partnership working with landlords, including regular meetings of landlord forums.

A Member praised the work of Housing Services in achieving the outcomes set out in the report. An officer confirmed that Housing officers were liaising with officers in Housing Benefit.

A Member asked whether Harrow residents were accommodated in B&Bs outside Harrow. The officer responded that a few families had been placed in B&Bs in the Midlands and Bradford, and added that these were generally agreed by mutual agreement with the tenant. The Council also had some temporary accommodation in other parts of London. The Members asked whether, in the case of vulnerable families, Housing Services liaised with the local authority and other agencies where the temporary accommodation was located. The officer advised that, where appropriate, Housing Services liaised with Children and Families in Harrow to see if a move out of Harrow was appropriate, and monitored the re-settlement process for families that moved. However, as there was competition between local authorities for landlords,

officers tended not to advise local authorities about these families until after they had moved.

A Member stated that Newham Council had begun a new scheme to license all private landlords and asked if this measure was likely to be implemented in Harrow. An officer advised that he was unclear whether this would be possible under law and that Harrow's policy was to work in partnership with landlords.

A Member sought clarification as to the average length of stay at B&B accommodation and whether there was any data related to this. An officer advised that there was data available for those in B&B accommodation for longer than six weeks. There were twenty-eight families who had been in B&B accommodation for approximately three to four months and larger families tended to have longer stays. He added that, Harrow was a popular area to live in and the Council was in competition with neighbouring boroughs such as Brent and Ealing for private rented sector housing, which was in limited supply. Harrow was bidding for additional funding which, if granted, would help to reduce the number and length of those in long-term stays at B&Bs.

A Member questioned the intention to identify long-term empty properties where enforcement action in the form of compulsory purchase orders might be taken under the 2004 Housing Act. An officer stated that there were over fifty long term empties, but only a few would go forward for possible compulsory purchase. Several of these properties had been vandalised. He added that there would need to be a public enquiry and agreement by the Secretary of State before a compulsory purchase order could go ahead.

A Member asked whether there was any data regarding complaints from tenants, how these were dealt with and resolved, and any data relating to the impact of small grants to landlords. The officer advised that data relating to complaints from tenants related mostly to repairs, the progress of which were tracked. Officers tended to work with landlords to resolve any issues relating to general repairs and with the Environmental Health and the Enforcement teams on health and safety related repairs. Officers also periodically carried out satisfaction surveys with tenants, who, on the whole were satisfied.

Members voiced concern regarding the situation of those in B&B accommodation once the benefits cap was implemented and requested that this issue be reinstated on the Scrutiny watch list.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

139. Children and Families Performance

RESOLVED: In accordance with Committee Procedure Rule 4.1.1 – Part 4B of the Constitution, the Sub-Committee agreed that the following Member could speak at the meeting:

Councillor Zarina Khalid, Portfolio Holder for Children, Schools and Families.

The Sub-Committee received a report which set out the performance of the Children and Families Directorate for 2012/13.

The Portfolio Holder for Children, Schools and Families stated that she had recently engaged in wide-ranging discussions with officers from the Directorate. The Directorate had made good progress recently but still had a number of challenges, mainly related to workforce issues, to deal with.

The Corporate Director of Children and Families stated that following the findings of the Ofsted inspection of the Directorate in May 2012, an improvement plan had been implemented and completed. A new improvement plan, which arose from self-evaluation, quality assurance activities and service improvement priorities, was now in place.

The Ofsted inspection under the new framework had awarded 'Good' status to only three Children's Services in the UK, with 56% awarded 'Adequate' status and 33% awarded 'Inadequate' status. The Directorate had made significant progress against the findings and recommendations of the inspection and had identified areas where more remained to be done. She added that Ofsted had recently amended its inspection framework to be more rigorous and that an additional inspection of the service could take place at any time, and was likely in the Autumn of 2013.

