

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (SPECIAL) MINUTES

12 JULY 2016

Chair: * Councillor Jerry Miles

Councillors:

* Ghazanfar Ali	* Jo Dooley
* Richard Almond	* Susan Hall (3)
* Mrs Chika Amadi	* Ameet Jogia
* Jeff Anderson	* Paul Osborn

In attendance: Barry Macleod-Cullinane
(Councillors) Mrs Christine Robson

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

167. Attendance by Reserve Members

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

Ordinary Member

Councillor Chris Mote

Reserve Member

Councillor Susan Hall

168. Declarations of Interest

RESOLVED: To note that the following interests were declared:

Agenda Item 3 – Question and Answer Session with the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive

Councillor Jeff Anderson declared a non-pecuniary interest in that his wife was the Portfolio Holder for Community, Culture and Resident Engagement. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane declared a non-pecuniary interest in that he was Ward Councillor for Harrow on the Hill, which was the focus of a major regeneration project. He would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

During the course of the meeting, Councillor Susan Hall declared a non-pecuniary interest in that she owned a commercial premises in Wealdstone. She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

Councillor Mrs Christine Robson declared a non-pecuniary interest in that she was the Portfolio Holder for Children, Schools and Young People. She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

RESOLVED ITEMS

169. Question and Answer Session with the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive

In his opening remarks, the Leader briefly outlined the three main areas of focus for his administration, which were as follows:

1. to tackle inequalities in the borough, for example, statistical data showed that there was an 8-year life expectancy gap between the most affluent and the least affluent residents in the borough;
2. to focus on successfully delivering the Regeneration Programme and to ensure that all Harrow's residents had a stake in it and benefitted from it;
3. to improve the Council's relationship with residents and to be more responsive to their needs.

In his opening remarks, the Chief Executive stated that, a Peer Review had been undertaken during June 2016 by a team made up of Councillors, officers and experts from the Department for Communities and Local Government. The findings of the Peer Review would be submitted to Cabinet along with an Action Plan to tackle any areas of concern highlighted by the Review. He added that the Council was also assessing any likely impact of Brexit on the Council, its workforce, its budgets and savings and on community cohesion.

A Member stated that the council-wide IT systems crash earlier in the week had meant that residents could not easily contact the Council. She asked

how this tallied with the Leader's objective that the Council should be more responsive to the needs of residents. She added that she had received a very large number of email complaints to her private email address from residents regarding the recent increase in traffic congestion on the way to the civic amenity site as well as emails regarding missed brown bin collections. She asked what swift action could be taken to deal with these complaints.

A Member stated that there had recently been a spike in the number of calls and complaints received regarding the non-collection of brown bins and asked how this would be tackled and why the brown bin scheme had not been introduced in stages.

Another Member asked for detailed figures in relation to the collection of brown bins.

The Leader responded that the chargeable brown bin scheme had been introduced as part of an overall savings strategy, and that many other boroughs had recently introduced similar schemes. He added that Harrow had the highest proportion of residents signed up to the brown bin scheme in London - which indicated that the scheme was a success.

The Chief Executive confirmed that there were forty-eight thousand brown bins in the borough and that 98% of these had been collected on time, however, as with any new initiative, there had been a small number of issues, which in this case had primarily related to IT. He added that it was important to learn from experience and officers were working to make the service simpler and more streamlined and to make it easier for residents to contact the Council regarding missed collections.

With regard to the number of calls received by the Council's call centre, Access Harrow, statistics showed that 91% of calls had been answered and that 84% of those calls were answered within the first 30 seconds. For emails, the figure was 95% responded to within seventy-two hours of receipt.

The Chief Executive added that the Council was undertaking a review of its customer care protocols and processes. The aim was to use plain English wherever possible, apologise for errors, aim to learn lessons from complaints received and focus on improving customer experience. There was also an intention to provide a 24-hour, 7-days a week service enabled by the use of online forms and digitalisation, which in turn would reduce the demand on Access Harrow.

