

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES

8 JUNE 2016

Chair:	* Councillor Jerry Miles	
Councillors:	* Ghazanfar Ali * Richard Almond * Mrs Chika Amadi † Jeff Anderson	* Jo Dooley * Ameet Jogia * Paul Osborn * Lynda Seymour (2)
Voting Co-opted:	(Voluntary Aided) Mrs J Rammelt Reverend P Reece	(Parent Governors)
Non-voting Co-opted:	Harrow Youth Parliament Representative	
In attendance: (Councillors)	Glen Hearnden	Minute 162

- * Denotes Member present
- (2) Denote category of Reserve Members
- † Denotes apologies received

155. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Councillor Chris Mote

Reserve Member

Councillor Lynda Seymour

156. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:

Agenda Item 7 – Homelessness Pressures

Councillor Ameet Jogia declared a non-pecuniary interest in that he lived in a Council flat purchased under the Right to Buy scheme. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

Agenda Item 8 – Welfare Reform Scrutiny Review Group – Report and Recommendations for Consideration

Councillor Lynda Seymour declared a non-pecuniary interest in that her son was in receipt of Disability Living Allowance. She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

157. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the ordinary meeting held on 19 April 2016 and the special meeting on 19 May 2016 be taken as read and signed as correct records.

158. Public Questions and Petitions

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

159. References from Council/Cabinet

There were none.

RECOMMENDED ITEMS

160. Welfare Reform Scrutiny Review Group - Report and Recommendations for Consideration

The Committee considered a report which set out the findings and recommendations of the Welfare Reform Scrutiny Review Group which met between August 2015 and March 2016. The Group focused on the areas of the Benefit Cap and low pay.

A Member of the Committee who was also a Member of the Review Group commented that the recommendations had been agreed on a cross-party basis.

Resolved to RECOMMEND: (to Cabinet)

That the Scrutiny Review's report and recommendations be forwarded on to Cabinet for consideration.

161. Final Report of the Social and Community Infrastructure Scrutiny Review

The Committee considered a report which set out the findings and recommendations from the Social and Community Infrastructure Scrutiny Review, the review examined the general 'soft' infrastructure provision that helped community formation from new and expanded residential development and sought to then identify specific provision that would be appropriate.

A Member of the Committee who was also a Member of the Review Group commented that site visits had been conducted as part of the Review. A key feedback point was that existing land and resources had to be developed.

Another Member commented that it was important to use materials which were of good quality especially in relation to buildings resulting from regeneration proposals.

Resolved to RECOMMEND: (to Cabinet)

That the Scrutiny Review's report and recommendations be forwarded on to Cabinet for consideration.

RESOLVED ITEMS

162. Homelessness Pressures

The Committee received a report which set out the background to the acute homelessness pressures being experienced in Harrow at present and demonstrated the work being done across the Council to manage and mitigate the impacts on the homeless households and on the Council's budgetary situation.

The Committee welcomed the Portfolio Holder for Housing to the meeting for this item.

Officers conducted a presentation for the Committee and made the following points:

- there had recently been a challenge panel which had looked at the issue of homelessness and identify actions which could mitigate the pressures. This had involved conducting research, receiving expert advice and consultation;
- an action plan was being developed from the Challenge Panel meeting;
- a round table meeting would reconvene in June 2016 to review the progress on this action plan;
- if the Council had accepted that someone was homeless under the relevant statutory definition, it was obliged to find a permanent housing solution;

