

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES

18 JULY 2012

Chairman:	* Councillor Jerry Miles	
Councillors:	* Kam Chana * Ann Gate Krishna James * Zarina Khalid	* Barry Macleod-Cullinane * Paul Osborn * Sasi Suresh (4) * Stephen Wright
Voting Co-opted:	(Voluntary Aided) † Mrs J Rammelt Reverend P Reece	(Parent Governors) † Mrs A Khan
In attendance: (Councillors)	Marilyn Ashton Thaya Idaikkadar	Minute 296 Minute 295

- * Denotes Member present
- (4) Denotes category of Reserve Member
- † Denotes apologies received

288. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Councillor Sue Anderson

Reserve Member

Councillor Sasi Suresh

289. Declarations of Interest

Members requested that Legal Services be requested to circulate advice on interests as there was some confusion in terms of types and nature of interests.

RESOLVED: To note that the following interest was declared:

Agenda Item 10 – Children Looked After Attainment

Councillor Ann Gate declared a non pecuniary interest in that she was married to the Portfolio Holder for Children, Schools and Families. She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

290. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 June 2012 and of the Special meeting held on 3 July 2012 be taken as read and signed as correct records.

291. Public Questions

In the absence of the questioner, the Chair indicated that a written response would be provided. This answer is set out below.

RESOLVED: To note that the following public questions had been received:

1.

Questioner: Mr A Pais

Asked of: Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Question: "This question relates to the Council's decision to award the contract to Whitchurch Consortium. As we all know the consultation was not carried out by Harrow Council, but by a party with a vested interest and as such produce any result provided one frames the question to produce the required answer. We wish to know what question was asked and whether the Councillors or Council Officials had any input in formulating that question and how many of the 1265 supporting signatures were collected at the open day event in Whitchurch Playing Fields?"

Written answer: I need to be clear from the outset that no contract has been awarded to The Whitchurch Consortium, in respect of the Whitchurch Playing Fields project.

At the meeting of Cabinet in November 2011, the Council agreed, amongst other things, that The Whitchurch Consortium should:-

§ Be selected as the Council's preferred bidder for the

purposes of further consultation

- § Present their proposed development plans to the public

The Whitchurch Consortium project manager has advised that no specific question was asked of local residents who signed the petition, expressing their general support for The Whitchurch Consortium's development proposals, for the Whitchurch Playing Fields project.

The front page of the petition was clearly labelled - 'The Whitchurch Playing Fields Support Petition - Have Your Say' and the majority of signatories completed the 'why you support this project' and/or 'Comment/Clarification' section of the petition.

The Whitchurch Consortium have advised that 711 signatures were definitely gained from door-to door consultation, with a rider 'although there are possibly more'.

Council officers did not contribute to the formulation of the questions but saw the front page of the petition document before The Whitchurch Consortium began their door-to door activity.

The use of a free text comment, to enable signatories of the petition to clearly state why they support the proposal has enabled some really useful information to be captured in respect of the wide ranging support for the project.

292. Petitions

RESOLVED: To note that no petitions were received at the meeting under the provisions of Committee Procedure Rule 15.

293. Deputations

RESOLVED: To note that no deputations were received at the meeting under the provisions of Committee Procedure Rule 16.

294. References from Council/Cabinet

RESOLVED: To note that no references had been received.

RESOLVED ITEMS

295. Petition - Whitchurch Playing Fields

In accordance with the Council's Petition Scheme, the Committee received a petition containing over 1,000 signatures that had been referred to in the

Cabinet report on Whitchurch Playing Fields on 20 June 2012. The petition supported the Whitchurch Consortium's proposals for the regeneration of Whitchurch Playing Fields.

The Chair advised Members that the Whitchurch Consortium had been invited to attend the meeting and also to submit questions but that they had indicated that they would not attend or ask questions as the petition was unusual in that it was supporting a Council initiative. The Consortium had indicated that they felt there was little they could add and did not think it appropriate therefore to ask any questions but would have been happy to if their presence had been requested. He indicated that he would, however, permit 15 minutes of questions to officers. He reminded Members that the petition was supportive of the Consortium's proposals. The Chair welcomed the Portfolio Holder for Property and Major Contracts and the Corporate Director of Place Shaping to the meeting.