A Member asked what powers and resources the Council had to deal with inequalities such as the 8-year life-expectancy gap referred to by the Leader.

The Leader stated that the Council had statutory responsibilities in terms of planning, licensing, housing, public health, etc, and a more cohesive policy approach in these areas could be used to tackle issues such as the gap in life expectancy. For example, Harrow had been identified as having high levels of inactivity in terms of physical exercise. Increasing activity was a health and wellbeing target that was being tackled through a number of different initiatives such as the installation of green gyms in local parks. Poor quality

housing may also be a contributor and the Council had set targets for the building of more, better quality, affordable homes. It would also work closely with statutory partners such as the NHS, the Clinical Commissioning Group and the Health & Wellbeing Board as well as third sector organisations to tackle these issues.

The Leader added that the above initiatives had long-term, generational objectives the results of which may not be immediately evident but were a lifelong process that would benefit future generations.

A Member asked how the recent amendment to the Council's Constitution, which now allowed Cabinet to appoint the former Leader of the Council as a Non-Executive Member to Cabinet, would benefit residents.

The Leader stated that this had been done in the interests of continuity, and to enable the former Leader to continue to share his expert knowledge and experience with Cabinet colleagues and to contribute to future policy discussions.

A Member stated that there had been a noticeable increase in the number of hate crimes reported post-Brexit and asked what measures the Council had taken to preserve community cohesion and to mitigate against any likely impact of Brexit upon the residents of Harrow and on the Council.

The Leader advised that he had recently met with the Leaders of other local authorities in West London where one of the topics of discussion had been a possible skills shortage as a result of the UK leaving the EU and its impact on staffing in key areas such as the NHS and the teaching profession. They had also discussed the importance of developing those skills in the local population by ensuring adequate training courses were available at colleges and other institutions.

The Leader stated that the Borough Commander had confirmed that there had been no noticeable increase in the incidence of hate crimes reported in the Borough, and this was an indication of the success of cross-party initiatives in this area over recent years. He added that there was a statement from him on the Council's website that Harrow had a 'zero tolerance' approach to all hate crime.

He further added that there were significant numbers of EU nationals living and working in Harrow and that the Council would need to closely monitor Brexit negotiations to assess and respond to any likely impact of these on its residents. He had recently met with and discussed these issues with the leaders of local community and faith groups, who had indicated that their members felt confident about reporting incidences of hate crime to the proper authorities.

A Member asked whether the Selective Licensing Scheme, which had been rolled out in Edgware Ward would be extended to other Wards. She added that this initiative had yielded a number of benefits such as a reduction in fly-tipping, a reduction in the issuing of Anti Social Behaviour Orders and an improved relationship between private landlords and the Council.

The Leader stated that the severe housing crisis in London could only be tackled by the Council working in partnership with the private rental sector. He added that there was a pressing need to improve the availability, quality and affordability of the housing stock. The scheme in Edgware was a pilot and there were plans to roll this out to other wards.

A Member asked how the issue of homelessness would be tackled, particularly since data showed that those families who were allocated emergency accommodation outside the borough tended to remain in that accommodation for longer periods; what could be done about unscrupulous landlords who charged exorbitant rents.

The Leader responded that homelessness was a London-wide and a UK-wide problem that Harrow could not tackle alone. The Council was doing the following:

- working closely with GLA to bid for funding from the Housing Zone initiative;
- providing loans to developers to build new properties, whilst ensuring a proportion of these were affordable;
- working with the voluntary sector to build new homes;
- buying houses and building new houses on land that it owned;
- setting up its own lettings agency;
- working on joint initiatives with other local authorities;
- lobbying the Mayor of London and Central Government for funding.

