

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (SPECIAL) MINUTES

9 JULY 2013

Chairman:	* Councillor Paul Osborn	
Councillors:	* Husain Akhtar (1) * Sue Anderson * Tony Ferrari * Ann Gate	* Graham Henson * Amir Moshenson (2) * Victoria Silver (2) * Stephen Wright
Voting Co-opted:	(Voluntary Aided) Mrs J Rammelt Reverend P Reece	(Parent Governors) Mrs A Khan
Non-voting Co-opted:	* Harrow Youth Parliament Representative	
In attendance: (Councillors)	Thaya Idaikkadar	Minute 414

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

410. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Councillor Kam Chana

Reserve Member

Councillor Amir Moshenson

Councillor Man Dharmarajah
Councillor Jerry Miles

Councillor Husain Akhtar
Councillor Victoria Silver

411. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:

Agenda Item 5 – Question and Answer Session with the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive

Councillor Ann Gate declared a pecuniary interest in that her employer was the Chair of the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). If questions related to the CCG she would leave in the room whilst the matter was considered.

Councillor Tony Ferrari declared a non-pecuniary interest, during the course of the question and answers, in that he was a member of the Pension Fund Committee. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered.

Councillor Graham Henson declared a non-pecuniary interest in that the Hive was due to be considered at the Planning Committee, of which he was a Reserve Member. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered.

Councillor Stephen Wright declared a non-pecuniary interest in that the Hive was due to be considered at the Planning Committee, of which he was a Member. He would leave the room whilst the matter was considered.

RESOLVED ITEMS

412. North West London Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee

RESOLVED: That Councillor Mrs Vina Mithani be appointed as Harrow's Member and Councillor Victoria Silver be appointed as Reserve Member on the North West London Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

413. Sub-Committee Memberships

RESOLVED: That following be noted:

- (1) on the Health & Social Care Scrutiny Sub-Committee, Councillor Ben Wealthy replace Councillor Margaret Davine as a Member and Councillor Mrinal Choudhury be appointed as second reserve;
- (2) the Labour Group has also indicated that the following Members are their nominated Members on various Sub-Committees:

Councillor Sue Anderson – Performance and Finance Scrutiny Sub-Committee

Councillor Victoria Silver – Health and Social Care Scrutiny Sub-Committee

414. Question and Answer Session with the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive

The Chair welcomed the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive to the meeting and outlined the procedure for the asking and answering of questions. Members then put their questions and received responses as follows:

1. *What is the overall strategy for the remainder of the year and the Leader's priorities up until the election?*

The Leader advised that following the recent political changes he had stated that he would continue with the priorities set out in the Corporate Plan agreed by Council. He referred to the flagship action of building new housing stock, the possibilities around e-books in libraries, consideration of ways to assist the 3rd sector, consolidation of Council staff and services into one building and the launch of the Harrow Help Scheme.

The Chief Executive reported that there was a need to achieve £24 million savings over the next 2 years and that there was a programme to do this including special needs transport, residential care, procurement and the use of agency staff etc.

A Member questioned why it was considered that the pension fund would achieve a better return by building housing in Harrow. Another Member indicated that he would wish to see more details on the risks and sought clarification on the proportion of the pension fund that it was proposed to be spent on housing. Other comments included that a people versus place budget had been set and that a small number of projects such as PRISM and staff car parking had been paused.

The Leader advised that it was necessary to consider the construction industry and that the Government only permitted 18% to be borrowed from the pension fund. There was also the option of borrowing from the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB). The Chief Executive added that any potential use of the pension fund would need to be subject to discussions with the trustees.

2. *How will the budget be put together, how will we scrutinise it, how will officers support different budgets and how is the Council doing in terms of last year's budget?*

The Leader advised that the budget had been subject to the commissioning panel process and that almost £1 million had been put into the Council's reserves. The advice from the Section 151 Officer was that reserves of £10 million were required. In terms of scrutiny, he wanted to be as open and transparent as possible but there was

always a question as to how much information should be provided to the opposition. The Chief Executive added that it was important that there was a clear process that applied whatever the administration in relation to commissioning panel papers and that all Groups had access to that information as early as possible. This was particularly important for groups to have the opportunity to set their budget proposals for next year (2014/15). Time and support would be available to all Groups.

