

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES

6 APRIL 2017

Chair:	† Councillor Jerry Miles	
Councillors:	* Ghazanfar Ali * Richard Almond * Mrs Chika Amadi † Jeff Anderson * Jo Dooley	* Ameet Jogia * Kairul Kareema Marikar (2) * Paul Osborn (Vice-Chair, in the Chair) * Stephen Wright (1)
Voting Co-opted:	(Voluntary Aided) Reverend P Reece	(Parent Governors)
Non-voting Co-opted:	Harrow Youth Parliament Representative	
In attendance: (Councillors)	Sachin Shah	Minute 213

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

207. 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 Chris Mote

Reserve Member

Councillor Kairul Kareema Marikar
Councillor Stephen Wright

208. Declarations of Interest

In connection with Agenda Item 6 (Access to Primary Care in Harrow), Councillor Kairul Kareema Marikar declared a non-pecuniary interest in that she is employed in the Patients Advice and Liaison Service in Harrow. She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

In connection with Agenda Item 8 (Peer Review), Councillor Mrs Chika Amadi declared a non-pecuniary interest in that she works in Wealdstone Town Centre and might be relevant to discussion of the Council's regeneration plans. She would remain in the room whilst the matter was considered and voted upon.

209. Minutes

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 14 February 2017 be taken as read and signed as a correct record, subject to the following amendments:

Page 196 – the second sentence of the question about Project Infinity (second paragraph on that page) to be replaced with the following words: “Beyond the “My Community” e-purse, were the other items not products but concepts with speculative assumptions about income?”

Page 197 – penultimate paragraph on the page to be supplemented with the following sentence: “The Council has no idea when it will get 500 properties.”

Matters Arising:

Minute 204 (Page 197): Councillor Almond referred to the agreement recorded in the minutes to report back to members of the Committee on the governance arrangements for the Concilium group of companies. An update would be obtained for members of the Committee.

Minute 204 (Page 198): Councillor Almond asked about progress in replying to the query about damage to grass verges. Councillor Ali reported that he had received a satisfactory response from the relevant Portfolio Holder.

Minute 205 (Page 198): Councillor Almond pointed out that the minutes referred to agreement recorded in the minutes to report to Members on the implications for changes in street trading policy and charges on the budget position. An update would be obtained for members of the Committee.

210. Public Questions and Petitions

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

RECOMMENDED ITEMS

211. Scrutiny Annual Report 2016-17

The Committee received a report which outlined the activities of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the scrutiny sub-committees and the scrutiny lead councillors during the 2016-17 municipal year.

Resolved to RECOMMEND: (to Council)

That the annual report be submitted to Council for endorsement.

RESOLVED: That the scrutiny annual report for 2016-17 be approved.

RESOLVED ITEMS

212. Recommendation from Health and Social Care Scrutiny Sub-Committee - Access to Primary Health Care in Harrow

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the report from health scrutiny members be endorsed;
- (2) the Review's report and its recommendations be forwarded to the relevant agencies, as identified in the recommendations, for consideration and response; and
- (3) it be agreed that the Health and Social Care Scrutiny Sub-Committee revisit primary care access and the implementation of the report's recommendations in its work programme for 2017/18.

213. Peer Review

The Leader of the Council joined the meeting at this point (7.43 pm).

The Committee received a report by the Chief Executive which outlined some of the work which had taken place to address recommendations in the LGA Peer review report. The Cabinet had agreed that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be requested to work with the Leader of the Council and the Chief executive to develop the draft action plan set out in the committee report and to help the organisation improve in response to the review.

A Member asked about the involvement of councillors in setting priorities for the Council's future work. The Chief Executive underlined the importance of positive and cooperative working relationships between Members and officers. He had written to all Corporate Directors to emphasise the need to work to engage councillors across the board so that they understood how proposals and projects were developing. He personally made efforts to go on ward visits so he could understand better the perspectives of individual councillors, and he would meet with new councillors to establish immediately a clear appreciation of respective roles and expectations. The Chief Executive encouraged Members to let him know if these efforts could be

improved and/or if at any time difficulties were being encountered in the working relationships with Corporate Directors.

A Member proposed some corrections to the description of items in the draft action plan as follows:

Item 10 – should refer to the “economic **regeneration** agenda”.

