

Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Special)

Minutes

12 July 2021

Present:

Chair: Councillor Sachin Shah

Councillors: Dan Anderson
Jeff Anderson
Sarah Butterworth
Ramji Chauhan
Stephen Greek
Jean Lammiman
James Lee

**In attendance
(Councillors):** Graham Henson
Natasha Proctor
Krishna Suresh

**Apologies
received:** Councillor Ajay Maru
Councillor Chris Mote
Councillor Kanti Rabadia

Absent: Mr M Chandran
Mr N Ransley
Harrow Youth Parliament
Representative
Reverend P Reece
Ms M Trivedi

169. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Councillor Ajay Maru
Councillor Ramji Chauhan

Reserve Member

Councillor James Lee
Councillor Kantil Rabadia

170. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that

- (1) the Declarations of Interests published in advance of the meeting on the Council's website were taken as read;
- (2) Members of the Committee and Co-opted Members who had declared interests remained in the virtual meeting whilst the matters were considered and voted upon.

Councillor Ramji Chauhan declared that his wife worked for Northwick Park Hospital.

Councillor Dan Anderson declared that he was the Portfolio Assistant to Cllr Sue Anderson, who's portfolio covered customer services.

Resolved Items

171. Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion

The Committee received the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion report, which was presented by an Officer in brief. It was noted that:

- The Council had launched a 3-strand approach to race equality in order for inequality in life outcomes to be addressed, for the services and role as an employer to be reviewed.
- An independent race adviser was commissioned to conduct an internal review of the Council's role as an employer. A staff survey was also conducted to which circa 700 staff took part.
- Recommendations had centred around recruitment and retention, for the organisation's culture to be changed through training and development and for safe spaces to be created for dialogue.
- It was essential to address issues around race inequality with staff which were based on mutual trust, openness, and honesty.
- The next stage would involve the creation of the corporate race action plan for the race review.
- It was explained that the race action plan included a six-step process including focus groups, data analysis, establish priorities, a directorate EDI Vision to be created, measures to be defined and for these to be reviewed and evaluated.
- Implementation of the action plan would be aimed to begin for November 2021.

The Director of HR and OD added that what could be seen in the race action plan overlapped well with planned improvements to the HR service, ensuring that there would be a good staff development offer for staff and for career support and development to be implemented for all staff.

The Cabinet Member for equalities and public health added that this review was very much welcomed and that the coaching, mentoring and leadership programmes to be implemented would be positive benefit for staff.

The Chair thanked officers and opened the floor to questions from the Committee which were discussed and answered by the officers present, which highlighted the following:

- Raised if there were planned processes for other protected characteristics as it would be vital for all protected characteristics to be included. It was explained by the Director of HR and OD that there was a need to focus on race because there had been a need to prioritise a response to Black Lives Matter. However, it was noted that the race action plan was being used to test initiatives that would be part of an overall approach to equalities, diversity, and inclusion which could be applied to other issues of underrepresentation.
- It was emphasised by a Committee Member that it would be useful to know how the Council would be creating an environment where those with disabilities could come forward. The Director of HR and OD explained that part of the disability confident campaign had outlined how the council aimed to be disability welcoming which formed part of the Council's employer branding.

In addition, there was the new staff network called DAWN (Disability and Well-being Network) which was launched late in early 2021, this had allowed for a safe place for staff to raise and be consulted around the disability agenda and had been promoted through staff Yammer groups as well as staff briefings.

- It was raised by a Committee Member that though officers mentioned equality and fairness there was no mention of when an employee might want to approach someone who was independent of the Council. The Director of HR and OD highlighted that the council's commissioning of Patrick Vernon as an independent adviser had proved to be a success with staff approaching him through the formal focus groups and through direct contact in order for experiences to be directly shared.

The Director of HR and OD also added that an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team had been set up which had given staff a channel to raise equality issues with confidence. In addition, Dignity at Work champions would be introduced who would be able to support fellow staff.

