

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES

17 SEPTEMBER 2013

Chairman:	* Councillor Paul Osborn	
Councillors:	* Kam Chana * Mano Dharmarajah * Tony Ferrari * Graham Henson	* Jerry Miles * Bill Phillips (1) * Sachin Shah (3) * Stephen Wright
Voting Co-opted:	(Voluntary Aided) † Mrs J Rammelt Reverend P Reece	(Parent Governors) * Mrs A Khan
Non-voting Co-opted:	* Harrow Youth Parliament Representative	
In attendance: (Councillors)	William Stoodley	Minute 435

- * Denotes Member present
- (1) and (3) Denote category of Reserve Members
- † Denotes apologies received

429. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Councillor Sue Anderson
Councillor Ann Gate

Reserve Member

Councillor Sachin Shah
Councillor Bill Phillips

430. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:

Agenda Item 7 – Regeneration in North Harrow, Replicating the Lessons in other parts of the Borough

Councillor William Stoodley, who was not a member of the Committee, declared a non-pecuniary interest in that he had been the Portfolio Holder at the time the report was prepared. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

Agenda Item 8 – Debt Recovery Process

Councillor Sachin Shah declared a non pecuniary interest in that he had been the Portfolio Holder when the majority of decisions had been made in relation debt recovery. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

431. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 July 2014, be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

432. Public Questions

RESOLVED: To note that no public questions were received.

433. Petitions

RESOLVED: To note that no petitions had been received.

434. References from Council/Cabinet

RESOLVED: To note that no references had been received.

RESOLVED ITEMS

435. Regeneration in North Harrow, replicating the lessons in other parts of the borough

Members received a report of the Corporate Director of Environment and Enterprise which outlined the work to reduce vacancy rates in North Harrow and how the lessons learnt could be transferred to other district centres in the borough. The report detailed the activities in North Harrow in the context of emerging national, regional and local strategies to stimulate economic growth.

The Committee agreed that the former Portfolio Holder for Planning and Regeneration be allowed to address the Committee. The Chair welcomed the former Portfolio Holder and officers to the meeting.

Members welcomed the report stating that the lessons learnt section was helpful and that it could be a valuable blueprint as to what could be done elsewhere. Having considered the report, Members made comments and asked questions as follows:

- Clarification was sought in relation to the North Harrow Business Association and Members were advised that the North Harrow Partnership had been established. The Council was able to guide business/traders' associations in terms of constitutional issues.
- A Member questioned whether the Council was able to coordinate different traders associations and whether there was any particular mix of retail and non retail that the Council could secure. The officer advised that such associations were sometimes dependent on only one or two individuals who were enthusiastic, active and community orientated. Many in the borough functioned without direct Council support and that others needed some Council direction. In terms of retail/non retail use, a local development order provided more flexibility in changing the use of premises, but the Council was unable to prevent the same type of business trading if that use was permitted. The Council could not, for example, limit the number of fried chicken shops in area if that class of use was allowed.
- A Member stated that traders and residents' groups were vital to a successful district centre but may become demotivated by lack of action by the Council. An officer advised that a toolkit had been prepared that provided traders with advice on how to set up a group, best practice and development of a constitution. The officer also attended meetings of the traders' associations and partnerships to provide advice and guidance.
- Referring to the gym, the effect on the area and the controversy linked with the lack of supermarket in North Harrow, a Member questioned how the Council could get residents on board. The officer stated that, in his view, residents had been on board and that the items that residents could buy from a supermarket were readily available from the independent traders in North Harrow. The opening hours of the gym had been an issue but the gym had also brought visitors into the area who may then spend money locally. The former Portfolio Holder added that at the time the Council agreed to the gym, the Council had been keen to find a business to use the premises.
- A Member congratulated officers for the work done, stating that North Harrow had been a success largely due to the mix of business models.
- With reference to the petition presented to Cabinet the previous week which had contained over 3,000 signatures, a Member stated that it

appeared that parking was a priority for residents. Residents wished to make their purchases quickly and easily by parking outside the relevant shop, rather than parking round the corner in the car park. The officer responded that traders wanted on street parking and the car park was under used. A survey of 400 shoppers and 200 business had identified that the importance of parking was dependent on the particular shopping area (district centre). For shoppers, the biggest draw was the offer in the shops but he acknowledged that there were considerable complexities around parking.