Item 13 – should refer to the “budget setting challenge **process**”.

He also suggested that the action plan follow the order of the proposals and recommendations in the peer review report itself.

In response to a Member’s question about the review’s comments on the level of challenge to the Cabinet’s work, the Leader of the Council referred to arrangements made to strengthen this, including the “deep dive reviews” established by the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Commercialisation and his own fortnightly meetings with Portfolio Holders with no officers in attendance. The Chief Executive added that these arrangements mirrored his own fortnightly meetings with Corporate Directors which he used to challenge proposals and promote coordination across the organisation. There were also improvement boards for each Directorate which established inbuilt challenge to their work and their directorates’ activities and performance. The Chief Executive also acknowledged that the introduction of informal Cabinet briefing sessions with Portfolio Holders would enable discussions with Members at an earlier stage, and this would help to inform proposals more effectively.

A Member commended the Chief Executive and Administration for commissioning the peer review which she regarded as a progressive and forward-thinking initiative. She asked about the reaction of residents to the Harrow Regeneration Plans. The Leader of the Council reported that residents’ feedback was mixed as could be expected in relation to very significant change plans, involving, for example, the construction of tall buildings in a town centre. Major change affecting the built environment, traffic, parking, businesses, etc., necessarily led to a range of responses, but he still considered it very important to engage with residents through the regeneration programme so that there was always transparency and dialogue even if complete agreement was impossible. The Leader was convinced that there would be benefits from the programme for many residents and businesses and that, overall, it would be accepted as a very positive initiative for the Borough.

The Member asked about the role of councillors in working together to support the Council’s regeneration efforts. The Chief Executive advised that the regeneration programme was such a significant project for the Borough, the impact of which would be felt over many decades, that it transcended political boundaries and demanded a fully cooperative approach. He had offered monthly meetings to the Opposition to ensure that they were kept informed of key developments and he was grateful for their advice to date. The Chief Executive acknowledged that quite rightly some challenge was inherent to these arrangements. The Chair added that the review by the Centre for Public Scrutiny would also help examine the arrangements in place to involve councillors across the board in these initiatives.

A Member considered that the reference in Item 3 of the action plan to “trust issues” did not reflect the language of the peer review report itself; he felt it was important to deal with any undercurrent of mistrust. The Chief Executive acknowledged that the point had not been portrayed in this particular way in the peer review report, but it had been raised nevertheless and it would be important not to ignore it. He emphasised his own positive working relationships with councillors and the fact that Corporate Directors reported the same in respect of their dealings with both Portfolio Holders and Shadow Portfolio Holders. He accepted that there would always be room for improvement and that he and his colleagues were committed to this. The Chair suggested that it would be helpful if committee reports on the peer review always included the original peer review team report as an appendix so that it would always be possible to cross-refer to its content.

In response to a Member’s query about the role of cross-party working, the Leader of the Council considered this to be important, particularly given that the Council was subject to changes of political control. In this context, joint working on major projects affecting the Borough over very many years, was critical. He felt that the different political groups were likely to agree on perhaps 90% of the decisions involved in such programmes, with the differences being primarily ones of emphasis rather than substance. The Leader accepted that his political group did not have a monopoly of good ideas and it was important to work cooperatively and encourage others to engage and make proposals which might improve the overall programme.

The Chair was disappointed with the comments in relation to Items 16 and 19 in the draft action plan. He felt that work in this area should be carried out; for example, the Member/officer Protocol could usefully be updated anyway as the existing version even predated executive arrangements. The Chief Executive agreed to look into the fact that the agreed protocol should be reviewed and modernised; he considered that the Council’s involvement in establishing private companies for commercial activities in itself provided a reason for reviewing some of the rules. He would discuss these matters with the Director of Legal and Governance Services.

A Member confirmed that monthly budget monitoring meetings with leading Opposition Members would start in May.

The Chair referred to the challenge of encouraging residents and stakeholders to engage with the Council’s improvement and regeneration activities. The Chief Executive felt this related in part to the silo arrangements in many public services. The aggregated budgets of all public services in the Borough totalled about nearly £2 billion and there were some 60 buildings available to those organisations. There were clear opportunities to do more with the overall resources available and also to focus on the needs of the service users in designing and improving service delivery. The Leader of the Council added that it was difficult to engage the public in such major projects, but there were interesting options which could be pursued such as the recruitment of volunteer accountants for local voluntary organisations.

