

EMPLOYEES' CONSULTATIVE FORUM MINUTES

13 JANUARY 2015

Chair: * Mr G Martin

Councillors:

* Jeff Anderson	* Ms Mina Parmar
* Mrs Camilla Bath (2)	* Pritesh Patel
* Graham Henson	* David Perry
* Barry Kendler	

Representatives of HTCC: Ms L Snowdon

Representatives of UNISON:

* Mr D Butterfield	* Mr J Royle
* Mr S Compton	* Mr D Searles

Representatives of GMB: * Ms P Belgrave

* Denotes Member present
(2) Denotes category of Reserve Member

RESOLVED ITEMS

7. INFORMATION REPORT - Draft Revenue Budget 2015/16, Medium Term Financial Strategy 2015/16 to 2018/19 and Capital Programme 2015/16 to 2018/19

The Forum received a report of the Director of Finance and Assurance which set out the Council's proposals for the draft Revenue Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2015/16 to 2018/19 and the Draft Capital Programme 2015/16 to 2018/19.

Following a question from a Representative regarding the Council Tax Freeze Grant of £1.068m, an officer advised that the current Medium Term Financial Strategy was based on the implementation of a Council Tax increase of 1.99% in 2015/16 which would generate an estimated income of £1.922m and therefore the Freeze Grant would no longer be applicable.

A Representative commented that charging residents for the disposal of organic waste would deter residents from recycling, which would impact on the landfill charges the Council paid. He added that the new 23 litre caddies supplied to households had caused injuries to staff and would lead to increased sickness absence and personal injury claims. He suggested that households should be charged for additional residual bins. Another Representative asked whether residents had been consulted about the charge and stated that those residents who chose not to pay for this service would still need to dispose of their waste. The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Major Contracts stated that the introduction of a charge for organic waste had been a difficult decision, made only after extensive discussions and was part of the overall savings the Council was required to make over coming years. It was anticipated that the scheme would require a 40% take up rate to make it viable and those residents who did not pay the charge had the alternative of composting or taking their waste to the Civic Amenity Site (CAS). Savings could be made by separating organic waste from dry waste and disposing of them separately and officers would continue to monitor the situation. He added that he would welcome further discussions with the Representative regarding the supply of a second bin to all households.

The Director of Finance and Assurance stated that comparable London boroughs had a similar 40% target and that, in his view, this was achievable and would deliver savings. A Representative added that the CAS saw a high volume of use by residents at weekends, often with long queues building up.

The Chair asked what plans were in place to reduce the funding gap and how this fitted into the Council's overall commercialisation agenda. The Director of Finance and Assurance stated that he anticipated that savings planned for future years would help reduce the funding gap and he would be working closely with the Portfolio for Finance and Major Contracts on this issue.

The Chair asked about the Council's contribution to West London Waste (WLW). Harrow residents were actively engaged in recycling and 50% of all waste was recyclable. However, this had not led to a reduction in the £7m figure. The Portfolio Holder advised that there was a 'pay as you throw' element to the charge which meant lower charges for less waste.

A Representative queried whether there was any data regarding the gradings of the posts which would be lost as part of the efficiency and managements savings. The Director of Finance and Assurance advised that the 'management savings' would be made through a reduction in the number of posts. However, not all the 'efficiency savings' related to loss of posts and not all of these posts were lower grade posts. Some proposals were still at the consultation stage and therefore data relating to the grading of posts identified for deletion was not available.

The Chair asked how many of the identified FTEs (full time equivalent) were senior posts and how many were agency staff. The Director of Finance and Assurance advised that the posts were a mixture of permanent, agency-filled and vacant posts.

A Representative asked why the £10m reserve was not being used to save jobs under threat. The Portfolio Holder advised that Harrow was in the lowest quartile in London in terms of its reserves and using this to save jobs would not be a permanent solution as the savings would still need to be made in subsequent years.

The Chair asked whether there was a contingency fund for the commercialisation agenda and how far it was reliant on government funding. The Portfolio Holder advised that the sum of £3m per annum had been allocated for this from the Transformation Fund. He added that the aim of the Council's commercialisation agenda was to make it less reliant on government funding.

The Chair queried whether there were robust procurement and management procedures in place for the Council's procurement contracts to ensure these were value for money and cited the recent example of issues with the timely sign-off for the dry recyclables contract. The Portfolio Holder advised that the procurement team was highly skilled in contract management and that delivering value for money was central to its function.

A Representative expressed his concern regarding the impact of reduced staff and resources on frontline services and asked how the commercialisation agenda would help mitigate against this. The Portfolio Holder advised that the Council would need to make £75m worth of savings over coming years. With this in mind, the administration had identified areas of efficiency, such as loss of posts and areas of priority, such as supporting the borough's vulnerable residents, employing more social workers and tackling homelessness.

A Representative queried the £100k savings to be made from Occupational Health Service (OHS), the review of the time and facilities afforded to the Unions and the re-tendering of the Communications contract. The Director of HRD and Shared Services advised that the OHS assessment of pre-employment health questionnaires would be replaced by a declaration of fitness by applicants and management referrals would be more tightly controlled. Staff and their family members would continue to have access to the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). The amount of administration time and facilities afforded to the Unions would be reviewed. The Director of Finance and Assurance added that the Communications contract was being re-tendered following a full review of the service area.

The Leader advised that the Communications section were responsible for producing the Harrow People and Homing In magazines, disseminated internal council communiqués, and had facilitated a number of recent consultations, for example, the Take Part initiative, the School Expansion Programme and had encouraged resident participation and engagement with these. He added that £30k had already been invested in sports and the

Council, local sports organisations, health providers and other stakeholders were working collaboratively in this area.

He further added that the council depended on its Reserves to deal with un-anticipated expenses, for example, homelessness. With regard to commercialisation, he was in close communication with the new Chief Executive regarding the Council's future challenges and priorities.

The Chair asked about the non-renewal of the Council's contract with Wiseworks printing. The Director of Finance and Assurance advised that the Council was committed to reducing its printing costs and all Councillors had been issued with IPADs as part of this drive. The Council followed a strict procurement process that was designed to be open and transparent and the bidding process was open to all.

A Representative stated that the establishment of Business Support services was a fairly recent initiative that had received a considerable start-up investment. He advised that a very large proportion of the BS workforce was female and asked about the anticipated savings from this service area the likely impact of job losses. The Director of Finance and Assurance stated that the savings in BS equated to the loss of 12 posts, and that there were changes planned to the service provided by the print unit and the mail room.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.