

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES

14 FEBRUARY 2017

Chair: * Councillor Jerry Miles

Councillors:

* Ghazanfar Ali	* Jo Dooley
* Richard Almond	* Ameet Jogia
† Mrs Chika Amadi	* Chris Mote
† Jeff Anderson	* Paul Osborn

Voting Co-opted: (Voluntary Aided) (Parent Governors)

† Mrs J Rammelt
Reverend P Reece

Non-voting Co-opted: Harrow Youth Parliament Representative

In attendance: (Councillors) Kiran Ramchandani Portfolio Holder for Performance, Corporate Resources and Customer Service

Barry Macleod- Cullinane

* Denotes Member present
† Denotes apologies received

199. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

200. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Paul Osborn declared the possibility of a non-pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 8a (Digitilisation and Access to Services Online) in that he had been a Cabinet Member and might not be able to participate in the review of any decisions he had taken if these arose in the discussion of the item. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

All councillors present declared a non-pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 8a (Digitilisation and Access to Services Online) with respect to their own "My Harrow" online accounts. They would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

201. Minutes

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 8 November 2016 be taken as read and signed as a correct record, subject to amendment of the final sentence of the resolution at Minute 183 such that it concludes "... the criticisms **by** the Corporate Director, People."
- (2) the minutes of the special meetings of the Committee held on 1 February 2017 be taken as read and signed as correct records.

202. Public Questions and Petitions

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

203. References from Council/Cabinet

RESOLVED: To note that there were no references from the Cabinet or Council for consideration at this meeting.

RECOMMENDED ITEMS

204. Corporate Plan 2017

The Committee considered a report dealing with the Corporate Plan refresh for 2017. The Plan was scheduled to be discussed by Cabinet at its meeting on 16 February 2017.

The Portfolio Holder for Performance, Corporate Resources and Customer Services, briefly introduced the report, outlining the Leader's additional priorities related to equalities and enforcement, and stating that performance was holding up well in spite of a number of challenges, particularly with respect to budget pressures.

Members raised a number of questions and received responses as follows:

Was Cabinet satisfied with the level of performance and the quality of performance data? For example, recycling rates appeared to have fallen to 38% against a 2020 target of 50% and a previous 2015-16 performance at 43%, and there was no data for Quarter 2 of 2016-17, nor any commentary on these matters.

Cabinet was satisfied with both the overall performance set out in the plan and with the data. The latter was underpinned with a more detailed corporate performance report which was monitored on a quarterly basis by Cabinet. In the case of recycling, performance had been impacted by a national change in the classification of wooden materials which had affected all local authorities. Environment staff would be consulted on the framing of future targets in view of such developments.

How could it reasonably be claimed that there had been “improvements” in the garden waste service when the implementation had been flawed?

The Corporate Plan did refer to the problems associated with the implementation (Page 11 of the Plan), but these had been resolved.

Did Cabinet agree that a staff training rate of 14% for equalities training was unacceptable?

The Portfolio Holder for Performance, Corporate Resources and Customer Services considered the performance unacceptable, but she was aware of certain mitigating factors such as the requirement for face-to-face training for some staff without ready access to computers, and the fact that some staff had only recently passed the two-year threshold for their accreditation and needed to complete the course again. Nevertheless, it was accepted that there had to be considerable improvement and there was a current drive to increase course completions.

What was the basis for the Leader’s statement in the plan that there was a 10-year life expectancy gap between the poorest and most affluent parts of the Borough? Figures in the plan suggested that this figure should be 6 years for men and 5.6 years for women (Page 13 of the Plan).

It was understood that the statement was based on information from the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) and national indicators of multiple deprivation. It reflected some significant differences within the Borough, such as between Pinner and Wealdstone, and was intended to demonstrate the extent of the gap in respect of the areas with highest and lowest rates rather than the averages cited in the body of the plan itself.

What was the basis for the £15m figure given for the anticipated income from commercial activities and did this figure refer to the period to 2019 or to 2020 since information in the plan was ambiguous on this point.

