

PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE MINUTES

30 SEPTEMBER 2013

Chairman: * Sue Anderson

Councillors: * Sue Anderson * Amir Moshenson (1)
† Mano Dharmarajah * Anthony Seymour
* Graham Henson

* Denotes Member present
(1) Denotes category of Reserve Members
† Denotes apologies received

140. Membership of the Sub-Committee and Election of Chairman

RESOLVED: That in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 1.5, and following notification by the Conservative Group, it was noted that Councillors Chris Mote and Anthony Seymour had been appointed to the Sub-committee in place of Councillors Tony Ferrari and Paul Osborn. It was also noted that a new Chairman would be appointed at the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Sub-Committee elected Councillor Sue Anderson as Chair for the duration of the meeting.

141. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Reserve Member

Councillor Chris Mote

Councillor Amir Moshenson

142. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:

Agenda Item 6 – References from Council and Other Committees/Panels

Councillor Graham Henson declared a non-pecuniary interest in that he had been Portfolio Holder for Performance, Customer Services and Corporate Services when the Disaster Recovery plans had been agreed. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

Agenda Item 10 – Adults Services Complaints Annual Report (Social Care Only)

Councillor Sue Anderson declared a non-pecuniary interest in that her son was in receipt of Adult Social Care. She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

143. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 July 2013 be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

144. Public Questions and Petitions

RESOLVED: To note that no public questions were put, or petitions received.

145. References from Council and Other Committees/Panels

The Sub-Committee received the following Reference from the Government Audit and Risk Management Committee (GARMC): IT Disaster Recovery – Report of the Director of Customer Services and Business Transformation. It was noted that a further report on this topic would be submitted to a future meeting of the Sub-Committee.

RESOLVED: That the Reference from GARMC be noted.

RESOLVED ITEMS

146. Chair's Report

The Sub-Committee received a report which set out issues considered by the Chair since the last meeting of the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Sub-Committee.

A Member expressed concern that the issue of rent arrears, which in his view was a key indicator of the levels of debt among residents in Harrow, had been removed from the Corporate Scorecard. The Chair advised that this issue continued to be listed on the Sub-Committee's watch list. The Director of Finance and Assurance confirmed that this was a key indicator that would continue to be monitored.

Following questions from a Member, the Chair advised that issues selected to be included on the watch list were identified following extensive discussion between Scrutiny Lead Members and officers and on the basis of which required further investigation and monitoring, focussing on those where the Sub-Committee would have the maximum impact. She added that most of the topics on the watch list would already have been considered by both Cabinet and the Improvement Boards. The Chair's Briefing would usually consider whether to review an issue, refer it to a Challenge Panel or pursue other action.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

147. Revenue and Capital Monitoring Quarter 1 2013-14

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Director of Finance and Assurance, which had been previously considered at Cabinet on 12 September 2013. The Director highlighted the following areas of the report:

- some savings had been RAG rated in the report as amber or red as these late savings targets were the principal reason for the forecast overspend reported at period 3;
- there was an overall end of year forecast overspend of 2m in most service areas;
- there was a £3m contingency fund for welfare related issues, but calls on this fund had not reached expected levels;
- there was a significant under spend on the General Fund Capital Programme and officers had been requested to provide more realistic forecasting in the future.

A Member queried whether the over spend in the Library transfer was an estimated figure. The Director advised that the final figure would not vary significantly from the estimate. The Member asked about future plans for use of the Teachers' Centre and the shortfall in income due to the re-location of Avanti House School outside Harrow. The Director advised that this in-year income shortfall was a significant loss and plans for the future use of the Teachers' Centre would shortly be submitted to Cabinet for approval.

The Member expressed concern that agreement had not been reached on implementing the efficiency savings which had been identified in the Mayoralty and agreed at Council. He added that spending protocols had been put in place across the entire Council and should apply to all departments equally. The Director agreed that this was an important point of principle and advised that one post in the Mayoralty had been deleted and that discussions were ongoing with the Mayor to implement the savings identified. He added that there had been an overspend in the Mayoralty in 2012/13, but that this had been a relatively small sum and had been offset by under spends elsewhere in the Council. The Director undertook to submit a

more detailed report to the Sub-Committee in Quarter 2 regarding the overspend in the Mayoralty.

A Member stated that, in the future, Members would find it helpful if the additional comments section of the Medium Term Financial Strategy Progress Monitoring table provided greater detail as to why some of the savings were deemed not to be achievable. The Director undertook to provide this information in future reports.

The Member queried the savings in Legal and Governance related to the number and frequency of committee meetings. The Director advised that the intention was to finalise the number and frequency of meetings before the Municipal Calendar for 2013/14 was agreed and undertook to provide an update regarding this at a future meeting of the Sub-Committee.

The Director added that the Council's financial position in 2014/15 would depend in large part on the level of Council Tax set in February 2014 and the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2014.

A Member queried the £919k under spend in due to the over achievement of parking enforcement income. The Director advised that this had also been the case in 2012/13. The Member asked what proportion of the parking income was due to CCTV enforcement action. The Director advised that a large proportion of the income was generated by fines for traffic violations and added that this activity was undertaken by the Council in order to ensure traffic flow rather than to generate income.

