

# OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (SPECIAL) MINUTES

## 3 SEPTEMBER 2015

**Chair:** \* Councillor Jerry Miles

**Councillors:**

* Richard Almond	* Michael Borio
* Mrs Chika Amadi (2)	* Susan Hall (4)
* Jeff Anderson	* Barry Macleod-Cullinane (3)
* Marilyn Ashton	* Primesh Patel

**Voting** (Voluntary Aided) (Parent Governors)

**Co-opted:**

† Mrs J Rammelt	† Mrs A Khan
Reverend P Reece	

**Non-voting** Harrow Youth Parliament Representative  
**Co-opted:**

\* Denotes Member present  
(2), (3) and (4) Denote category of Reserve Members  
† Denotes apologies received

### 107. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Councillor Ghazanfar Ali  
Councillor Chris Mote  
Councillor Paul Osborn

Reserve Member

Councillor Mrs Chika Amadi  
Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane  
Councillor Susan Hall

## **108. Declarations of Interest**

**RESOLVED:** To note that there were no declarations of interests made by Members.

## **RESOLVED ITEMS**

### **109. Question and Answer Session with the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive**

The Chair welcomed the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive to the meeting and explained that any questions which could not be answered at the meeting would receive a written response.

The Chair also expressed thanks on behalf of the Committee to Mrs Aamirah Khan, a Parent Governor representative. She would not be continuing in her role on the Committee. The Committee agreed that it was important to seek a replacement as soon as possible.

The Leader of the Council gave an introduction and explained that it was an interesting time to be involved in Local Government. There were many opportunities and challenges facing it, in addition to the well publicised pressures regarding Local Government finance. There were also increasing pressures facing the Council relating to homelessness and a sharp increase in pupil numbers.

He also stated that there were huge opportunities and developments in commercialisation and regeneration that the Council were embracing. There were also huge positives in Children and Adult Social Services.

The budget planning session for next year would also be commencing. This would involve discussing proposals at commissioning panels and setting a new budget. This would be a difficult process for Councillors, staff and residents. However the Council would not shy away from these challenges.

The Chief Executive also addressed the Committee and reported that in the 6 months since his return to the Council, he had reflected on the challenges facing the Council. He had also spoken to as many members of staff as possible and it was evident that they were proud of their role and hardworking in a tough environment. Despite budget reductions staff had still been innovative and creative in delivering services and last year the Council had managed to come in under budget. Additionally there had been a significant increase in resident satisfaction.

There was still approximately £57 million to save and this would undoubtedly have a significant impact. However it was important for the Council's infrastructure to be robust and correct in this environment. This reflected in the Council procuring a new IT provider and making changes to the senior management team to ensure that it could meet the challenges ahead.

It was also hoped that commercialisation and regeneration would help to accelerate major opportunities in these areas.

Members asked a series of questions to the Leader and Chief Executive and received responses as follows:

*When was the decision made to no longer exempt pensioners from the garden waste charge? This change will affect close to 34,000 residents and in fact this issue had been discussed at a recent Call-In Sub-Committee meeting. This is a reversal of the Council's original decision.*

The Leader explained that at no point had a decision been made to exempt pensioners from the garden waste charge. All options had been and were being explored. There was no recollection that this exemption was contained in the policy document. It was with a heavy heart that charges were being brought in for this non-statutory service however the current financial climate meant that it was required.

*What progress is being made in building more affordable homes? Could a detailed analysis be reported on the scale of the housing crisis in Harrow and how welfare caps are increasing the pressure on homelessness?*

The Leader responded by stating that a Regeneration Strategy would be presented to Cabinet shortly. This would include a large number of affordable housing being built to tackle pressures facing the homelessness crisis, use of bed and breakfast accommodation. Council Houses were being built by the Council for the first time in a generation.

Professional Housing officers had not been able to put an estimate on the projected number of homelessness families anticipated in Harrow. However this would increase significantly and put budget pressures on the Council.

The Chief Executive further reported that approximately 5,500 new homes would be built in the borough which would lead to a better start and quality of life for residents. Nationally issues such as the benefit cap, the low housing stock and general legislative changes added to the pressures faced by the Council.

Short to medium term solutions to the homelessness issue included using temporary housing stock more effectively, buying more housing stock, helping residents to stay in their own homes and putting the Regeneration plans into effect.

*There is concern that if the purchase of properties for housing stock is back loaded, this will create the price of houses on the property market to increase raising the premium for these houses. If there are housing issues, what short to medium term actions are being taken to address the issues?*

The Leader of the Council explained that when buying property in Harrow or London, this was always dictated by the market value at that current time. Cabinet had provided professional officers with the ability to purchase

properties and it was important to realise that properties were assets for the Council.

The Chief Executive reported that housing was a national issue and was adding approximately £2.5 million worth of pressure to the Council's budget. Only 1,000 affordable homes had been built last year nationally. Things that the Council were doing to try to alleviate the pressure involved using existing housing stock effectively, buying properties over a period of time which would not destabilise the market and help to keep residents in their own homes.