- A Member questioned whether any resources were available from the Greater London Authority for similar work to that done in North Harrow and, if so would bids for vulnerable areas be likely to succeed. The officer advised that such funding was not available, but if they became available would hope a bid would be successful.

The Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder and officers for their attendance and responses. It was then proposed and unanimously agreed that it be

RESOLVED: That Cabinet be requested to consider this report and how viable it was and to consider those areas with over 10% frontage vacancy detailed on page 10 of the report.

436. Debt Recovery Process

Members received a report which provided information requested by the Committee at the meeting on 4 June 2013. This included information on the effectiveness of all Debt Collection Policies within the Council, the draft Council Tax Debt Collection and Recovery Policy (which had been updated to include the corporate vulnerability criteria and check points to identify vulnerability at key points in the process), and the outcome of the review of the Corporate Debt Recovery Policy.

Members considered the report, made comments and asked questions as follows:

- Clarification was sought on the pilot completion date and the type of information that would result. In terms of the data sharing pilot, Members were advised that the debtor data put into the Council's system could now be cross referenced against department data and would flag any cases where further enquiry was required. There were currently seven red flags on Council Tax support payments. The second pilot was tracking 7,500 CTS payers.

The officer stated that he did have concerns in terms of the collection rates but that this was partly due to Council Tax support and reprofiling. Recovery action had been delayed until now.

- A Member questioned the extent to which properties where vulnerable people lived were flagged and whether this could be addressed. The officer advised that whilst there would be some merit in flagging

properties which housed a particular type of person, for example sheltered housing, this could be problematic due to people moving. If properties were used for other purposes it may result in a flag which could slow the collection rate of monies owing. The officer, at the Member's request, undertook to further consider this issue.

- Concern was expressed that credit cards were accepted by the Council for payment of Council Tax and that there appeared to be no signpost to credit unions. The officer responded that due to channel migration, credit and debit cards were viewed as the way forward and that significant sums were taken by the Council in credit card payments each year. There would be an additional two kiosks located in Access Harrow but ultimately the Council could not govern payment methods. In terms of the credit union, the officer advised that work was underway.
- Referring to the chart on page 56 of the report, a Member stated that it would be helpful to include the duration /time limit of each stage. He suggested that there could be value in including Frequently Asked Questions at Appendix C. The officer responded that duration could be included but that generally from demand to recovery was approximately 3 months.
- A Member sought clarification as to the progress of the analysis of the potential impacts of the Welfare Reforms in terms of Housing and collection rates. An officer advised that there had been a 'broad brush' analysis at this stage and that the income management team had been visiting individual cases. Since the introduction of the size criteria implications in April 2013, a steady increase had not been seen.
- The officer acknowledged a Member's concern that it was not clear who the draft Council Tax Collection and Recovery Policy was aimed at as its tone changed throughout the document but emphasised that it was a draft. The document was aimed at both debtors and staff.
- A Member questioned whether there had been difficulty in putting policies together from three different units and any noticeable difference in collection rates. An officer advised that lessons had been learnt and that there were similar trigger points. The Council could now work better with people who had multiple debts.

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance and for their responses.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the update on the effectiveness on the individual Service Debt Recovery Policies be noted;
- (2) the proposed changes within the Council Tax Collection and Recovery Policy and the Corporate Debt Recovery Policy be noted;

- (3) it be noted that the revised policies would be taken to consultation.

437. Report from the Accessible Transport Scrutiny Review

Members received a report from the Divisional Director of Strategic Commissioning which outlined the findings and recommendations of the Accessible Transport Scrutiny Review with regard to the accessibility of public transport in the Borough.

