

PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE MINUTES

26 MARCH 2015

Chair: * Councillor Phillip O'Dell

Councillors: * Richard Almond * Kiran Ramchandani
* Mrs Chika Amadi (1)
* Barry Macleod-Cullinane

In attendance: Sachin Shah Minute 38
(Councillors)

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

34. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Reserve Member

Councillor Adam Swersky

Councillor Mrs Chika Amadi

35. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that no interests were declared.

36. Minutes

A Member of the Sub-Committee requested clarification regarding the question on the fifth question of Minute 29. The Chair responded that the

Member's question should be forwarded to the Environmental Leads for further information.

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of 6 January 2015 be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

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

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

RESOLVED ITEMS

38. Revenue and Capital Monitoring

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Director of Finance and Assurance, which had previously been considered by Cabinet on 19 February 2015. The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Major Contracts assisted the Director in delivering the report.

Following a brief overview of the report by the Director of Finance and Assurance, Members asked the following questions and received responses from the Director and the Portfolio Holder:

- Q: What plans were in place to deal with the introduction of Universal Credit, and the implementation of the Care Act 2014?

A: Some money from the Better Care Fund had been set aside for the implementation of the Care Act. The total cost was as yet unclear, but Officers would be watching the cost carefully once the Act was implemented. There had been discussions about different boroughs being part of a pilot scheme for a small number of recipients of Universal Credit, and contingency funds were there for the pressure of this.

- Q: How did the demolition of Grange Farm stack up as a mitigation of the costs of housing people in bed-and-breakfast accommodation?

A: Properties that had been bought back from leaseholders were being used as short-term accommodation for people who were being housed in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, and almost every vacant property that had become available in Harrow was being used for homeless families.

- Q: Was this not being considered in 2013?

A: Had been proposed by PH and was in manifesto. Arrears have risen by a third due to benefits cuts and a 40% cut in the Discretionary Housing Fund.

- Q: How many houses have been built by this administration?
A: No houses have been completed, but the building process is underway for a number of homes.
- Q: Have rent increases above inflation affected arrears?
A: Most arrears have come from the private sector; benefits cuts and a 40% reduction in the Discretionary Housing Fund have been the main contributors to arrears and homelessness.
- Q: Will the Council receive money from the Home Office at the end of the Council's financial year?
A: The Council had budgeted to receive money from the Proceeds of Crime Act, but the amount received would probably be less than in previous years. The money would usually come from large fraud / wholesale crime.
- Q: At what stage in the year did the bed-and-breakfast problem become apparent?
A: The increase in people who require bed-and-breakfast accommodation had risen in a linear fashion, and was a big issue for the Council.
- Q: Had the option of moving people who couldn't afford rents in Harrow out of the borough been explored?
A: There were a few initiatives, but these tended not to be taken up by families whose children were at an important time in their education such as their GCSEs.
- Q: If the Council is in reach of 62% of the total capital programme, what progress has been made towards being better at spending?
A: A scrutiny panel had been investigating this area. The capital spend was much more focused, and the fragmented way in which this was spent could lead to underspending, for example, money could be reclaimed due to work not completed by service providers. Some money was being spent in order to save more money in the long term, such as the spending of next year's budget on street lights.
- Q: Are there allowances in the budget for the fact that the Council is required to deliver complicated projects in urban environments?
A: There are some allowances for this, but there is room for improvement in this area.
- Q: Are robust resources being dedicated to the handover of the IT contract? There had not been effective scrutiny of this area, involving

the opposition. At the Chief Officers' Employment Panel Members were told that the handover was being sufficiently resourced, and the Director's post was being reduced to three days per week.

A: The rationale for the post was to manage the handover of the contract, and the reason for the reduction in days was that the day-to-day work undertaken by this post had been distributed to other posts. There had also been an extra £100,000 contribution from the Council going towards the contract.

- Q: What level of resource was being dedicated to this contract, as Members were informed at Chief Officers' Employment Panel that the reduction in days would be sufficient?