- A Committee member then followed up by asking what the current retention is of staff was, which the Director of HR and OD answered

formal complaints were low and that they had started to record the outcomes of cases which would in future give a better understanding on staff retention in this context.

- An explanation on what had been done to address issues that surrounded management culture had been requested, to which an officer noted that the focus groups that were undertaken during May and June of 2021 consulted staff on what changes they would like made and from that it was found that there should be more consistency within the appraisal system, with a focus group with managers had also been arranged for September 2021.
- With a shift toward remote and hybrid working it was queried if there would be a risk that those with protected characteristics would go unseen. The Director of HROD reassured members that this format of working had been considered in the race action plan.
- Asked when the recommendation for a similar review with residents, community organisations, faith groups and businesses would be undertaken, an officer informed the Committee that some work had already begun around education and with the Council's charity sector partners for youth services to be delivered. The homelessness service was being looked into, particularly to consider any biases within our housing system.
- When it came to how successful the focus groups had been gathering data it was explained by an officer that the attendance was well received and noted that a wide range of staff joined the focus groups which had allowed individuals to share experiences with those who they may not otherwise speak to within the organisation.
- In order to see if improvements had been made a Member of the Committee asked if there was data available on how many managers within the Council were hired externally vs internally as well as the demographics of the management staff. It was noted that this data could give insight into how well the council was doing in terms of internal career progression for staff at Harrow. The Chief Executive pointed out that the Council was very conscious of the diversity within the directorate of Harrow Council.
- The Chair asked if there were any barriers faced by the race action plan, an officer explained that it was important to gain as much engagement from managers as possible. However, the officer also noted that there was confidence that once discussions had begun at director level, they should see management engagement improve.

The Chief Exec added that the biggest challenge had been to have the capacity for this race action plan to be implemented during a pandemic to a standard that Harrow Council would be happy with.

- They also asked the Cabinet member for equalities and public health what they had done to communicate the race action plan to other Cabinet members and others when it came to the implementation of the report. To which the Cabinet Member mentioned that this information would be passed on, to have transparency and for these voices to be heard.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

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

The Committee received a presentation on the strategic context and priorities from the Chief Executive which noted the following:

- The response to Covid-19 would continue to dominate the work of the Council for the next 9 to 12 months.
- There had been significant service pressures caused by the pandemic.
- Strategic priorities were explained to be what could be done alongside the response and recovery from the pandemic. This included the delivery of core Council services with the extra demand, the HSDP and wider regeneration strategy, the accommodation strategy, health and social care integration, the equalities, diversity and inclusion agenda.
- It was mentioned that the winter months would likely bring challenges to the NHS and Social Care due to flu season and Covid-19.
- The council's ability to restart paused activities that were pre-Covid-19 would be limited.

The Leader of the Council also added that staff would continue to be impacted by the pandemic as it was still on going and that staff have worked with very little breaks which was a factor that others should be mindful of when the recovery to the pandemic begins.

The Chair thanked them for the presentation and then opened the floor to the Committee for questions that related to the following topics which were answered as followed:

The Covid-19 Pandemic

Q. How many staff had been put on furlough related to the issues of health?

The Chief Executive explained that no Council staff had been furloughed because it was not necessary and also would have been frowned upon for public sector employers to furlough staff. When it came to sickness absence and self-isolation from Covid-19 had always been relatively manageable.

Q. Was there an understanding on the long-term impact long-covid would have on our social care provision?

The Chief Executive noted though this could be a pressure that the social care provision could be faced with in the future it relatively not impacted social care. However, one of the biggest challenges that social care had been faced with was that the elderly that survived the pandemic had been debilitated further by the pandemic. It was also found that there was an element of catching up on elective care and delivering a higher level of aftercare packages to those who had been discharged from hospital.

This was followed up by a Member of the Committee noting that those with long-covid could have relied on family when restrictions were in place but may now have to rely on social care when those restrictions would be eased. The Chief Executive agreed and noted that another challenge could be that many people who caught long-covid may not be eligible for social care.

Q. It was mentioned that how the pandemic had affected Council priorities. What has the impact been on the Council's core services?