A Member queried whether Adult Services would have recourse to the contingency fund. The Director advised that this was the case and that demographic growth in Harrow had contributed to budgetary pressures in Adult Services. The Chair queried why the likely impact of these demographic pressures, the cost of expansion of the Legal Practice and other issues had not been foreseen and mitigated against. The Director advised that the the number of staff transferring over following the merger of the shared legal practice and the transfer of health services to the Council may have been higher than anticipated and contributed increased IT costs. The economies of scale anticipated by the implementation of some policies such as the merger of the legal practice and reduction in number and frequency of meetings would have a cumulative effect and would be realised in future years.

The Chair queried why the income targets for the commercialisation of Hatch End Pool, the Harrow Arts Centre, the Museum and the Bannister stadium would not be met. The Director stated that these were late savings which had been flagged up by officers.

A Member asked about the late savings identified in agency costs and vacancy management. The Director advised that the use of agency staff translated into savings in the short term but not in the long term. The issue of employing consultants was under continuous review.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

148. Children and Families Services Complaints Annual Report 2012-13

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Children and Families which set out the statutory Children and Families Services complaints annual report for 2012/13.

A Member asked about the seriousness and nature of the stage three complaints. An officer advised that these were predominantly complex cases which were related to serious safeguarding issues. He added that over the past nine years, the Ombudsman had not upheld any complaints against the Council. This did not mean that mistakes had not been made by the Council, however, all complaints were taken seriously, there was a rigorous complaints handling procedure in place and appropriate remedial action was taken.

The Member asked how Harrow's performance in this area compared to other London authorities. The officer advised that Harrow's performance was average compared to other London authorities. However, Harrow applied a process of quality assurance to all responses to complaints and not all authorities did this. He emphasised that, overall, the complaints team were skilled, had received additional training in customer services, took a proactive approach and undertook mediation work, which reduced the number of complaints being escalated.

An officer from Children and Families added that in addition to staff training, a test had been introduced as part of the staff recruitment policy and there had been a significant improvement in the Council's ability to deal effectively with lower level complaints.

A Member asked whether the recent reduction in resources and loss of targeted services had caused a rise in complaints. An officer advised that most councils did not have a stated eligibility criteria for these services and that Harrow had been one of the first authorities to implement this.

A Member asked how the targets set for complaints reduction for 2013/14 would be measured. The officer advised that no specific targets had been set, and that the reduction would be relative to the number of complaints received. The Member suggested that a reduction in the overall percentage might be a more precise method of setting targets.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

149. Adults Services Complaints Annual Report (social care only) 2012-13

The Sub-Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Community, Health & Well-Being which set out the statutory Adults Services complaints Annual report (social care only) 2012/13.

An officer advised that advocacy support in health and adult social care had been a key development. He added that Harrow was the only London authority to have combined its health and social care advocate's post.

A Member requested that future reports should provide a breakdown of complaints in terms of severity, i.e. whether the complaints related to minor or major issues and whether any deficiencies in service provision had been identified. The officer advised that the 'learning lessons/practice improvements' section of the report did provide this level of information. He added that all complaints were risk assessed and given a rating. Twenty five per cent of cases could be described as complex and the remainder could be described as straightforward. Complex cases were those that required input from senior staff, legal advice and multi-agency involvement.

A Member asked whether, in view of the e-purse scheme, there was any co-ordination and overview of the complaints made directly to the council and those made directly to third party providers, who had their own complaints procedures. The officer advised that there was provision for service users to complain directly to the commissioner of services, in this case the Council and that the Council had quarterly meetings with advocacy providers to monitor service provision.

An officer further advised that the e-purse system would ensure that there were additional quality assurance measures in place, and social workers and care managers would be obliged to ensure that any care provided was meeting the needs of the service users, while working in tandem with commercial providers of care services.

A Member queried the increase in complaints relating to 'policy/legal/financial decision' and to 'quality of service delivery (standards)' since 2010. An officer advised that these complaints related overwhelmingly to the implementation of the fairer charges policy. He added that, historically, the number of complaints received increased when policy changes were implemented. However, none of these complaints had been referred to the Ombudsman or been upheld. The policy had been properly consulted on prior to implementation and the officer referred Members to the learning section regarding the fairer charges policy in the report.

The Member asked whether the increase in the number of complaints was covered by the budget or would require additional funds. The officer advised that the complaints management team were highly skilled and trained and it had not been necessary to seek external help to resolve any of the highly complex complaints that had been received. He added that the number of complaints overall had reduced since Quarter 1.

A Member asked what the difference was between those complaints which had been upheld and those which had been partially upheld. The officer advised that if a complaint had several strands, and only the very serious aspects of these were upheld, then it would be listed as partially upheld. He added that it was a legislative requirement that complaints be categorised in this way.

Members were pleased to note that there had been a significant rise in the number of compliments received.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.05 pm).

(Signed)
Chair