He also stated that devolution could also be a useful way of dealing with housing issues as local government could offer the best solutions. This included changing right to buy provisions and enabling local Councils to prioritise development.

*How are residents being engaged in relation to the Regeneration plans?*

The Leader of the Council advised that he had attended the Regeneration engagement launch which had been held in Kenton. This event had been well received and there had been hundreds of responses on things residents would like to see as part of the Regeneration.

The Leader clarified that the Regeneration plans would involve the Town Centre but would also include other parts of the borough including Edgware and Queensbury for example. In Edgware talks had taken place with the Leader of Barnet Council regarding regenerating Burnt Oak, and the talks had been positive.

The Chief Executive stated that it was important that residents felt the effects of regeneration when they felt the benefits of Regeneration for e.g. new housing jobs etc. Communication regarding the regeneration plans was important especially in relation to the message that it would benefit the whole of the borough and not just the town centre.

*What are the most important features for Regeneration of the Town Centre? Does the Leader of the Council consider the development at 51 College Road to be of a world class architectural design?*

The Leader of the Council explained that the Town Centres and sites surrounding it were either owned by the Council, Transport for London or privately owned. The Council wanted to be ambitious and see inward investment particularly in the retail industry.

The Leader stated that he did not disagree with colleagues on the Planning Committee who felt that the criteria had been met for the proposal at 51 College Road.

*What have you learnt in conducting the Leader's Surgeries by going round the borough and listening to residents' concerns? Are there any ideas from Residents on Regeneration?*

The Leader stated that he was proud of this new way of engaging with residents. It had allowed him to talk to residents face to face in an apolitical manner and had proved to be very productive. It had also provided a useful tool in influencing decisions and developing new ideas for different parts of the borough.

There had been ideas from residents on regeneration which were being considered. He had also personally signposted residents to the Communications team if they had further ideas so that they were able to contribute to the Regeneration process.

*In the report that went to Cabinet in July 2015 on Trading Companies and commercialisation, it was reported that there would be a £5 million benefit to the Council. Can this be broken down and more details provided?*

The Chief Executive responded by stating that a lot of the details were not public at the moment and was part of the budget process being developed. However the figures that could be provided included £576,000 for legal services, £402,000 for procurement and £2 million for the private rental sector. For officers this was a more positive project to be involved with given the current financial pressures facing the Council.

*How will the Council be working with its partners to tackle problems regarding Northwick Park Hospital being under resourced?*

The Leader advised that they would be focusing on prevention services. The Council would also be working to look at NHS changes in the local areas, access to GPs and acute care provision. Both he and Councillor Anne Whitehead were also participating in an Independent Healthcare Commission. This commission had requested a report by an Independent Investigator, Michael Mansfield QC to investigate where the pressures were on Northwick Park Hospital. This report would be provided to the Secretary of State for Health in due course.

*In relation the proposed charges for Garden Waste, what actions will be taken if the proposed take up was significantly less than the 40% which was predicted? If this is in fact 20%, there will be a significant funding gap of approximately £1 million. How will this be addressed? There are also concerns regarding the misuse of bins and fly tipping resulting from this.*

The business case for the proposal was based on 40% take up. The Council would put in place measures to react to whatever the take up would be. No one could predict what the final take up would be.

If there was a lower take up, there would be fewer costs. If there were any shortfalls in the take up this would also be covered by the increased recycling rates and the separation of food and garden waste. If bins were contaminated they would not be collected

The Council would be ready to deal with it and examples referred to in the question were all hypothetical which as a result could not be responded to.

*How are the Council doing in recruiting young people for jobs and recruiting apprentices? Are companies being encouraged to come to Harrow?*

The Leader of the Council explained that approximately 500 jobs had been created for either young people or apprentices. In addition to this a number of these roles had been provided for those who were vulnerable, which was something that the Council was proud of.

It was anticipated that the Regeneration plans would attract more companies to Harrow and the Council were being ambitious in this regard. The Council were also doing a lot of work to support young people to ensure that they were instilled with strong social values to provide them with the right skills when seeking employment.

*Are Council Tax rises ruled out for the next 2 years?*

The Leader of the Council explained that this would not be ruled out and that all proposals would be looked at.

*As part of the Regeneration Strategy, how will the relocation of companies to Harrow be promoted to ensure long term job opportunities in the borough?*

The Leader of the Council reported that one of the difficulties facing the Council was legislative changes which allowed offices to be easily converted into flats. This caused issues in attracting companies to relocate in Harrow.

However despite this the Council wanted to see investment from companies in Harrow and were 'open for business'.

The Chief Executive reported that developers and employers understood the benefits of creating employment and investing in Harrow. Harrow was in an ideal location being only 12 minutes away from Central London and had excellent schools which had to be publicised. Additionally the Council should explore investment from other countries. It was important that this message was also communicated to the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department of Trade and Industry and the Greater London Authority. Presentation of the key messages from Harrow was vital.

