

PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE MINUTES

9 OCTOBER 2014

Chairman: * Councillor Phillip O'Dell

Councillors: * Richard Almond * Kiran Ramchandani
* Barry Macleod-Cullinane * Adam Swersky

In attendance: Glen Hearnden Minute 15
(Councillors)

* Denotes Member present

8. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

9. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:

All Agenda Items

Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane declared a non-pecuniary interest in that he had been the Portfolio Holder for Adults and Housing for some of the period covered by the reports. He would remain in the room whilst the matters were considered and voted upon.

10. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 3 July 2014 be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

11. Public Questions, Petitions and References

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

RESOLVED ITEMS

12. Update on Recommendations from Customer Care Review

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Head of Customer Services which set out the recommended actions to be taken by the Council in response to the Scrutiny Review Group recommendations about Customer Service as outlined in its 2013 report.

Members asked the following questions:

- One of the recommendations from the Review Group had been that the tone used in responses to complaints should be reviewed. Had this been implemented?

The officer stated that the Council was sometimes perceived as being too defensive when dealing with complaints. He was working closely with the relevant complaints' co-ordinators and staff to ensure there was a consistent approach and the tone used in response to complaints was more conciliatory and proactive in remedying the issue. Any complaints that were escalated to stage 2 or above were referred to the Corporate complaints co-ordinator for checking.

- How were queries and complaints from Councillors submitted via the councillor query email address dealt with and monitored? It was his experience that he had had to follow up his initial emails to Access Harrow requesting an update. How far had plans for the Members' Portal progressed?

The officer advised that staff in Access Harrow aimed to deal promptly with any queries or complaints from Members. These were tracked and monitored in terms of progress and response times. If the query/complaint email was forwarded to another officer at the Council, then the Councillor in question should be copied into the forwarded email, for information. A Members' Portal is being developed to enable Councillors to track requests more effectively

The Member stated that he would forward screen shots and copies of email responses from Access Harrow to the officer for further investigation.

- Why did response times for residents' queries vary?

The officer advised that there were set timescales to be adhered to when dealing with complaints. Sometimes, delays occurred during the

investigation stage. There were plans to introduce a system of sending progress update alerts via MyHarrow to enquirers/complainants.

- What were the timescales for the upgrade of the SAP CRM system?

The officer stated that user testing of the upgraded CCP-H product (which integrates the CRM system to the line of business systems) was planned for December 2014 and January 2015, and he expected the upgrade to be in place by February 2015. Once complete, discussions about upgrading the CRM system can take place.

The new Council Tax web forms were at the testing stage and would be fully integrated into the council tax system. He expected the web forms to be live within the next 2-3 weeks. The call centre telephony upgrade would enable emails to be processed more efficiently and would enable the sending of receipts for payments for things such as parking fines.

- How extensively was MyHarrow used by those residents who had registered accounts? Did some residents use it regularly whilst others used it infrequently or not at all? What qualitative data did he have regarding the use of MyHarrow? Could details of the 'Take Part' consultation be shared via the MyHarrow account?

The officer stated that there are 18,000 log-ins to the MyHarrow account each month however he did not have more granular data to hand and undertook to provide this information to Members outside the meeting. He added that it was expected that increased use of the web forms would reduce the number of phone calls to the call centre as well as the use of MyHarrow. Information regarding the 'Take Part' consultation had been published in the e-newsletter which had been disseminated to sixty thousand households in the borough.

- Who monitored the progress of the Customer Services Working Group and how often did it meet?

The Customer Services Working Group met every 5-6 weeks. It monitored performance and shared areas of good practice. The work of the Working Group was monitored by him. He added that Harrow was a member of the London and South East Contact Centre Forum, which provided an opportunity to share information about industry standards and best practice.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

13. Adults Services Complaints Annual report (Social Care Only) 2013-14

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Community, Health & Well-Being which set out the statutory Adults Services complaints Annual report (social care only).

Following a brief overview of the report by an officer, Members made the following comments and asked the following questions:

- How were compliments logged?

Any compliments sent to the complaints section, rather than the individual being complimented, were logged and forwarded to the relevant officer copying in their manager.

- What was the process for a resident or service user to lodge a complaint?

The officer stated that complaints were generally received via the web or directly by a member of staff, such as a social worker. Adults and children's complainants often preferred to telephone in to complain. The officer taking the phone call would make extensive notes. There were statutory timescales to be adhered to with regard to complaints and officers endeavoured to keep complainants updated regarding progress. However, delays could occur during the investigation stage.

- What examples were there of lessons learnt following a complaint received?