He added that recent welfare reform had particularly affected those on low incomes, for example, 60% of those in receipt of Housing Benefit in Harrow were working in low-income jobs. He confirmed that there were plans to roll out the Selective Licensing Scheme to other wards. He had recently met the Deputy Mayor of London for Housing and they had discussed the possibility of tenancy agreements where rent increases were controlled.

A Member asked how the Council would help and support those families which had been adversely affected by the recent welfare reforms.

The Leader replied that the housing benefit cap had impacted low-income families the most and that he would like to see the Government re-evaluate these reforms. The Council's Economic Development Team was working closely with the Housing Regeneration Team to help those families in a number of different ways, for example, by helping them to access training and find employment.

A Member asked whether the possibility of the UK leaving the EU been included on the Council's Risk Register as this had not been listed as a risk on recent Cabinet papers.

The Chief Executive confirmed that this was being included on the risk register. He added that the post-Brexit landscape was continuously evolving and that this topic would be considered in detail by the Corporate Strategy Board.

A Member asked whether the high interest payments on the £350m loan that the Council had taken out to fund the Regeneration Programme would impact on council services.

The Leader stated that although it was important to achieve the correct risk-balance in a project of this scale and ambition, it was not simply a case of balancing the books. This project involved £1.75bn public and private investment and it was therefore equally important consider the wider long-term benefits of such an undertaking. The Regeneration Programme would see much needed investment in the most deprived areas of Harrow and would improve the lives of Harrow residents, especially the most vulnerable.

The Chief Executive added that under the Regeneration Programme, there were plans to build five thousand new homes and create three thousand jobs across ten sites. Finances were independently validated every six months using current market values to ensure all projects remained on target and within budget.

A Member asked how the Council would make itself more accessible to residents, considering that residents had reported that My Harrow was not very user-friendly, and Access Harrow's call response rates required improvement.

The Leader stated that Harrow received one of the lowest amounts of local government grant in London and this had obvious repercussions for the Council's spending. He would continue to lobby central government for Harrow's grant amount to be increased. He accepted that Access Harrow's call response rates required improvement, that some of the web forms on the Council's website needed to be re-designed and that overall customer experience needed to be improved. It was important to ensure that the Council's policies reflected the views of and feedback from residents. To this end, he would be attending more community events, holding more Leader's surgeries in order to have more dialogue with residents.

A Member stated that he had recently shadowed one of the teams in Access Harrow and found that staff there operated under enormous pressures and morale was quite low. He had also noticed that poor call response rates meant that increasing numbers of residents were visiting the Civic Centre in person. He asked what was being done to ensure that the call centre was adequately resourced and the wellbeing of its staff safeguarded.

The Chief Executive stated that he undertook monthly visits to Access Harrow and was aware of the pressures on staff there. This was partly due to the

recent increase in demand. He confirmed that additional resources had been made available in the revenues and benefits team in Access Harrow and he hoped that increased digitalisation of services would relieve some of the pressure on those teams.

A Member stated that the Scrutiny function, which was an essential criteria for good decision-making, had been significantly reduced in recent years. Consequently, opposition Members had fewer opportunities to ask questions or raise queries about areas of concern. He asked how the current administration would ensure Councillor engagement and better scrutiny. He also requested that more Q&A sessions with the Leader and the Chief Executive be scheduled into the calendar of meetings.

The Leader responded that the Peer Review had highlighted the need for better cross-party working and in his view, the current adversarial style of engagement between the main parties was counter-productive. He would consider scheduling in additional Q&A sessions and may increase the time allowed for Councillor questions at Cabinet meetings. He added that he hoped, going forward, the two main political groups would be able to work together more collaboratively.

A Member asked about early intervention initiatives and whether any other additional savings had been identified.

The Leader replied that the focus of early intervention should be doing things better, less expensively, with better outcomes and rolling out the Council's commercialisation agenda.

The Chief Executive advised that this would be achieved through close working with partner and statutory bodies, neighbourhood champions and by engendering values such as citizenship and social responsibility amongst residents.

