

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES

7 OCTOBER 2014

Chairman:	* Paul Osborn (Vice-Chair in the Chair)	
Councillors:	* Richard Almond * Jeff Anderson * Kam Chana * Jo Dooley (5) * Ms Pamela Fitzpatrick (1)	* Chris Mote * Kiran Ramchandani * Antonio Weiss (4)
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)	Barry Macleod-Cullinane	Minute 28, 32, 33, 34

- * Denotes Member present
- (1), (4) and (5) Denote category of Reserve Members
- † Denotes apologies received

26. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Councillor Jerry Miles
Councillor Ghazanfar Ali
Councillor Michael Borio

Reserve Member

Councillor Antonio Weiss
Councillor Josephine Dooley
Councillor Ms Pamela Fitzpatrick

27. **Members' Right to Speak**

RESOLVED: That, in accordance with Committee Procedure Rule 4.1, the following Councillor, who was not a Member of the Committee, be allowed to speak on the agenda items indicated:

Councillor

Agenda Item

Barry Macleod-Cullinane

3, 7, 8, and 9

28. **Declarations of Interest**

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:

Agenda Item 7 – Impact of Outer London Fund in Harrow

Councillor Kam Chana declared a non-pecuniary interest in that he had had some involvement with town centre regeneration in Harrow as the Portfolio Holder for Business and Enterprise. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered.

Agenda Item 8 – Children and Families Self-Assessment

Councillor Jeff Anderson declared a non-pecuniary interest in that his son had had involvement with Children's Services. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered.

Councillor Chris Mote declared a non-pecuniary interest in that his daughter was a qualified child protection officer. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered.

Agenda Item 9 – Scope for Council Tax Support Scheme Challenge Panel

Councillor Ms Pamela Fitzpatrick declared a non-pecuniary interest in that she worked at Harrow Law Centre. She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered.

29. **Minutes**

The Committee agreed to consider the minutes as a matter of urgency for the reasons set out on the supplemental agenda

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 16 September 2014 be taken as read and signed as a correct record.

30. Public Questions and Petitions

RESOLVED: To note that no public questions were put or petitions received at this meeting.

31. References from Council/Cabinet

RESOLVED: To note that no references were received.

RESOLVED ITEMS

32. Impact of Outer London Fund in Harrow

The Committee received the report of the Corporate Director for Environment and Enterprise which informed the committee about information submitted to the GLA Regeneration Committee following the successful bid for funds from the Outer London Fund.

Following an introduction and update by the Head of Economic Development and Research, Members commented and asked questions as follows:

In response to the Chair's observation that vacancy rates appeared to have increased, the Head of Economic Development and Research agreed that this was a fair perception, caused in part by some large chain stores moving out. However, the position was better than 3 years ago, and a vacancy provided an opportunity for landlords to change their tenant profile. He informed Members that two recent vacancies had been caused by the loss of two book-makers, which he believed was a positive outcome. He agreed to circulate current figures for vacancy rates to Members. A Member added that vacant units had a waiting list for prospective tenants.

A Member queried the underspend on the Lowlands project and was advised that this had been caused by delays in procurement, but the sum had been carried forward and the project was now on schedule with no loss of funding.

Members noted a positive trend in employment, and that this was not wholly dependent on the retail sector, but boosted by office jobs in and around the town centre. This in turn increased footfall and spend.

The Head of Economic Development and Research informed the Committee about Public Realm developments, including the purchase of mechanical sweepers and further bids for funding for local projects.

A Member commented that, while the report was encouraging, there were some issues to consider, including the difficulty caused to the visually impaired by the colour and placement of street furniture, disabled access, and a move away from high-end retail outlets. It was noted that some placement of seating had been recommended by the police as an anti-crime and anti-terrorism measure, and that Harrow Association for the Disabled had been consulted about disabled access prior to the improvements.

The Chief Executive of the Business Improvement District explained that the focus was on encouraging interest and increasing footfall in the town centre, with a programme of events and measures to stimulate this. Harrow was competing for custom with destination shopping centres such as Brent Cross, Watford and Uxbridge town centres, and Westfield, but local businesses were confident enough to invest in Harrow town centre. He believed that some of the unit sizes available did not facilitate occupancy by high-end retailers, but that this could be addressed by varying the unit size on offer, and proactive engagement and marketing.

In respect of consultation, the Head of Economic Development and Research stated that retailers and residents did not always agree about what was best for their local area.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

33. Children and Families Self Assessment

The Committee received the report of the Interim Corporate Director of Children and Families which provided an update on performance and self-assessment. He introduced the report, which he described as a work in progress and dense in detail, and the Head of School Improvement Partnership provided background information and explained the format.

Members then commented and asked questions as follows:

Members commented that despite the level of detail the data was difficult to understand, and a lack of comparable figures meant it was hard to draw useful conclusions. The Chair was concerned that average figures did not adequately illustrate the best and worse timelines for assessments and referrals. Referring to the apparent downward trend, he was disappointed that no reasons were given for this, and stated that in order to fulfil its scrutiny function, reports needed to be formatted for Members understanding and review, rather than focus solely on Ofsted criteria. The Interim Corporate Director of Children and Families stated that the percentage of core assessments had doubled, but the number of experienced social workers available had reduced alongside an increase in newly qualified staff. This meant the level of casework completed had reduced as newly qualified staff could not be given the same volume of work. He assured the Committee that there had been no instances of a child being left in unsafe circumstances.

Members discussed the 'cost / benefit' ratio, and how early intervention could reduce the cost to the Council of continuing intervention and care in future years.

A Member referred to recent nationwide cases of 'grooming' vulnerable children, and asked why no mention was made in the report, and whether there was any known incidence in Harrow. The Interim Corporate Director of Children and Families replied that the subject would merit a separate paper.

A Member enquired as to whether all referrals were recorded, and whether those resulting from poverty but requiring no further action were captured in the statistics. She was reassured that all contacts, regardless of progress or outcome, were recorded, and that genuine cases of poverty were supported.

In conclusion, the Chair stated that the Committee had to ensure that Harrow Council was dealing appropriately with identified problems, and needed relevant and timely information to do this. He asked that a scorecard and a report summary highlighting strengths and weaknesses be brought to the next meeting, along with details about the length of time for assessments.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

34. Scope for Council Tax Scheme Challenge Panel

The Committee received the report of the Divisional Director for Partnership Development and Performance which set out the draft scope for the Council Tax Support Scheme Challenge Panel. The Committee agreed to consider this report as a matter of urgency for the reasons set out on the supplemental agenda.

A Member introduced this report and informed the Committee about the proposal to take an in-depth look at the Council Tax Support Scheme prior to its consideration by Council. The Panel would consider the impact of the scheme to date, using evidence from partners and stakeholders such as Harrow Law Centre; the Citizens' Advice Bureau, and voluntary organisations, in addition to Councillors' own case work. Membership of the Challenge Panel would be flexible to accommodate any Members with an interest in the topic, and it remained to be determined which witnesses would be invited to appear. The Challenge Panel meeting had been arranged for 27 October from 2 pm to 6 pm.

RESOLVED: That the scope for the Council Tax Support Scheme Challenge Panel be agreed.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 9.55 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR PAUL OSBORN
Vice-Chairman in the Chair