The Corporate Director made the following additional points:

- Children and Families (C&F) Management Team had invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to undertake a peer review of Harrow's safeguarding arrangements. The review had identified areas where significant improvement had been achieved;
- a number of other reviews had been carried out over the past twelve months. These had resulted in the implementation of a number of measures and fed into the overarching Child's Journey improvement plan;
- the Directorate may be undergoing several concurrent inspections of its schools, children's centres and other settings at any one time;
- Harrow schools that had contracted the services of the Harrow Schools Improvement Service had benefited from this service;
- recruitment and retention of social workers continued to be an area of concern, with an increased number of posts filled by agency staff. There was generally a shortage of social care workers in London. An external human resources specialist project manager had been recruited and the service aimed to recruit 11 new social workers, advanced practitioners and a new service manager;
- the role of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board had been strengthened and was taking a multi-agency approach in dealing with safeguarding;

- the Early Intervention Service had a sizeable caseload, which was increasing and there had been a 154% increase in the number of referrals in April 2013 compared with April 2012;
- with regard to Children Looked After (CLAs), Harrow has had much lower rates than statistical neighbours. The service has now reviewed and lowered the threshold for social care intervention to ensure that need is met. The number of CLAs had increased from 151 to 187, which had increased pressure on resources.

A Member queried why two Primary Schools in Harrow had been downgraded following the Ofsted inspection. The Corporate Director advised that Ofsted had recently changed its inspection framework. 93-94% of Harrow's schools had been awarded either Good or Outstanding status, which was amongst the highest in the UK. Several schools had maintained their Outstanding status. C&F was working closely with those schools which had been downgraded to improve performance and raise standards. An officer added that there had been some disappointing results, however, Harrow was mirroring the national trend in this area. The Corporate Director added that some schools were experiencing higher levels of deprivation, but that the support services in Harrow were outstanding.

A Member asked what would be the likely effect of the loss of the quality assurance post. The Directorate had been obliged to find a number of efficiencies recently and was focussing on improving the skill-sets of chairs of boards, frontline work and staff training and development.

A Member asked which bodies the LGA peer review had been reported to and asked about the youth offending improvement plan. The Corporate Director advised that the general findings of the review had been reported to the Performance Board and to the Scrutiny lead Members. The Youth Offending, the CLA and the Safeguarding Improvement Plans were in place. The work of the Quality Assurance and the Early Intervention Team also had a significant impact on the service. Timescales were affected by the high level of staff turnover and by the increase in the number of cases. Education for CLAs was a priority for improvement and work was being carried out in partnership with Harrow School Improvement Partnership to improve outcomes.

A Member stated that it would be useful for the Sub-Committee to be provided with further data relating to the improvement plans. For instance, it would have been useful to see a monthly breakdown of activity for the months between April 2012 and April 2013. The Corporate Director advised that this data was available and undertook to circulate this to the Sub-Committee. An officer stated that significant improvements had taken place as a result of better planning and oversight.

A Member asked whether care leavers were involved in their care plans. The Corporate Director stated that there was a care leavers' support group and university graduates would be recruited during the summer months to undertake one-to-one mentoring with those at risk of becoming disengaged. The Council's Xcite team had been contracted to identify appropriate

traineeships and apprenticeships for those leaving care. An officer added that CfBT Education Trust had been contracted to achieve outcomes for the most vulnerable young people.

Referring to the Children's Social Care Scorecard, a Member pointed out that the figures relating to CL missing school for more than 25 days a year contradicted the summary comments and that there was in fact a significant improvement in this area. An officer agreed to update the commentary.

A Member asked about the experiences of those in care and leaving care. An officer stated that every LAC had five meetings a year with their independent reviewing participation officer, and also had the opportunity to meet with Councillors. The Corporate Director undertook to circulate a snapshot of this data to Members.

The Chairman requested that the outcomes relating to recruitment and retention strategy be provided to Members. The Corporate Director advised that this information was not in the public domain, and undertook to provide a briefing for Members during July 2013.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 9.15 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR TONY FERRARI
Chair