A Member stated that delays in the implementation the brown bin scheme had resulted in a loss of revenue. He asked how the Council would ensure that policies were implemented in a timely manner so that it did not lose any potential revenue.

The Leader advised that this would be achieved through the extensive planning, budgets and timescales included in the Medium Term Financial Strategy. In the case of the brown bin scheme, the Council would need to investigate the reasons for the delay and it may transpire that there were legitimate reasons for this. He added that going forward, the Council needed to be flexible and responsive to changing circumstances and amend its plans accordingly.

A Member asked how Brexit would affect Harrow's shopping centres and whether the skills of the Economic Development team would be used to protect local jobs and support local businesses.

The Leader stated that the Economic Regeneration Team was working on the 'work to save' initiative and there were other initiatives encouraging residents

to shop locally, local businesses to bid for Council procurement contracts. Interestingly, 25% of Harrow residents were self-employed and the Council had provided support to pop-up shops and start-up businesses by allowing them to use Council owned premises. These traders would eventually move to High Street premises once they became more established.

The Chief Executive stated that Harrow was an entrepreneurial borough and the Economic Regeneration Team were also promoting the Harrow Deals discount website and Stanmore Business Park.

A Member stated that Edgware Brook had flooded during recent heavy rains and she asked what flood contingency plans were in place and how would residents be alerted in case of widespread flooding in the borough.

The Chief Executive advised that many boroughs had early warning systems in place in high-risk areas. The Council worked closely with the Meteorological Office and would share any warnings with staff and publish this information on the Council's website. It would also provide advice and material help such as sandbags to those affected by floods. It was important to ensure that waterways such as Edgware Brook was clear of litter and blockages and that the parks drainage system was fully functional at all times. The council would also work closely with the Environment Agency and follow its guidance in times of emergency.

A Member asked what the potential risks of Brexit were for Harrow and how these would be mitigated.

The Chief Executive stated that the post-Brexit landscape was continually evolving and the Council would be closely monitoring and taking on board the views and guidance of experts. He added that the Council had identified four key areas of concern:

- investment and the economy – the Institute for Fiscal Studies had suggested that there would be £30bn budget deficit post-Brexit. The Chancellor of the Exchequer had stated that any deficit would need to be dealt with through either an increase in taxes or a reduction in spending and that further details of this would be provided in his autumn statement. The Council would continue to lobby the Secretary of State;
- Devolution – it was not yet clear whether this would continue to be prioritised by the Government;
- Harrow's Regeneration Programme – it was noteworthy that sterling had recently been devalued, which had led to an increase in the cost of imported goods which in turn could lead to an increase in construction costs;
- social cohesion, which was an important area of responsibility for local authorities.

The Council would continue to closely monitor and review the situation post-Brexit and work closely with Central Government and bodies such as the Greater London Authority, the Local Government Association and London Councils.

A Member asked whether the transfer of the Harrow Arts Centre was linked with the Cultural Regeneration Strategy and asked whether Harrow's cultural assets were at risk.

The Leader advised that Cultura London had been awarded the contract to manage the Arts Centre and the Heritage Museum. A Trust had been set up and Cultura London was working on an ambitious business plan which would see the layout of the Arts Centre changed and a programme of events that was expected to attract bigger audiences and more users of the Centre.

A Member asked what had prompted the decision to give Cultura London £1m instead of the initial idea of giving it a loan. She added that the organisation was not meeting its fundraising targets which meant that the Council in the meanwhile continued to be responsible for the upkeep of the Arts Centre and the Heritage Museum.

The Chief Executive advised that the length of the lease for both buildings had been changed from 25 years to 90 years to allow a longer life-span to the project. There were safeguards in place as the loan was subject to three conditions, namely, receipt of requisite planning permission for changes to the buildings, achieving match funding and contractors being engaged to begin the works.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 9.15 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR JERRY MILES
Chair