Information on this was available in the report to Cabinet on the Council's 2017-18 budget, but income was expected from a range of areas such as legal services, HR services, procurement, Project Phoenix, school improvement services, Wiseworks, etc.

How reliable was the expected income from Project Infinity, particularly given that it represented the largest element of the proposed contributions from commercial activities? Beyond the "My Community" e-purse, were the other projects and products within the scheme little more than vague concepts with speculative assumptions about income?

There was a table of information in the report to the Cabinet on the Council's 2017-18 budget which set out information on the various commercialisation projects. The £15m figure was intended to relate to the period to the end of March 2020. The MCep product in the My Community e-purse project was being re-platformed and marketed by the Council and IBM; the other elements were in the development stage and it was therefore inevitably the case that the financial projections would be targets and estimates and were therefore speculative. Any future changes would be made through an annual budget refresh process. Assumptions had to be made about such matters as the composition of care packages and product take-up. All the projects had been reviewed and the targets revised accordingly; a more detailed briefing could be provided to Members if this was required.

An income figure of £640,000 had been associated with a "Community Wrap" project, but there had been no other information for Members on this scheme – could this be explained?

It was agreed that the Corporate Director, Resources and Commercialisation would arrange for the Director Adult Social Services to offer to brief Members with more detail on these projects.

How did the Council propose to accommodate the needs of the increased number of children and very elderly people in the Borough arising from the new housing units included in regeneration plans? Had the Council not taken account of the considerable additional cost which could arise?

With respect to school populations, these had been projected and factored into expansion plans. There were modeling tools for adult social care needs and it was understood similar tools were used for assessment of children's special needs. The Council was taking account of demographic growth pressures in their budget plans.

Did the Council consider that the additional housing would bring considerable benefits to local people?

The Council was clear and committed in its objective to address the local housing crisis by providing significant numbers of new affordable homes in the

Borough; this was part of a plan considered to be both ambitious and achievable.

How was the Council proposing to assist those people in the private rented sector faced with homelessness following eviction?

The Help to Let scheme had proved successful and the Council was acquiring properties to expand the stock of homes for social rent, with some 50 properties already transferred. Further information could be provided.

What were the governance arrangements for the letting of these new properties? Were the directors of the private company involved officers of the Council, and if so, how did their remuneration operate?

The Council had established a company limited by share with the Council as sole owner (Concilium Business Services Ltd.), although the Corporate Director, Resources and Commercial would check this. Its Directors were four officers of the Council, but they acted in the interests of the company in that role with the Council as owner. A Shareholder's Agreement was in place which set the parameters for the company's activities and an annual agreed plan formed the basis for its work; ultimately, it was in the control of the Council as sole shareholder. The Directors were remunerated and expected to carry out their company duties in addition to their substantive Council roles with additional hours being worked; the company's accounts would set out these figures.

How had the requirements of legislation about registering people with significant control or influence been addressed in the case of Concilium Business Services Ltd.?

Officers would report back to Members on this matter.

Had the Council established any threshold or policy which might limit any losses being incurred by its local authority company? What was the target date for the letting of 500 homes by Concilium Business Services Ltd.?

The company reported to the Council on a quarterly basis and while there was no target or threshold in terms of financial position, the Council was ultimately in control and could take any appropriate action in response to performance, including cessation of trading if that were deemed necessary. A new business plan for the company's activities in the following year was currently in preparation and Cabinet would receive a report on this.

Should the work of Concilium Business Services Ltd. be included in the Corporate Plan given uncertainties over its place in the private residential lettings market?

The reference in the Corporate Plan reflected the original plan for the company, when the intention was to source properties to let from the private market from Council's properties temporary accommodation and from those developed through regeneration. Cabinet would be able to review the project and the company's activities in the light of the new business plan.

How could the Council deal with cases of drivers parking on footways causing damage to grass verges?

This would be raised with the appropriate Portfolio Holder. The Council had secured new resources for enforcement in this area.

The Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder and officers for their attendance.

Resolved to RECOMMEND: (to Cabinet)

That the comments from the Committee on the Corporate Plan be referred to Cabinet.

RESOLVED ITEMS

205. Street Trading Charges

The Chair confirmed that this item had been withdrawn since officers were still working on the implementation of the revised policy; a report would be brought to the Committee at its next meeting on 6 April 2017.

A Member asked how the delay in this report related to the proposals for street trading charges in the reports on the 2017-18 budget being made to the Cabinet and the full Council over the following week or so. The Portfolio Holder for Performance, Corporate Resources and Customer Services agreed to confirm the position and advise Members of the Committee.

206. Digitalisation and access to services online

In accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, the Committee agreed to consider a report on Digitalisation and Access to Online Services notwithstanding the fact that the report had not been circulated with the main agenda since the latest Quarter 3 data had not been available at the time and the report title had also been inadvertently omitted from the scrutiny forward work programme. The Committee agreed to accept the item on grounds of urgency in order to respond to feedback from residents and the VCS in relation to the difficulties experienced in contacting the Council.

The Portfolio Holder for Performance, Corporate Resources and Customer Services introduced the report, setting it in the context of the Administration's objective of making online the "channel of choice" for residents. The Head of Customer Services and Business Support outlined the key challenges and the

extent of progress in the shift to online transactions, communications and information.

A Member referred to residents only being able to report a missed refuse bin collection for their own premises via the webform, meaning that other residents nearby would not benefit from a more comprehensive reporting for the street generally. The Director of Customer Services and Business Transformation would consider whether this could be addressed in the webform design.

The Member also asked about whether someone with Power of Attorney for a Borough resident would be permitted to use online transactions and communications on behalf of the resident. The Director of Customer Services and Business Transformation advised that there was provision for “mediated access” in the current MyHarrow account arrangements.

In response to a Member’s query, the Head of Customer Services and Business Support agreed to supply information on website use to Members of the Committee.

A Member explained the frustrations which some residents in Pinner South ward had encountered in that there had been no prompt confirmation emails to those who had applied early for the new “brown bin” garden waste service. This had led to concerns as to whether applications had been received and had generated unnecessary phone calls and emails. The Member asked whether these circumstances were connected to mistakes made in the implementation of the scheme. The officers confirmed that there had been inadequate integration of information and systems at the outset so that early applicants had to be contacted by phone and email to complete data required, including bank details for payment of the charge involved. Understandably, this had been the cause of concern and frustration for some residents, but nevertheless, there was never any risk to their application and arrangements had been made with each applicant for the secure transfer of bank details. It was the case that relevant staff were learning lessons from each new scheme and were improving the integration of data and systems at each stage.

A Member asked about the Council’s approach to those who did not have access to the internet or were not confident or patient enough in using the MyHarrow account for Council services. An officer underlined that the Council were keen for residents to telephone or visit the Civic Centre if they were not able to, or otherwise did not wish to, use online methods. There had never been any intention to close off the more traditional forms of contact. Residents visiting the Civic Centre were supported by staff in using the computer terminals in the reception area so that confidence and capability in online communications were increased.

The Member also referred to occasions when a resident would receive an acknowledgement email indicating a timescale within which a matter would be addressed, but then not having any contact details to chase up when this timescale was not met. He suggested that residents should be provided with a generic email address and relevant telephone contact numbers. The officer reported that the Council was trying to improve the connections to back-office

systems so that residents would receive automated emails on the status of their service issue, eg. why a refuse bin had not been collected. The challenge with respect to telephone contact details and generic email addresses was that these tended to be used a great deal if readily available on webpages and in acknowledgement emails. For example, a generic email would often be used subsequently to report something without giving sufficient information; the approach was to encourage residents to use webforms which ensured that the key required information was obtained. Members were advised that this model was similar to the approach of John Lewis on its webpages where such contact details were only made available if an online alternative was not in place.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.33 pm, closed at 8.59 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR JERRY MILES
Chair