The Chief Executive explained that core services were running reasonably normally as it was aimed to keep services operating to a reasonable level however, it had not been possible to be as responsive as the Council would have liked.

Q. How far into the future do you anticipate the Council being affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in its day-to-day work?

The Chief Executive noted that they believed it would affect the Council's work over the next 9 to 12 months. Work would be impacted in a number of different ways, and it was believed that there would be extreme pressure during the winter months. There could also be a significant spike in unemployment, housing could be seen as challenge for the future as well as pressures in social care.

Council Finance

Q. Regarding the gap in the capital budget and the impact on interest is quite significant and going up from £38.7m this year to £43.6m next year. This would mean the 25% of the revenue budget would be taken up by interest payments from the capital budget. What would be the Council's plan for reducing this?

The Director of Finance explained that there was a plan for the capital programme and that an element of this would be grant funding and would need to ensure that adjustments were made for that. The Director also noted that the figures quoted were not just interest payments but were also the Council's minimum revenue provision and the interest payment. The interest payment was circa £12m and that it was important to ensure that it was understood that it was not just capital financing. The Director of Finance then went on to explain the minimum revenue provision was a sum that needed to

be set aside from the Council's revenue budget in order for the capital programme to be funded.

Ove the last couple of years there had been a stringent approach to the capital programme with clear categories of what went into the capital programmes were set out, so that additional financing being added to the budget could be prevented and for this approach to be continued.

The Committee Member followed up by asking if any capital projects were in place to reduce the interest payment amount, as this would still be affecting the Council's day-to-day revenue spending.

The Director of Finance referred to the modernisation funding, which was funded through capital receipts but was important to remember that the Council had not been funded for any additional capital expenditure and so had to be internally funded, which for the modernisation, the government had allowed.

The Director of Finance also noted that they were aware of the Council's debt and had planned to dispose of some property in order for some debt to be offset. The Council also had to ensure that debts were not paid off too early to avoid early payment penalties.

The Deputy Leader of the Council mentioned that the capital was flexible using the money available in the ways that were possible and reducing debt had been a topic that was present in our conversations.

Q. What were the lesson learnt from other Councils in financial difficulties?

The Director of Finance gave assurance by noting that when other Councils have been found to struggle financial the Council had compared its own audit practices to those struggling in order to make sure an element had not been missed. Commercial investments were something the Council had done at a minimum level compared to other Councils who had borrowed much higher amounts for commercial investments.

Capital flexibilities were another factor where other Councils had been seen to use their capital flexibilities which was circa £70m, whereas Harrow Council's use of capital flexibilities over five years came to circa £12m. This highlighted that Harrow Council have used these tools responsibly and in a way that could be managed. In addition, it could be said that our use of the capital flexibilities was for one off payments towards modernisation as opposed to building it into annual costs which would not be very sustainable. Harrow Council had also monitored its revenue on a monthly basis compared to some authorities that had monitored their revenue either quarterly or bi-annually.

Q. Given the lack of a long-term funding settle in the health and social care white paper, how confident was the Council to meet the financial pressure over the coming years?

The Director of Finance noted that this would be a challenge and one of the biggest pressures against the budget. Monitoring was very tight over budgets and the Council would have to meet those pressures and would need to wait to see what the Council's settlements were in terms of what additional grants would be received next year.

The Chief Executive added that we would need to meet those social care needs and that it would be other services where there would be discretion in the budget.

Equality

A member of the Committee noted that the previous item's presentation was very useful and that it would also be good to have regular reviews or updates about other protected characteristics.

Performance issues and Consultations

Q. Regarding customer service and residents' ability to contact the Council, it seems to be harder for residents to contact the council since the move to an internet platform. How could this be addressed and how can we help residents who struggle to contact the Council in a better way?

The Chief Executive responded by noting that the pandemic has exacerbated this issue as there used to be staff who could help residents face to face in the Civic Centre help access services that were only online. The turbulence of demand caused by lockdowns had also overwhelmed the system. What had been planned was for the number of access points to be expanded within the Borough's libraries, to help meet demand and provide better access to services.