In response to a Member’s question about the central message from the Council about the regeneration programme, the Chief Executive emphasised the importance of pride of place, new and improved housing, the creation of

new jobs and enhanced infrastructure, but also the value of coping with the financial pressures in public services by achieving growth through regeneration, supported by government incentives such as business rates and the New Homes Bonus. He looked forward to engaging as many residents as possible in what was an exciting and very significant project.

Referring to Items 7, 8 and 27 of the draft action plan, a Member made the following points:

- the Major Developments Panel met very infrequently and the “cross-party working framework” was not well understood;
- there had only been one meeting between the Leader of the Council and the Leader of the Opposition to date;
- the comment in Item 27 about utilising the skills and experience of councillors only referred to the Labour Group; it was unacceptable to profile only one of the political groups in this way.

The Member cautioned that consensus was sometimes the enemy of quality, particularly at the outset of a project, and there was a valid place for robust challenge.

The Leader of the Council reported that he had met at least twice with the Leader of the Opposition; he underlined the need to use these meetings to deal with substantive issues rather than simply focus on concerns about process. He accepted that the reference to the cross-party working framework was probably more an expression of future aspiration than established practice. The Chief Executive agreed that it was important to provide space for, and accept, robust questioning of proposals, both because substantial amounts of public money were involved, but also because there was a risk that projects would not be properly tested. He clarified that Item 27 referred to all Councillors. The Member accepted that there had been some recent improvement in this area, such as progress on Project Infinity.

In response to a Member’s question about the Council’s attitude to risk management, the Chief Executive’s starting point was very much the fact the Council spent public money and some services were critical to certain sensitive clients, such as vulnerable service users which made this a complex issue. This naturally conditioned the risk judgement and appetite, however, given the challenges the Council faced e.g. financial this had to be balanced against the value of “reward” from an ambitious and innovative approach which meant taking ‘calculated risks’ in certain situations

A Member expressed interest in attracting quality flagship stores to a regenerated town centre so it could compete more effectively with Watford and Hillingdon. The Chief Executive agreed that this should be the ambition, though these moves involved massive commercial investments. Harrow Town Centre was in competition with Brent Cross, Westfields and Watford which had already received significant investment. Whilst footfall in the Town Centre was good and the number of vacant shops low, the mix of retail in Harrow needed to further change and the advent of step-free access at

Harrow-on-the-Hill station and the possibility of improvements to bus facilities, would hopefully help attract new tenants.

A Member stressed the importance of access to timely information for all councillors; he considered that the “skills audit of councillors” mentioned in Item 27 of the action plan, should be for all councillors. The Chief Executive agreed with this and that was meant in item 27. He reported that he had conducted such an audit in a previous authority; he looked forward to the benefits this would bring to the organisation and the Borough. The Leader of the Council agreed with the point about timely information and in this context, he explained that it could sometimes cause frustration if the wider group of councillors were consulted at too early a stage since it would often not be possible in those circumstances to answer many questions. He acknowledged that, by the same token, if the consultation were left too late, then councillors could equally feel frustrated at the difficulty of influencing the course of decisions and actions at that later stage. The Chief Executive underlined the need to try to provide enough information at each stage so that appropriate challenge could be facilitated. Another Member recognised the difficulty in making these judgements in a complex environment, though he stressed the importance of allowing Members the time required to analyse the information so as to be able to make a meaningful contribution. The Chair added that councillors involved in the overview and scrutiny function had specific legal entitlements to information to support that work.

In response to a Member’s question about the “Crowdfund Harrow Platform” mentioned in Item 25 of the draft action plan, the Leader of the Council advised that it was focused on fostering giving to the smaller Harrow-based charities. The Chief Executive also added that, in addition, the Council had devolved a 2-year fund to Harrow Community Action to administer which would also be targeted at supporting smaller organisations in Harrow.

RESOLVED:

- (1) To note the progress made to date with addressing the peer review recommendations;
- (2) to agree to work further with the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive to identify the key priorities to respond to the Peer Review; and
- (3) to monitor progress on the basis of regular reports back to the Committee.

(Note: The meeting, having commenced at 7.32 pm, closed at 8.43 pm).

(Signed) COUNCILLOR JERRY MILES
Chair