The officer stated that some complaints could be resolved swiftly following a face to face meeting between the complainant and a member of Council staff to discuss the situation in detail. This resolution work and mediation work, had helped to curtail the time required to resolve complaints at an earlier stage and reduce escalation rates.

Members acknowledged that not only were the number of complaints received low, the percentage of complaints received, compared to the number of people in receipt of a service was very small. The number of people known to adult services was over 4500.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

14. Children and Families Services Complaints Annual Report 2013-14

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Children and Families which set out the statutory Children and Families Services complaints annual report for 2013/14.

Members had no questions regarding the report.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

15. Revenue and Capital Monitoring for Quarter 1 as at 30 June 2014

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Director of Finance and Assurance, which had been previously considered at Cabinet on 30 June 2014.

Following a brief overview of the report by the Director of Finance and Assurance, Members asked the following questions and made the following comments:

- How was service delivery impacted by spend on the Capital Programme? For example, what impact would the Council's mobile and flexible working arrangements have on frontline services and residents? How would residents' feedback regarding this be monitored and dealt with?

The Director advised that the Capital Programme focussed on improvements to the physical infrastructure of the borough. The Capital Programme budget was now being set for a four year period which would enable better forecasting and greater flexibility. This also meant that officers could begin the procurement and commissioning process for a project as soon as it received Member approval. However, some types of delays could not be controlled or anticipated, for example, bad weather which could cause delays to building projects.

He added that the report did not currently provide information about the impact of the Capital Programmes on service delivery, but undertook to include this data in future reports.

- The figures showed an increase in the number of families in Bed and Breakfast (B&B) accommodation and the rate of homelessness in the borough. What pressures were there in securing B&B places, what were the costs associated with placing families in these, particularly in London and how were these being mitigated; did London Councils have any initiatives regarding this issue?

The Portfolio Holder for Hosing stated that homelessness was an area of challenge. B&B accommodation in London was costly and it could cost between £12k-£16k to keep a family in B&B accommodation. However, moving families into accommodation outside the borough or outside London was a far from ideal solution. The Council was looking to increase its stock of temporary housing and other London boroughs faced similar problems. London Councils had a pan-London initiative whereby the daily rates for B&B accommodation were capped.

- Wouldn't capping the rate lead to a reduction in supply and consequently exacerbate the situation? What targets had been set for reducing the numbers of families in B&B, how were resources being used to meet these targets and what were the associated timescales?

The Portfolio Holder for Housing stated that the ideal would be to have no families living in B&B. There were a number of variables which affected the supply and demand of B&B places. For example, the increasing popularity of the 'Right to Buy' policy was impacting negatively on the availability of housing stock. His aim was to reduce the number of families living in B&B accommodation and to reduce the costs associated with these. Although no specific timescales or targets had been set, he would like to maintain the current rate of reduction in the figures. The number of those in B&Bs had been reduced from 140 to 115 over the past two months.

- Which savings targets in the Capital Programme had yet to be achieved?

The Director of Finance and Assurance advised that he anticipated there would be savings from the reduced costs of administering Housing Benefit. He also anticipated further savings once Universal Credit was introduced.

- To what extent had bad debts in housing and council tax been written off? How much of the Bad Debt Provision (BDP) was the Council likely to recoup? How difficult was it to collect housing benefit from council tenants?

The Director of Finance and Assurance stated that there was every intention to reclaim the BDP using different methods. Current rates of the BDP were based on past experience and there was a tendency to over provide in the expectation that a large proportion would be recouped. Housing benefit was known to be difficult to collect, however, the figures for uncollected housing benefits for 2013/14 were lower than those for 2012/13.

- Were there any figures for the council tax BDP that provided a breakdown by council tax band?

The Director advised that he had not seen such a breakdown and BDP was not monitored on this basis. He undertook to look into the matter and update Members.

- What was the reason for the delays in the programme of improvements to the housing stock and how many households had been affected by the delay?

An officer advised that the delays mainly related to the kitchens and bathroom and the external enveloping works programmes and had occurred due to the following factors: The programme was received late this year-due to decisions on the properties to be included in the regeneration programme meaning some properties were removed from the programme and new ones added. The new ones then had to be surveyed and validated. Then the works had to be procured, which is a 3 month process. Furthermore, in cases where the improvements

involved leaseholders, there was a requirement to consult them and staffing issues in the leaseholders' team had delayed this process. Officers were working to fill this post. She added that there was a potential under spend on the capital programme, due in part to procurement savings where actual costs had come in below initial forecasts. The team was also attempting to bring forward additional improvements which had been programmed for future years.