A: The amount of resources at the Director level was sufficient. The £100,000 would pay for two relatively junior Officers to work on challenging invoices.

- Q: When in the financial year will the handover of the contract take place, and what will be the impact on service delivery?

A: Harrow Council were having discussions with the current service provider about what they can deliver before the end of the contract.

- Q: Is Harrow Council doing enough to keep energy bills as low as possible?

A: The lights in the Civic Centre are activated by motion sensors. The building is patrolled by security officers 24 hours a day, which is why the lights can sometimes be seen on at night.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

39. School Travel Plans Update

The Sub-Committee received a report regarding School Travel Plans.

Following a brief overview of the report by the Traffic and Road Safety Team Leader, Members asked the following questions and received responses from the Team Leader:

- Q: Was there enough enforcement activity taking place for the School Travel Plans?

A: Two CCTV vans were being used around the borough, and they were effective as a deterrent to stop people from parking where they are not allowed to. Several "walking buses" had also been set up.

- Q: Has there been mapping to see if the plans had been having any impact?

A: Surveys had been undertaken, and the Traffic and Road Safety Team knew where people were coming from and could see when people change their behaviour.

- Q: Were complaints mapped so problem areas could be identified?

A: Complaints were recorded on a system that was searchable.

- Q: Was there capacity for schools situated close together to cooperate in the implementation of the plan?

A: Schools were encouraged to communicate and work together, and the Traffic and Road Safety Team had reviewed satellite images and introduced zebra crossings, which schoolchildren had been encouraged to use.

- Q: Regarding schools that did not have a “star” accreditation, was this because they had not tried to implement the plan yet?

A: There had been high staff turnover in some schools which had made ongoing engagement difficult, but this was starting to improve. Some schools were not aware of the benefits in taking part in the scheme and attaining the “star” accreditation.

- Q: Were the timescales for schools to adopt the Travel Plans realistic?

A: One of the objectives behind the Travel Plans is to change the culture of the school, and this was achievable as new children start the school every year.

- Q: Is help available for schools that have a ‘silver’ accreditation, but need help to achieve the ‘gold’ accreditation?

A: The main priority was to engage with schools that don’t have any accreditation, but there are resources within the team to support schools that had committed to implementing their Travel Plans.

- Q: How are the accreditations managed, and is the “bronze” target a realistic one?

A: Transport for London awarded the accreditations. “Bronze” was awarded when 40% of pupils were using alternative methods of travelling, “silver” for 50% and “gold” for 60%. The targets were achievable if parents, teachers and pupils were engaged with the plan.

- Q: Is delivering communications to parents via their children a reliable and effective method of engaging with parents?

A: There were also newsletters, forums, and ambassadors for the scheme who work with teachers to try and get all parties engaged. The

budget for the scheme was £80,000, and £50,000 of this was allocated for physical measures such as zebra crossings.

- Q: Are the targets different for each school?

A: The target for a school would be one step above their current level, so schools with no accreditation would have a “bronze” target, schools with a “bronze” accreditation would have a “silver” target.

- Q: What about the schools that do not appear on the list?

A: The ownership of the list had changed hands since the list was last updated, and members of staff were aware that it needed to be updated.

- Q: Would sixth form colleges like St Dominic’s be included in the plans, as the surrounding area had a lot of congestion?

A: The School Travel Plans were mostly aimed at primary schools, but the team could review the causes of congestion and try to tackle it.

- Q: There were no additional funds in 2015 – 16 for the deployment of crossing guards, what impact would this have on the walking buses?

A: The Traffic and Road Safety Team had been working to improve the infrastructure of the walking buses and replace the crossing guards with other physical measures.

- Q: Would it be possible for refuse collection vehicles to plan routes so they did not contribute to areas of heavy congestion?

A: Health and Safety audits had been done on the routes taken by refuse collection vehicles, and the routes had been planned using a Route Optimisation Programme.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.15 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR PHILLIP O'DELL
Chair