*With about 50% of the council's budget cut in recent years, what progress is being made for the Council's case for a fairer grant given that this is significantly less than for other neighbouring boroughs?*

The Leader of the Council reported that proposals were being developed to make an offer to residents to work with the Council, in an amicable and non political manner, to make a case for additional funds from Central Government.

Harrow received approximately £159 less per person than the London average. Whilst it was accepted that nationally this was an issue, it had to be recognised that London had issues which were unique to it and not applicable to other parts of the country.

*Given the recent Central Government decision to postpone the cap on care provisions, what are the Council doing to make the case to Central Government to support the social care system?*

The proposals would be assessed and anything to support the social care system would be supported. This was an important issue especially with the large number of elderly people in the borough. The Council had an excellent Adult Social Care Team headed by an excellent Director which it should be proud of.

The Chief Executive reported that there was an ageing population in Harrow and the Local Government Association had made a lobbying effort to Central Government to get the adult social care budget protected. Residents were living longer and having more complex needs. The Government had recognised that this was an issue which is why they had delayed the introduction of the caps on care through the Care Act.

The Chief Executive also reported on a number of factors impacting on Local Government funding. The Local Government Association had done some research and reported that half of Councils had reported that they had run out of efficiency ideas and about a third were using their reserves to deliver a balanced budget. Whilst Local Government had done a good job in delivering funding cuts, there was a school of thought that further efficiencies would be very difficult to achieve.

*There are concerns regarding responding to responding to residents. There had been a recent case where responses had not been provided by officers and had to be escalated by the Councillor to the Chief Executive. It is important to recognise that residents paid their Council Tax and are customers of the Council.*

The Chief Executive explained that if requests for responses reached him then the system was not working as it should. This was recognised as an issue.

The solution to this involved getting the basics right. It was important to respond to all queries in a timely manner and if it was not possible to explain when a response would be provided. The tone of the responses should be constructive, saying sorry and thank you where appropriate. This did not necessarily need to involve extra resources to be able to get this right.

*Will the proposal on the Garden Waste Charge be reconsidered if it is proved not to be correct or un-sustainable?*

The Chief Executive responded by stating that the Council was a learning organisation and always learnt from any decision that it made. It was clear that tough political decisions had to be made. It was his job to deliver what had been agreed by the Councillors.

The Leader of the Council also stated that the Chief Executive did offer his professional opinion on issues and they had an excellent relationship.

Sometimes the Chief Executive's opinion did differ from his but final decisions on these issues were made by Councillors.

*What steps is the Council taking in relation to protecting the safeguarding of children?*

Safeguarding of children was a key priority for the Council. Part of this was linked to the Council supporting the prevention of and dealing with Domestic Violence. To date almost £200,000 had been spent with £800,000 to follow.

There were many different issues in relation to the safeguarding of children and the Council were strongly committed to tackling all of these issues.

*What plans does the Council have in relation to the sports development of young children?*

The Leader of the Council explained that the Council would be investing £30,000 towards sports the physical activity for young people in Harrow. The Council were committed to the sports development of young people in the borough and would continue to do this.

*In relation to the campaign for a fairer grant from Local Government that was referred to earlier, what will this involve, who is co-ordinating this and which residents are the Council targeting?*

The Leader of the Council responded by stating that a motion requesting a fairer grant was agreed at the last Full Council meeting. This campaign was work in progress.

The evidence in relation to this request for a fairer grant was compelling. Harrow received approximately £159 per person less than the London average. This meant that the Council were losing about £35 million worth of funding which could have protected affected services.

The Communications Team were currently working up proposals to involve residents and opposition Councillors in the campaign. The Council would work with them to make the Council's representations to local MPs the Treasury and the Department for Communities and Local Government. This would ultimately benefit the people of Harrow.

*The Chief Executive had said at a recent resident association meeting in South Harrow that he would look at cameras being installed in the area to address fly tipping in the area. There are also concerns regarding the use of agency staff. Have any actions been taken in relation to this?*

The Chief Executive responded that he had not yet been provided with a copy of the minutes from the resident association meeting. However he was keen to explore the use of CCTV to address issues of fly tipping. He was keen to understand the specific location of these issues. In addition to this if there was any issue regarding the use of agency staff in a service area, he would be happy to look into this.



*How excited is the Council in terms of its future direction?*

Notwithstanding the current financial climate facing Local Government, the Leader responded by stating that the Council was ambitious and hopeful of the opportunities that would present itself in the future. Services in the Council were doing well including HB Public Law which was leading the way in terms of the Commercialisation agenda for the Council. Further ideas would be presented to the Cabinet shortly.

The Chief Executive reported that his hope was that the economic and social regeneration would take effect as planned and that this would create pride in the borough and make a real difference to residents' quality of life.

*Was it true that £8 million worth of funding cuts would be made to the Children's Services' budget for this current financial year?*

The Leader reported that this was not correct. The Council were currently in the process of preparing proposals for the budget for the next financial year.

The Chair thanked the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive for their attendance and responding to the questions raised.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.21 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR JERRY MILES  
Chair