- How many families and properties had been affected by the delays in quarter 1 and did the service have the capacity and resources to fully deliver the programme of repairs?

An officer advised that approximately 400 tenants were affected by the kitchen and bathroom programme, 100 of these were in sheltered accommodation. A third of these tenants would have experienced delays. However, although tenants had been informed they were included on this year's programme, no timescales had been specified and tenants were always kept informed throughout the process. She added that she was confident that all internal improvements were deliverable, however, external works may require re-consultation if all leaseholders did not agree to the proposals. She anticipated that works would begin at the end of 2014 and roll over to 2015.

- What criteria were used to identify which properties were due for improvement and which for demolition? How was the life expectancy of a property calculated?

The officer stated that the Service worked from two lists, one where properties had been earmarked for regeneration and others which were earmarked for feasibility surveys. Those properties deemed to be functional were removed from the list.

The officer added that the standards for life expectancy used to be based on the government's 'Decent Homes Standards'. This standard was fairly basic and had not included communal areas or the external environment. However, the council now had the discretion to set its own borough standard, which would be implemented from April 2015.

- Why was the leaseholder team understaffed and had this issue been resolved?

The officer stated that someone had been in post but had left. This was a specialist role and there had been only one post. It could therefore be deemed an area of risk. Officers were liaising with the human resources and procurement teams to fill this post and were also considering whether to change the staffing structure in this area.

- Why did the report not specify the exact nature of the slippage in the Housing Revenue Account? In the future, it would be helpful to have details of the exact nature of the slippage, why it occurred and its likely impacts?

The officer undertook to ensure this level of detail was available in future reports.

- How would the council ensure that advertising on lampposts and bus shelters in the borough would be appropriate and in keeping with the Council's values and priorities?

The Director of Finance and Assurance advised that this measure would be implemented in 2015/16 to help maximise income. The policy regarding who would be permitted to advertise would be considered by an internal officer board with final sign-off by Members.

- What was the cause for the slippage in the schools' expansion project and how had this impacted on budgets and schools and what oversight did Members have of this area?

The Director advised that Cabinet received quarterly update reports regarding the school expansion programme and that the Portfolio Holder for Children, Schools and Young People received regular briefings. In addition to this, there were regular update meetings with the stakeholder group, which included parents, teachers, governors and a cross-party group of Members. The timescales for the project were tight and there had been a number of delays. However, he was confident that the programme would be delivered in time and on budget in line with the grant which would cease in September 2015.

- How accurate were the auditors' valuations of the current housing stock? The auditors had admitted that key elements, such as subsidence, infestation and crime statistics were not taken into account when carrying out the valuation. How was the life expectancy of a property or building calculated?

The Director of Finance and Assurance advised that the valuation carried out by the auditors was done from a purely financial perspective, did not reflect a property's actual market value nor did it take into account information such as whether the property or its location was deemed by residents to be a desirable area to live in or local crime statistics. A discount factor of 50% was therefore applied to the auditors' figure. He added that a new componentisation measure would enable the allocation of differing life expectancies to different areas of a housing estate or block of flats.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

16. Performance at Quarter 1 2014/15

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Divisional Director of Strategic Commissioning, which provided an update on the Chair's and Vice-Chair's review of the Scrutiny Watch List and Corporate Scorecard in relation to quarter 1 performance.

The Chairman introduced the report and stated that the Watch List was considered at the Scrutiny Chair and Vice Chairs' briefing meeting. The Chairs and Vice Chairs had the discretion to refer areas of concern to the Scrutiny Leads Meeting and/or the relevant Corporate Director or to the Overview and Scrutiny meeting.

Members voiced concern regarding the following:

- the poor response rate to the Council's staff survey;
- ongoing staffing issues in the Children and Families Directorate;
- the increased levels of sickness absence, particularly in the Community Health & Wellbeing directorate;
- the lack of clarity or explanatory information regarding the figures relating to vacancy rates in the Town Centre.

It was agreed that the above issues would be discussed further at the next Scrutiny Leads meeting with a view to re-prioritising the Scrutiny work programme.

The Panel agreed that the Divisional Director of Human Resources Development & Shared Services be requested to provide a report to the next meeting of the Sub-Committee regarding the high rate of sickness absence, if this data was readily available. In any case, Members requested that they be sent the raw data in the interim if it was not possible to submit the report to the next meeting. The report should contain department by department breakdown and highlight any spikes and patterns identified, and how this compared to other comparable local authorities. The Portfolio Holder for Performance, Corporate Resources & Policy Development be invited to attend the meeting to respond to Members questions regarding the report.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.56 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR PHILLIP O'DELL
Chair