In terms of last year's budget, the Leader advised that the Harrow Card had not been progressed resulting in £0.5 million savings and that there were savings by not changing parking meters as had originally been intended. He indicated that, following some negative comments in relation to 'Let's Talk', this would be re-branded. The Chief Executive advised that whilst most of the elements of our savings programme were being progressed PRISM and work in relation to staff car parking had been paused in order to consider more thoroughly the ideas and views of staff.

A Member commented that there were only 9 Members in the Administration Group and that at budget setting the opposition Groups may not agree with the Administration's budget. He questioned how it was possible to achieve a sensible budget to consult on as the Council was in a new situation and suggested that some thought be given as to how all Groups could be engaged in the process. The Chief Executive responded that an agreed £24 million savings target was being progressed to cover the next 2 years and that it was not envisaged at this stage that a commissioning panels process would be required. The Chief Executive however also accepted that Members may want to take a different view in December and review that 2 year programme.

3. *Do you think the Council has acted in an appropriate way in dealing with alleged breaches of the Lease, planning obligations and traffic problems at Prince Edward playing field (the Hive)?*

The Leader reported that the lease conditions had not been breached but that there had been problems in relation to car park lighting and that the change in closing time had had an impact. If the lighting issues remained unresolved, enforcement action would be taken. There were no problems in terms of building control and the floodlighting issues had been resolved. Traffic was not part of the lease and only 26 matches could be played at the ground each year and not all of those at night.

In terms of lessons learnt, the Chief Executive advised that he was keen to keep ward councillors involved and that communications with residents were made as clear as possible as to the Council's powers. The leaseholders were in breach in terms of the building and floodlights however a new application was to be submitted in order to regularise these. If these issues remained unresolved enforcement action would be taken. Counsel opinion was being sought on this matter.

4. *What are the implications of the spending review?*

The Leader advised that officers estimated that the spending review would result in a savings target of approximately £10-£15m for 2015/16. As in previous years local government had been particularly badly impacted by the spending review. The Chief Executive added that in his view, austerity could continue until 2020/21 with savings of the order of £10m-£15m per annum up to then.

The Government had indicated that Councils would be supported to freeze Council Tax in 2014/15 and 2015/16 and were allocating £3 billion to integrate health and social care. The Government had provided additional resources for the work in relation to troubled families.

A Member sought the views of the Leader as to the role of the community in helping the Council to save money and to deliver services themselves. The Leader advised that the 3rd sector had a lot to offer. The Chief Executive added that residents should be viewed as the Council's partners with considerable knowledge, capacity and expertise to offer. He undertook to meet with the two Members who were part of a Carers' champions group with this in mind.

The Chair requested a report on troubled families to a future meeting of the Committee.

5. *Following the Welfare Reform changes what are the Leader's plans to support vulnerable residents? How will different areas of the Council work together to support vulnerable residents? What criteria was used to define vulnerable residents?*

The Leader advised that £400,000 was being allocated to the Harrow Help Scheme and there was to be a review of the debt collection policy.

In terms of the criteria used to identify vulnerable residents, the Chief Executive advised that criteria such as income, medical conditions, dependent children, literacy, language and disabilities were used. IT systems were being developed in order to assist identification. The data, both Council and Partners, held needed to identify the individuals better. He added that a common sense approach might need to be taken in relation to debt collection processes with vulnerable residents.

A Member sought the Leader's views on collaboration with outside agencies and referred to some recent work carried out by the Citizens' Advice Bureau in relation to housing benefit. The Leader responded that whilst sharing of information was helpful, it was necessary to be mindful of data protection issues.

The Chair suggested that the Chief Executive may wish to attend the Committee when the report on Debt Recovery was submitted.

6. *What is the long term strategy for Harrow Town Centre? How will the Council work to increase footfall, attract investments and support businesses?*

The Leader advised that two projects were currently being considered namely Dandara and Gayton Road, both of which had considerable Community Infrastructure Levy associated. In terms of the former, he had asked the Portfolio Holder to begin dialogue with the company and in terms of Gayton Road, the company had applied to extend their planning application.

A Member expressed the view and concern that there were too many small investments in the town centre and the Chief Executive had some sympathy with this view. The Chief Executive also added that whilst there were high occupancy levels, the town centre did in some parts look 'tired' and was in competition to areas like Westfield, Brent Cross etc. He stated that he would like to see a town centre reflecting Harrow uniqueness and to attract retailers accordingly. A DVD had been prepared and submitted to the Greater London Authority in order to show the benefits of Harrow and another project, Gateway Asia, aimed to attract businesses from India.