A Member of the Committee followed this up by highlighting certain features on the Council's website were not fully equipped to handle particular issues that residents had. To which the Leader of the Council noted that there were plans to help residents access services who don't have access to the internet and that the move to the new 8x8 telephone system should give better access to residents contacting the council by phone.

The Chief Executive noted that though certain aspects of this service could be improved there were challenges during the pandemic that required Council Staffs' capabilities that ultimately hindered other services, such as delivering business grants during the pandemic.

Q. What consultation has the Housing Service had with the Council? There were a couple of issues such as the services from Mount Vernon were planned to be moved to various locations and St Mary's being transferred to central Middlesex. Had there been consultation with the Council on these plans?

The Chief Executive mentioned that no formal consultation had taken place with the Council and that technically there would not have been a requirement

for the health service to consult the Council. There had been engagement and information from the health service on the Mount Vernon relocation, but for the transfer to central Middlesex this was not a permanent change therefore a consultation was not required.

The Leader of the Council added that at a national level a consultation had taken place on Mount Vernon hospital which was still on-going.

Q. A concern around consultation was the approach the Council had taken in the past, surrounding feedback not being properly gathered and a lack of communication with residents. How can the Council improve its approach to consultation?

The Chief Executive expressed that consultation and engagement had been conducted extensively with regards to the HSDP and that the Council's plans and proposals were well known and understood.

The LTN project was a difficult situation and could have been handled better, however the Council's communication and engagement with the public about the Pandemic had been very good.

The Member of the Committee followed up by saying that there were changes to the resident's environment that seemed to only be noticed after the changes had happened, for example planning permissions and CPZ's and it would be the Council's reputation that would be affected. To which the Chief Executive agreed that work could be done better culturally.

The Leader of the Council added that residents could sign up for alerts using the portal and was well used and on bigger consultations letters have been sent out to the wider community.

Q. Regarding Ward Councillor consultations, could there be a recommitment to this? As this does not seem to be happening as much as it should.

The Chief Executive was happy to do so and was something that could be improved upon.

General strategic direction of the Council

Q. Could the Committee be provided with an update on the borough plans?

The Chief Executive reported that there would be an update in Autumn on the progress against delivery of the key priorities within the borough plan and mentioned that good progress had been made on a number of areas despite the challenges of the pandemic and the capacity that the pandemic had taken out of the system.

It had been asked if it was possible to restart the engagement process around the borough plan and what were the top priorities given the resources available. The answers to these points were yet to be answered would be

present in conversations at the next Cabinet meeting. A refocus around certain priorities may be needed as things have changed in past 12 months which should be factored in what the Council could do in the next financial year.

Q. How would tackling overcrowding be reflected in planning policy and on-going work done by the Council?

The Chief Executive outlined that the HSDP was put into place for a significant number of homes to be generated as well as other development projects in Harrow, this is because more affordable homes were required. Opportunities for overcrowding to be addressed would come through the local plan which has been going out to consultation.

The Member of the Committee followed up by highlighting that while it was important to meet demand for the number of houses being built but it was also crucial for the correct type of home to be built also. The Chief Executive agreed and noted that the market would drive the meet the need and demand. In addition, the Leader of the Council also noted that larger housing had been featured in plans which explained the reduction in the number of houses planned to be built which were originally houses with fewer bedrooms.

HSDP

Q. Could the Committee receive an update on the lack of diversity of the HSDP Board?

The Chief Executive noted that conversations had taken place and was being looked into.

Q. What evidence is there that safeguarding has been considered for the HSDP projects?

The Chief Executive explained that the appropriate risk assessments would be done when the Council moves to its new facility and when other parts of the project are at an appropriate stage.

The Member of the Committee followed this up and highlighted that it was important to have a statement of intent that safeguarding will be part of the planning process. To which the Chief Executive explained that the appropriate risk assessments and staff consultations would take place.

RESOLVED: That the presentation be noted.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 6.30 pm, closed at 9.05 pm).

(Signed) Councillor Sachin Shah
Chair