

Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Special)

Minutes

7 January 2025

Present:

Chair: Councillor Amir Moshenson

Councillors: Dan Anderson
June Baxter
Govind Bharadia
Graham Henson
Maxine Henson
Kuha Kumaran
Samir Sumaria
Antonio Weiss

**In attendance
(Councillors):** David Ashton
Paul Osborn
For Minute 118
For Minute 118

**Apologies
received:** Councillor Vipin Mithani

Absent: Harrow Youth Parliament
Representative
Reverend P Reece
Ms M Trivedi

116. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Councillor Vipin Mithani

Reserve Member

Councillor Kuha Kumaran

117. Declarations of Interest

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

Resolved Items

118. Question and Answer Session with the Leader of the Council and the Managing Director of the Council

The Chair welcomed the Leader and the Managing Director to the Special Meeting of the Committee in accordance with Committee Procedure Rules 43 and 44. The Chair also welcomed the Portfolio Holder of Finance and Highways, and the Strategic Director of Finance and Assurance (Section 151 Officer) to the meeting.

The Chair informed the meeting that it would be an open Question and Answer session on a number of issues affecting the Council.

The Leader and the Managing Director briefed Members on the current financial challenges the Council was facing, particularly relating to adult social care, children's social care, and temporary accommodation. The Council had received the Local Government Finance Settlement, an annual process by which Central Government allocated grant funding to local authorities in the country. In spite of this being inadequate for Harrow, the Council would deliver a balanced budget.

In the Question and Answer session that ensued, Members asked questions on cross-cutting matters, to which responses were given.

Members asked whether the rent in Council-owned accommodation would increase during the current financial year, and by what percentage. They were informed that the increase would be at the rate of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) plus one percent. This had been the standard increment over the past years.

Members further questioned if tenants in Council-owned accommodation had been consulted about the likely increase in rent. They were advised that there had not been any changes in the policy of increasing rent by the rate of the CPI plus one percent, and that tenants, as well as leaseholders, would be consulted.

In response to a question on when the process for the corporate parenting strategy would be completed, Members were advised that the new leadership team in children's services were finalising the details. Once completed, a report would be submitted to Cabinet for approval. The timetable for the process would be shared with Members in due course.

Members queried if the Council Tax Support Scheme had in-built provisions to assist defaulting residents with potential fines for not meeting their Council Tax obligations. They were advised that the scheme was necessitated due to financial pressures, and residents were encouraged to approach the Council if

they still had challenges in paying Council Tax. However, fines would be issued where necessary, and as a last resort.

Members asked if there had been any changes to the administration of local government in the country since the General Election in May 2024, when a new government was elected. They were informed that not much had changed, and the much-anticipated reforms in local government were still awaited. The same challenges remained for Harrow, in particular rising costs for adult and children's social services, as well as temporary accommodation. Additionally, the cost of funding Freedom Passes had been increasing over the years.

In response to a concern in relation to fly tipping incidents not being adequately addressed, and whether targets had been set to fine offenders, Members were advised that due process of issuing fines should be followed and that the Council would be engaging with the contractor to ensure that that was undertaken.

In response to a separate concern on whether key services would be cut due to budgetary constraints, Members were advised that statutory services would continue to be provided, and that the Council could use some of its limited reserves to fund key services, if required.

Members asked if the Administration had engaged with Central Government, in collaboration with other local authorities in London, as well as local Members of Parliament (MPs) for increased funding. They were informed that the Administration had continued to lobby through the Local Government Association, London Councils, and local MPs. This was an ongoing process. However, the Council had to be realistic that Central Government had a limited amount earmarked for local government across the country, and any increment to the amount received by Harrow ought to be considered against that background.

In response to a question on the current status of Byron Hall and the Harrow Leisure Centre, and if there were any plans to refurbish them, Members were advised that it could be cost-effective to build new facilities because the cost of refurbishment mirrored constructing new ones.

Furthermore, Members asked if the entrance to the Harrow Council Hub would be improved to reflect a corporate image. It was advised that it would.

Members enquired if the current streetlights would be replaced with LED lights, and if this would lead to savings, as well as improve brightness across the borough. It was advised that the plan was to install LED lights across Harrow. It was, however, a phased process, whose savings would be realised over the years, as LED lights were more efficient. They were also flexible and could brighten up where conditions dictated.

The Leader highlighted four areas where the Administration had made strides with capital expenditure, despite the financial challenges. These were: increased road maintenance and pothole mending with an investment of around £14m; improved street cleaning at a cost of £800,000; re-opening

phone lines so that residents could contact the Council via telephone; and developing a new one-stop Council facility for ease of interaction.

Members asked why tarmac was being used to replace some pavements, and were advised that the technology was actually more environmentally friendly, smoother than concrete paving, and lasted longer.

In response to a question on parking enforcement, and whether Enforcement Officers were given targets to meet, and hence, an increase in issuing fines, Members were informed that parking enforcement was particularly problematic around schools during school runs for parents, but that no targets had been given to Enforcement Offices to issue fines.

Members asked about selective licensing in the private rented sector in Harrow, and if such areas were covered by enforcement. Members were advised that the Council was currently looking at areas that could be designated, with the aim of improving accommodation in the borough.

The Chair thanked the Leader and Managing Director for their attendance, and responses to questions. The Chair also thanked the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Highways, as well as the Strategic Director for Finance and Assurance (Section 151 Officer), for their attendance and answers to questions.

The Chair informed Members that the next meeting on 18 February 2025 would focus on the Revenue Budget 2025/26 and Medium Term Financial Strategy to 2027/28.

RESOLVED: That the Question and Answer session with the Leader and Managing Director be noted.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 6.30 pm, closed at 8.03 pm).

(Signed) Councillor Amir Moshenson
Chair