- there had been a significant increase in the number of people who were homeless in the borough throughout the last couple of years;
- the difficulty that the Council had was that a number of people who were homeless were being placed in temporary accommodation. The Council had a shortage of self contained accommodation;
- Bed and Breakfast establishments were used as temporary accommodation which was unsatisfactory as they were costly;
- there were a number of reasons why homelessness was on the increase. Part of this was because of the changes to Housing Benefits which had meant in its reduction financially at the same time that the rents within the private rental sector had been increasing. This obviously left a funding shortfall;
- the Council were actively trying to prevent people from becoming homeless. For example a number of people were becoming homeless because of an increase in rents within the private rented sector. The Council were working with landlords to provide measures such as grants for disrepair to prevent tenants from being evicted;
- the Council were utilising the option of moving families outside of Harrow and London to utilise accommodation which had more cost effective rental charges;
- the Council also offered rent advances and deposits to ensure that they could either remain in their current property or move into a new one to prevent homelessness;
- the Council undertook a detailed homelessness assessment process and reached a conclusion accordingly. These decisions could be appealed and usually per year there were about 120 appeals. Of these around two-thirds were upheld and a third involved the Council changing its mind due to new information provided;
- the Council operated a service called Help2Let. This was a social housing lettings agency. This was a service which charged Landlords for services and a supply of tenants. This was a successful service as it was a local service for local landlords;
- a key challenge with homelessness was getting those individuals and families affected to have realistic expectations. Approximately half of all families becoming homeless would have to be based outside London. The Council had a team which assisted those families and individuals to settle living outside London;
- the Government were looking to change the legislation on homelessness as they wanted to change the rule in relation to young and single people;

- the Right to Buy option had been extended to Housing Associations. This would reduce the options available to the Council even further;
- the Council would be undertaking regeneration programmes and it was expected that this would increase the housing supply available to the Council.

The following questions were put by Members and responded to accordingly:

- What is the financial cost of placing a family in Bed and Breakfast accommodation?

The cost to the Council was approximately £17,000 per year.

- What scope is there for the Council to buy a private house and utilise this for housing purposes?

Cabinet had provided officers with the approval to buy private properties for these purposes. The Council were actively looking into buying properties within Harrow and outside of London. The Council were buying a particular level within the housing market and this required time.

- How long would it take for people in temporary accommodation to be moved into permanent housing solutions?

This would take a long period of time and a long term view had to be taken. There was not enough housing in the private rental sector to be able to deliver this at a quicker pace.

- Should the duty on the Council to house a homeless family end if they refuse to accept a housing option presented to them?

If the Council had offered a reasonable housing solution which the Council deemed to be suitable and it was refused then the homelessness duty would end.

- Did the Council clearly state to those who were homeless that they could be placed outside of London?

The Council were clear in explaining that accommodation may be provided outside of London. It was difficult to say whether people were happy with this as there were some who preferred this and some who preferred to stay in London.

- There were situations where tenants were becoming homeless simply due to the greed of Landlords and not because they were in any arrears. What could the Council do to mitigate against this?

This was difficult to mitigate against. The Council did however attempt to offer incentives to Landlords for them to keep tenants.

- Had any thought been provided on the triggers for homelessness so that these were addressed immediately avoiding the need to consider the person homeless?

This was an issue that the Challenge Panel had considered and work would be undertaken on this.

- The Council had the lowest housing stock across West London. What was the reason for this?

Historically the Council had sold over half its housing stock in 1979. Additionally it had not been able to undertake the number of development opportunities like other authorities.

- If people were on benefits and then subsequently found employment, there may be a period of time where there would be a funding gap in the rent owed to private landlords. What help was being provided to them?

The Council would be willing to assist in funding the rent during this period to avoid the person becoming homeless.

- Were other boroughs dealing with the homelessness issue better or worse than the Council?

It was difficult to answer this question as each borough had its own unique issues and problems.

- Would the actions contained in the Action Plan arising from the Challenge Panel be contained within existing budgets?

Any initiatives proposed were likely to involve investing to save schemes. For example more staff may be recruited however in the long term this would save the Council money.

The Chair asked the Portfolio holder whether there were any areas that he would like the Committee to investigate working in collaboration on the homelessness issue. The Portfolio Holder responded that work could be done in considering how much affordable housing could be provided in the existing schemes within the Council and how could the issue receive a higher profile within the Council and developers.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

163. Scrutiny Work Programme 2016/17

The Committee received a report which contained a proposed work programme for 2016/17.

Members made comments as follows:

- Item 6 – Smoking Cessation Number Quitting – the column on ‘why’ required re-drafting;
- Item 35 – Family / Community Services for Asylum Seekers – the column on ‘why’ required re-drafting to read ‘what is the Council doing to ensure it is aware of hard to reach communities and best support and meet their needs’.
- Item 38 – Child Poverty – the column on ‘why’ required the following words added at the end ‘and how it was evolving’.

RESOLVED: That the work programme for the Committee be agreed subject to the amendments listed above.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.31 pm, closed at 8.55 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR JERRY MILES
Chair