Members asked a number of questions including the following:

- Clarification was sought as to whether the Council had had any involvement in the preparation of the petition and the Corporate Director of Place Shaping advised that the petition had been initiated by the Consortium. He understood that the petition had been prepared as a result of the positive comments the Consortium had received. The unredacted petition had been provided to Members of Cabinet, in confidence, and a validation check of the signatures had been carried out by Electoral Services.
- A Member expressed the view that the unredacted version of the petition should have been provided to Members of the Committee in order to enable scrutiny of the reasons stated by signatories for their support of the proposals. The Corporate Director indicated that he did not disagree with that view.
- In terms of duplication of pages contained in the petition, an officer advised that he had been aware of these and the net number of signatures was 1,265. The Portfolio Holder for Property and Major Contracts indicated that he was satisfied with the validity of the petition and the checks that had been carried out.
- A Member stated that at a meeting in March 2012, a lot of people had spoken against the proposal and it therefore appeared that the views of local residents had been ignored. The Portfolio Holder responded that a number of residents had spoken to him following that meeting and had indicated that they had not felt able to voice their support for the proposal due the nature of the meeting. The Corporate Director stated that he did not accept that local residents had been ignored as the Consortium had engaged with those residents adjoining the site.
- A Member stated that less than 30 people on the roads adjoining the site had signed the petition whilst the highest support came from Streatfield Road, a road nowhere near the site. The Portfolio Holder

responded that, in any planning application, those immediately adjacent to a site opposed proposals and he emphasised the need to minimize issues for those residents and to meet their needs. He stated that no contract had been signed with the Consortium.

- A Member questioned the sustainability of the proposals given that the number of marquees, the main income stream, was being reduced. It appeared that the site would be a social function venue rather than a sporting venue. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that income would be reduced. It would be a matter for the Licensing Panel to determine whether to permit the sale of alcohol at the site. He added that the lease would not be signed until the building had been completed.

The Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder and Corporate Director for their attendance and responses.

RESOLVED: That the petition be noted.

296. Scrutiny Review Report - Private Sector Rented Housing in Harrow

The Committee received a report of the Divisional Director of Partnership Development and Performance which set out the findings of the review of private rented sector housing in Harrow.

The Chair welcomed the Chair of the Review Group, Councillor Marilyn Ashton, to the meeting. The Chair of the Review Group outlined the content of the report. In terms of the recommendations, she advised that members of the review group had expressed differing views but that she hoped that the report would be useful to both this and any future Cabinet. She indicated that she was happy to provide the Committee with a briefing note on dealing with the proceeds of crime / planning enforcement. She also made reference the suggestion that had come out of the review that there be a landlord kite mark.

The Chair of the Review Group stated that if the residents of Harrow were provided with excellent, reasonably priced private rented sector housing it would prevent people from being housed in unsatisfactory accommodation.

Members then asked questions and made comments as follows:

- The Chair of the Scrutiny Review Group was invited to attend the Standing Scrutiny Review of the Budget meeting which considered the effective use of capital for regeneration of the borough.
- A Member questioned whether there had been any consultation with Estate Agents with a large rental market and was advised that there seemed to be an issue with the review group having access to this information, although it would have been useful.
- In relation to a query on Help2Let, the Chair of the Review Group advised that this was a partnership involving the Council but that it would be necessary for any details to be provided by Housing.

- A Member stated that the number of empty homes in Harrow, 60, and the number that would become family dwellings, was not significant.
- In terms of economic development and the benefit cap, the Chair of the Review Group confirmed that the correct information had been included in the report and made the case for the recommendation. The review made the observation that there could potentially be a problem for people to remain in Harrow.
- A Member stated that it was necessary for Cabinet to see the review report prior to the housing policy documents being finalised.
- The Chair of the Review Group undertook to circulate details of a recent court case to Members of the Committee.

Members congratulated the Chair of the Review Group on the report. The Chair thanked her for attendance and responses.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the report of the review group be agreed and be referred to Cabinet on 13 September 2012;
- (2) the findings of the private tenant survey be appended to the review report prior to its submission to Cabinet;
- (3) Recommendation K of the review be accepted, and the Standing Review of the Budget consider the policy objectives of the Private Sector Strategy as part of its work in reviewing the council's use of capital.

297. Children Looked After Attainment

The Committee received a report from the Corporate Director of Children, Schools and Families which summarised and evaluated achievement data for Harrow Children Looked After (CLA) using the Department for Education definition of CLA.

An officer reported that this year's results were not yet available but that the report presented previous years' for Members' review. Ofsted had made positive comments in relation to CLA at their recent inspection and the good educational provision and placements of CLA.