A member of the Review group commended the report to the Committee and thanked all those involved in both the review and the report. This was endorsed by another member of the Review group who also advised that Harrow was the first borough in London to have a community bus stop.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the report of the Accessible Transport Scrutiny review be noted;
- (2) the recommendations included in the report be agreed and referred to Cabinet for consideration.

438. Scrutiny Lead Member Report

Members received a report of the Divisional Director Strategic Commissioning which accompanied the reports from the Scrutiny Lead Members.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and the actions therein be agreed.

439. Scrutiny Work Programme Update

Members received a report of the Divisional Director of Strategic Commissioning which provided an update on the projects currently underway as part of the scrutiny work programme.

Members considered that in light of the potential changes to the membership of the Executive and the Committee it would not be appropriate to identify further projects for inclusion in the work programme.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the progress on individual projects be noted;
- (2) the timetable for completion of projects be noted;
- (3) identification of further projects for inclusion in the work programme be deferred.

440. Youth Justice Plan 2013-14

Members received a report of the Divisional Director of Targeted Services which presented the draft Youth Justice Plan for 2013/14. This was a statutory Plan which, once agreed, would be submitted to the Youth Justice

Board as part of the conditions attached to the grant received from the Ministry of Justice.

The Divisional Director of Targeted Services introduced the report and outlined the key priorities for 2013/14 as well as the key challenges. She reported that considerable work had been done since the inspection, including the recruitment of a Service Manager. The Service Manager advised Members that the culture over the last twelve months had been of a highly effective, efficient workforce who worked in partnership with key agencies. Experienced staff had been recruited who were willing to work flexibly. Considerable work had been done in terms of embedding the performance framework and a steady improvement on performance figures had been seen. She added that there were two police officers now attached to the Youth Offending Team.

Members were advised that the aim was to identify young people at risk of offending. The reduction of first time entrants was due to the work of the triage. Targeted intervention had resulted in 98.2% of no further offending by first time entrants. It was important for young people to understand the impact of their offending. The Corporate Director of Children and Families stated that her team managers had turned the performance of the Youth Offending Team around. There had been a root and branch review and the result was a motivated team.

In response to a Member's question, the Corporate Director advised that there was a wide range of mentors working with young people and work had been done with different ethnic groups. A number of young people who had been through the criminal justice system were now mentors. The Council was involved in a national citizenship programme. She stated that more work on cross identity was required and that she would provide the Member with further information on this issue.

A Member commented that he had found the report confusing and difficult to identify what was planned for the next year or two. The Divisional Director advised that the plan was written in order to adhere to a nationally prescribed format.

Referring to page 217 of the report a Member questioned whether the reduction in number of offenders translated into fewer cases. The Corporate Director advised that the early intervention service had been built from scratch and case loads had been too high. She personally monitored caseloads every week and the service was in transition.

A Member reiterated concerns that he had raised previously in relation to action plans having no baseline figures. He stated it was not clear as to the starting point and where the service was going. Members need to be clear as to what they should focus on. The Corporate Director advised that this information was not a requirement for this statutory plan but that she would provide Members with this information.

The representative of Harrow Youth Parliament congratulated officers on the work done making particular reference to the figures. She questioned the

strategy for dealing with young people not in education and what happened to the young people once they reached the age of 17. The Divisional Director advised that the Youth Offending Team Management Board was in the process of developing an action plan for this small number of individuals. On reaching the age of 17, the Divisional Director advised that follow up depended on each individual, for example, some may be referred to probation. The Corporate Director added that she believed that early intervention work would pick up young people at an earlier stage.

In terms of partnership working, a Member expressed the view that the new Borough Commander was robust in dealing with offenders. The Divisional Director advised that it had been agreed that in circumstances where it was proving difficult to engage with a young person, the a member of the Youth Offending Team would make a home visit accompanied by a police officer. This would then reinforce the importance of the work to the parent(s).

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance and responses and re-emphasised the importance of baseline data.

RESOLVED: That the Committee's comments be forwarded to Cabinet for consideration.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.39 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR PAUL OSBORN
Chairman