A Member sought clarification as to the plans to assist satellite centres such as North Harrow. The Leader advised that work was being done to tidy up the district centres in order to attract shoppers. The Chief Executive stated that one of the Council's priorities was to support district centres, each of which was distinct and unique. The Outer London Fund (OLF) had enabled some work to be carried out in North Harrow. The Chair requested that North Harrow and the OLF as well as regeneration generally be considered as an issue by the scrutiny leadership group.

A Member sought clarification on the strategy for dealing with fruit and vegetable stalls that encroached on the pavement. The Leader advised that a commonsense approach was required but enforcement would be used if necessary.

A Member commented that there needed to be a balance between creating new business and protecting small local businesses. The Leader advised that a local directory had been prepared and that some planning permissions had been relaxed.

7. *None of the Council's priorities related to youth. How are you going to work with young people? How can you encourage youth enterprise if shoppers want to shop all under one roof?*

The Leader responded that it was a two way process and that he had attended Harrow Youth Parliament. His door was open and he invited the young people to meet with him. The Chief Executive stated that he would welcome advice from the youth parliament as to how the Council could do better in this area.

Members suggested that 'Let's Talk' be taken in to schools and advised that Harrow had some good youth leaders. Hammersmith and Fulham Council had a scheme of young people becoming leaders in their school who in turn set up youth forums. It was also important to remember those young people who were not in education and the need to also engage with them as they were more likely to be in need of the Council's services.

The Chief Executive stated that he was keen to encourage the citizenship scheme and to try to ensure that local contractors working for the Council were required to recruit young people on apprenticeships.

8. *School place planning – are there any concerns around the number of places available for future years and if so, what action is being taken to respond to that? Are you comfortable that the programme is robust and deliverable?*

The Chief Executive advised that the primary sector had two phases, the first of which was nearly complete. Phase two was about to start but there was less certainty as it was based on external funding from government although we had an excellent track record of success in this area. It was expected that 22-24 forms of entry would be required by 2019 and that there would be a bulge in the secondary sector in 2020/21.

A Member requested a written response to the following questions:

- a) What is the contingency plan if the current scheduled 24 classes are not achieved in the necessary timescale?
 - b) Given that there are 3 options for secondary school places-academies offering classes, secondary schools taking more places, or opening new schools, how does the Council foresee placing 17 classes they have to fulfil?
 - c) What is the cost of all school places and where is the money coming from?
9. *How will the Council work with the new Borough Commander to improve community safety and keep Harrow's crime rates comparatively low?*

The Leader advised that he had attended the recent Harrow Police and Community Consultative Group where the Borough Commander had given some feedback on the comparison with figures from the previous year. There was, however, a need to increase engagement with him.

The Chief Executive referred to a number of initiatives including neighbourhood champions, SmartWater and Borough Beat. Staff working in the community were key and acted as the Council's 'eyes and ears'.

A Member questioned whether the Council had any say in how the police allocated their resources and was advised that the police increasingly wanted to understand the information/intelligence held by the Council. The Joint Tasking Group considered the intelligence gathered before police resources were deployed. The Chair stated that he would expect to see this information included in the Community Safety Plan when it was considered by the Committee on 23 July 2013.

10. *Following the recent changes in the health landscape what action will be taken to ensure there is optimum joint working arrangements between the Council and CCGs/NHS?*

The Chief Executive advised that the Health and Wellbeing Board had been introduced and given an important democratic input. There had been the transfer of public health to local authorities and its associate links made with leisure, housing and licensing. Increasingly, social care and health budgets had been pooled. In addition, a good example of prevention rather than cure was reablement.

In terms of controlling the health budget, the Chief Executive advised that there was now increased democratic accountability and that the pooling of budgets avoided duplication and reduced the chances of issues falling between the gaps ensuring that money was spent more effectively.

A Member questioned how the new commissioning model adopted by the Council would contribute to value for money. The Chief Executive responded that the Council would procure services that best met the needs of residents. The focus was on outcomes. He did not believe that outsourcing was right for all services and the key was to work better with the community and voluntary sector and have a mixed economy approach to service provision.

The Chair thanked the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive for their attendance and responses.

415. Termination of Meeting

In accordance with the provisions of Committee Procedure Rule 14 (Part 4B of the Constitution) it was

RESOLVED: At 9.57 pm to continue until 10.10 pm.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 8.00 pm, closed at 10.10 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR PAUL OSBORN
Chairman