Members made comments and asked questions as follows:

- A Member stated that he had a number of concerns in relation to the report and questioned why the 3 Headteachers previously responsible for CLA attainment had appeared to fail on each aspect of their job description. In addition, the report did not acknowledge that the system had not worked. The officer advised that the serving headteachers had

moved into the specialist area CLA and that there had been a steep learning curve which might be why the Member's perception was that improvement had not been as quick as he would have liked. There had been a change in emphasis in that there was now a figure head, the Virtual Headteacher, to refer to.

In terms of the 3 areas of responsibility of a virtual school head, an officer advised that this section of the report had been edited and that there was a need to be open about the lessons to be learnt. The 3 part time virtual headteachers had concentrated on CLA in Harrow schools and those CLA placed outside Harrow had only received a response when there had been a crisis.

- A Member expressed the view that, due to the presentation of the graphs, the information provided was limited. He requested that 'real time' information be presented. An officer advised that he could provide the data behind the figures in an A3 format and that work was being done in relation to absence tracking. In year progress tracking had improved.
- In response to a Member's question about statistical comparison with other boroughs, an officer advised that Harrow had largely been compared with other outer London Boroughs and Slough. Variations were often due to small numbers. He added that Harrow was struggling against the national picture mainly due to a challenging teenage cohort of CLA. There had been a higher number of teenagers in the previous few years.
- In terms of sharing information and learning, the officer advised that there were regional networks of VHT and this was used for sharing good practice. There was also a conference being held in November 2012.
- A Member stated that it was recognised that Children in Care tended to have low attainment but there did not appear to be any mention of the emotional needs of a child. An officer advised that work had been done by Children's Services in this area and that the remodelling of the service had enabled better analysis. Officers were also working with partners on a triage of services. Another officer added that care had been taken to ensure the placement of CLA in good or outstanding schools.
- A Member questioned why the Committee was being presented with out of date information in terms of attainment and was advised that the action plan had been updated for the Ofsted inspection but that further information could be provided. The Member went on to challenge officers in terms of base budgets, on the fact that revision classes did not appear to have been held and that the focus in general appeared to be wrong. The officer responded that the advantage of now having one VHT was that there could be organised strategic planning. She was trying to bring some coherence but a little more time was required.

- Referring to item 11 on the action plan, a Member questioned whether the plan referred to had been circulated to school staff. The officer advised that it had not but that the foster care plan had. Another officer advised that the action plan was not in chronological order or order of preference; all actions were important.
- A Member sought clarification as to when CLA were no longer the responsibility of the Council. He went on to ask whether these children were tracked in terms of getting jobs and going on to university as it was the 'rounded' person that determined the success of the Council. An officer advised that at 18, a CLA became a young person leaving care and that the Council had responsibility until that young person was 21 or 24. In terms of tracking, this was typically an area fraught with difficulties as on reaching 18, the young person tended to want to cut ties with the Council, although support was offered. In her view, the key to this was building good relationships with children at a young age. She added that Harrow currently had 13 former CLA at university.
- In relation to benchmarking, an officer advised that all care leavers were measured but that it was a challenging indicator. Further details would be provided to Members.
- A Member challenged officers in that there appeared to be no figures in relation to post 16 CLA and these children had priority in terms of admission to outstanding schools. He added that he would like this subject to remain on the scrutiny agenda in order to ensure robust challenge without causing undue work to officers. The officer indicated that she would provide scrutiny with a report at least annually and a report on exam results later in the year.
- A Member commented that, from the data presented, there appeared to be one exceptional student and she asked whether any lessons could be learnt from that individual's situation. The officer advised that this student would have done well whatever their circumstances. There was a need to focus on those students who could achieve but where something was preventing them from performing well. There was a need to see young people as individuals.
- A Member stated that it would be helpful to see where the Council had made a real difference to a child. An officer advised that better information gathering when a child came into care was required and that the VHT needed to know a child's capabilities and potential for the future. She hoped that by keeping this topic on the scrutiny agenda that Members would get a sense of this group of children.

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance and responses and asked that the information requested be circulated to Members.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the report be noted; and
- (2) the Children and Families scrutiny lead Members consider this area and a meeting involving these Members and the Vice Chair of the Committee, the Chair and Vice Chair of the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Sub-Committee be convened in order to determine the focus of the work they wished to consider.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.22 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR JERRY MILES
Chairman